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The Search for Purpose in Life: An Exploration of Purpose, the Search Process, and Purpose Anxiety

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the *search for purpose*—defined as the attempt to find or enact one’s unique purpose in life. While much is known about the benefits of a purposeful existence (*i.e.*, higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction and general well-being, reduced risk for psychopathologies, and greater physical health), far less is known about the effects of the search process. The first half of this document reviews what psychologists know about purpose, the benefits of purpose, and the search for purpose. The second half explores a new construct: *purpose anxiety*, a term meant to encapsulate the negative ramifications of the struggle for purpose in life. It also presents the findings of an original research study conducted to gather empirical data on purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety as perceived and experienced by American adults. Results indicated that the vast majority of people crave a sense of purpose in life, but nearly always encounter purpose anxiety during their search process, no matter the searcher’s age. Results also showed that purpose anxiety significantly hampers well-being—both overall and each element of PERMA. This project in no way intends to suggest that individuals should avoid searching for purpose. Rather, it merely means to enhance psychology’s knowledge of the search process so that interventions may be developed to prevent or mitigate the psychological distress that so often accompanies the struggle for purpose in life.

Keywords

Purpose, the search for purpose, purpose anxiety, meaning

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Psychology

The Search for Purpose in Life:
An Exploration of Purpose, the Search Process, and Purpose Anxiety
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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Carin L. Rockind

August 1, 2014

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Christopher Peterson once famously summarized the field of positive psychology in three words: “other people matter” (Peterson, 2006, p. 249). Over the course of this year, I have come to know that this is true and that almost nothing that is great in life is experienced or accomplished in isolation. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the multitude of people who have helped me with this project:

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The Search for Purpose in Life:

An Exploration of Purpose, the Search Process, and Purpose Anxiety

I. INTRODUCTION

When I was 15, one of my childhood friends was diagnosed with leukemia. Despite a hopeful prognosis and aggressive treatment she lost her battle after just 13 months. As it was for everyone who knew her, her death was incredibly hard on me. I was overcome with heartbreak, sadness, and confusion. I could not understand why she had been taken from this world so early. I could not understand why I had been granted more time than she. I became captivated by some of the most fundamental questions of human existence: Why are we here? What is it all for?

Unable to find any sort of satisfying answers to these existential concerns, I pushed them from my mind—carrying on in my own zestful, happy, and hopeful way. It was not until my freshman year of college that I was forced to re-address these questions. Over the course of that year, three of my sorority sisters were killed—each in their own tragic and highly unexpected accidents. When the shock and sadness had receded to bearable levels, I was again left with that same burning desire to understand *why*—why they had been taken and why I, and everyone around me, was still here.

Eventually I came to realize that I probably would never understand the reasons behind these young women's untimely deaths. And as time passed, I became less focused on why they had died, and more concerned with why and how I should *live*. From this shift in thinking arose an unrelenting conviction that each person has a unique purpose in life, as well as the personal responsibility to make whatever amount of time they have on this earth worthwhile. Put simply, I came to believe that with the gift of life, comes the responsibility to live in a manner that allows

for the realization of one's unique capacity for greatness—for the fulfillment of one's unique purpose.

While this conviction was empowering, exciting, and incredibly motivating, I faced one seemingly insurmountable problem: I had no idea what my own purpose was, and perhaps worse, no idea as to how to go about finding it. And this unknowing was paralyzing...

This paper seeks to deepen psychology's understanding of the search for purpose in life—defined as the attempt to find or enact one's unique purpose. More specifically, it aims to explore the negative ramifications of the struggle for purpose in life. In the sections that follow, I will introduce the field of positive psychology, review how purpose is defined by psychologists, explicate what the benefits of purpose are, and outline what psychologists have to say about the search for purpose in life. I will then propose a new construct to encompass the negative consequences of the struggle for purpose: *purpose anxiety*—provisionally defined as the negative emotions experienced in direct relation to the search for purpose in life. Finally, I will detail the results of a research study conducted between May and June 2014 that gathered empirical data on purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety as perceived and experienced by American adults. Before diving in, however, some background must be provided:

The Two Questions of Purpose

I did not realize it at the time, but as I was grieving my friends' deaths, I was struggling with what has been called “the Holy Grail” (Haidt, 2006, p. 217) of all questions: *What is the meaning of life?*

Positive psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2006) explains that when people yearn to understand the meaning of life, they are actually seeking answers to one or both of two distinct questions: the question of the purpose *of* life, and/or the question of purpose *within* life. While

the former is concerned with life itself—from an objective point of view, the latter is interested in life as experienced by the individual—from a subjective point of view. Purpose *within* life, then, is concerned with the idea of a life well-lived, with the questions: “How ought I to live? What should I do to have a good, happy, fulfilling, and *meaningful* life?” (Haidt, 2006, p. 218). It is this second question—the question of purpose *within* life—that is the focus of this project. From here on forward, this construct will be referred to as “purpose in life,” or simply as “purpose.”

Rationale for the Present Study

Research indicates that more and more people are craving a life of purpose. A study conducted by Net Impact (2012), for example, showed that 72% of college students and 59% of employed adults classified meaningful work—defined as that which makes a difference or has some positive social impact—as one of their most important goals in life. In fact, meaningful work ranked above children, a prestigious career, wealth, and leadership in importance, and only below financial security and marriage (Net Impact, 2012). Similarly, a study commissioned by the Career Advisory Board revealed that 30% of emerging adults (aged 21-31) identified meaningful work as *the* most important indicator of a successful career; 71% rated it among the top three (Levit & Licina, 2011). These statistics show that an astounding number of individuals have become concerned with purpose—with the manner in which they can realize their potential to uniquely impact the world. Yet what effect is this drive for purpose really having on individuals?

Research shows that purpose is highly conducive to well-being: its presence is associated with heightened levels of overall well-being (e.g., Bonebright, Clay, & Akenmann, 2000), global happiness (e.g., Debats, van de Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and life

satisfaction (e.g., Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009), robust physical health (e.g., Hill & Turiano, 2014), and a reduced risk of psychopathologies (e.g., Debats et al., 1993; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010). Studies also show that lacking a sense of purpose in life is linked to psychological ill-being (e.g., Heisel & Flett, 2004). Thus, one might assume that the surge in the number of people driven to live purposefully would result in a host of beneficial outcomes for both individuals and society at large. But this conclusion glosses over one critical fact: individuals must first “know” their purpose.

Psychologists believe that, for the majority of individuals, purpose is not inherently known—that nearly no one is born knowing their purpose. Rather, they explain that most often purpose must be found, created, or learned (Baumeister & Vohs, 2006; Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010). Notably, psychologists also believe that this search process is, more often than not, an intensely distressing endeavor (Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Thus, the upwelling in the number of individuals interested in purpose has likely been accompanied by an upswing in the number of people *searching* for their purpose, and potentially, suffering psychologically as a result.

Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the search for purpose (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). While many psychologists have hypothesized about the search process, only a few empirical investigations have been conducted to substantiate their theories. And notably, nearly all these studies have focused on the search for *meaning* as opposed to the search for *purpose*—a necessary distinction that will be addressed later. This is the gap that the present study aims to reduce. It seeks to provide empirical data on purpose, the search for purpose, and the new construct of *purpose anxiety*. This research intends to deepen psychology’s understanding of the search for purpose in life, so that the field can become better poised to help

individuals overcome purpose anxiety and go on to garner all of the benefits that purpose provides. But before beginning our investigation of purpose, the search for purpose, or purpose anxiety, let us first become familiar with positive psychology—the field responsible for nearly all the research that has been conducted on purpose in life.

An Introduction to Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the scientific study of human flourishing (Seligman, 2011)—of all that makes life worth living (Peterson, 2006). Formally established 15 years ago by Martin Seligman¹, the field focuses primarily on well-being, aiming to understand and describe how it might be cultivated in individuals, institutions, and communities. Positive psychology is based on the notion that well-being is not merely the absence of ill-being—that true happiness is not merely the absence of depression. It holds that all that is good, well, and healthy in human beings is just as real, genuine, and worthy of study as that which is bad, ill, and unhealthy (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology was created to remind psychologists of two of their field’s original, but largely forgotten, missions:

Prior to World War II, psychology had three aims: 1. to cure mental illness, 2. to make the lives of all individuals more productive and fulfilling, and 3. to identify and nurture high talent. After the war ended, however, two institutions were founded that that altered the field’s focus for decades thereafter: the Veterans Administration (or Veterans Affairs) (VA) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The establishment of these organizations led psychologists to realize that they could make a living best by treating and/or studying mental illness. As a result, psychologists came to believe that humans are fragile and flawed—that they are victims of bad genes or causalities of harsh

¹ I say the field was “formally established” because several psychologists studied “positive psychological topics” prior to the field’s formal founding. The term “positive psychology” was coined in 1998 to encompass these existing areas of research as well as the new well-being topics that would be studied.

environments (Peterson, 2006). In other words, they, like other health care professionals, adopted a disease model of human nature. While this emphasis did help scientists make massive strides in understanding and treating mental pathology, it left psychology's other two missions understudied, inadequately understood, and undervalued by society at large (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Seligman recognized the deficit this disease model had produced, and upon becoming president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, called psychologists to re-orient themselves back to the positive—to return to the study of fulfillment, high achievement, genius, and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Notably, Seligman did not intend for positive psychology to replace psychology as usual. Rather, he intended it to complement psychology as usual and to balance out the disease model that had taken hold of the field. Since its formal establishment, positive psychology has experienced incredible success in shifting researchers' and practitioners' focus from solely repairing that which is wrong within individuals to also building and nurturing that which is best.

It is important to note that positive psychology is not a “happyology.” The field does not advocate blind optimism or inaccurate positive thinking. Despite its name, positive psychology does not deny the darker side of life—it does not ignore the natural dips and valleys in the landscape of life (Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011). Rather, positive psychology aims to better understand *both* the things that enable human beings to climb out of life's valleys and those that enable individuals to reach the summits of life's highest peaks. In sum, positive psychology aims to understand and build more than happiness—something deeper than pleasure, contentment, or satisfaction. It aims to describe and cultivate human flourishing.

The PERMA Theory of Well-being

Seligman (1998) originally theorized that positive psychology's primary goal was happiness, and that happiness was captured best by self-reported life satisfaction. He hypothesized that happiness, or "the good life," consisted of three things: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. Yet as the field developed, Seligman revised this thinking, coming to understand that positive psychology is actually concerned with well-being—a term with more holistic connotations than the emotion-centric construct of happiness.

Seligman's (2011) theory of well-being holds that five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (collectively referred to as PERMA), combine to enable human flourishing. Each element of PERMA, he says, is something that most free, non-suffering people pursue when safe and well. While PERMA is not the only model of well-being within positive psychology, it is the conception of well-being that will be used in this paper. As such, it is beneficial to delve deeper into each of its elements.

Positive emotions are the first element of well-being. They are essential not only because they enhance an individual's subjective experience, but also because they act to broaden one's mind and build one's resources for the future (Fredrickson, 2009). Fredrickson explains that, in the present, positive emotions broaden one's mind, field of vision, and sense of self. This broadened mindset allows for heightened creativity and flexibility, better problem solving, and greater opportunity for connection with others. Over time, these immediate outcomes build one's long-term resources, or reserves, that may be used during future challenges, opportunities, or setbacks. Examples of such resources are positive psychological habits (e.g., optimism, mindfulness, and openness), strong social relationships, and good physical health (Fredrickson, 2009; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel 2008).

Engagement, the second element of well-being, is principally about the experience of flow (Seligman, 2011). Flow is an optimal state of being where one is completely involved in the task at hand: self-consciousness fades, sense of time disappears, and thought and emotion cease to occupy the mind (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This all-consuming state enables an individual to grow and accomplish in significant ways—during flow, the self becomes more complex, confident, and skilled. Research indicates that flow correlates with increased intrinsic motivation, positive mood, self-esteem, and enjoyment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

Relationships are the third fundamental element of well-being. Christopher Peterson (2006), one of the positive psychology's founding fathers, famously summarized the findings of his field in three words: "other people matter" (p. 249). Modern theorists believe that the capacity to love and be loved is an inherent part of human nature, and much research offers support for this claim. Studies show that people with positive relationships have better health and live longer (Valliant, 2012), experience more energy and positive emotion (Dutton, 2003; Fredrickson, 2009), feel a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction at work (Dutton, 2003; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), and are better able to cope with hardship (Peterson, 2006). As Seligman (2011) explains, almost nothing that is great in life is done or experienced in isolation, and for this reason, other people matter immensely.

Meaning, the fourth element of well-being, refers to the sensation of belonging to and serving something that is larger than the self (Seligman, 2011). Meaning helps individuals make sense of the world and come to understand their place in it. It gives an individual a sense that his or her life matters (Steger, 2009, 2012). Notably, meaning can be found in a variety of life domains such as relationships, work, and religion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2006). Research indicates that those who have a strong sense of meaning experience greater life satisfaction, self-

esteem, positive emotion, and optimism, while those who do not have meaning in life are more likely to experience psychological distress (Ryff, 1989a; Steger, 2012; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008).

Accomplishment, the final element of well-being, encompasses the winning, sense of mastery, success, and achievement that people pursue for its own sake (Seligman, 2011). Psychologists used to believe that animals, humans included, acted merely from a drive-reduction motivation—that they acted only to satisfy their biological needs. Research, however, refutes this rationale, revealing that people and animals often act with the sole intention of enacting mastery over their environment (Seligman, 2011; White, 1959). Many things play into the experience of achievement, including grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), self-efficacy (Maddux, 2009), hope (Snyder, 2000), and goals (Locke, 1996).

While Seligman's PERMA model offers scientists a theoretical framework with which to conceive of well-being, positive psychologists study many different constructs that play into these elements so as to better understand and promote flourishing. Positive psychologists are, for example, empirically investigating character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), resilience (Reivich & Shatte, 2002), optimism (Seligman, 1998), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), self-control (Brown & Ryan, 2004), high quality connections (Dutton, 2003), emotional intelligence (Salovey, Caruso, & Mayer, 2004), and, of course, purpose.

II. PURPOSE

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

“There is no passion to be found in playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

- Nelson Mandela

Defining Purpose: What Is It?

In order to understand the search for purpose, we must first understand “purpose” itself. Because it is a higher-level construct—one that is difficult to describe and empirically research (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009)—several different definitions of purpose have emerged within psychological literature. In order to garner clarity on what purpose is, I will outline the predominant definitions of purpose, and then define the construct as it will be used throughout the rest of this paper.

McKnight and Kashdan (2009) define purpose as “a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (p. 242). Purpose, they say, is central in the sense that it is a consistent and predominant part of one’s personality, self-organizing in that it provides a framework for everyday behavioral patterns, and a life aim in the sense that it must be perpetually pursued or lived out. Put simply, Kashdan and McKnight conceive of purpose as a core part of one’s identity that provides continual targets for one to aspire after. In an effort to describe something so abstract more concretely, Kashdan and McKnight (2009) describe purpose as a compass—it provides direction to life, but one can choose whether or not to follow its instruction. Thus purpose, under this framing, requires a deliberate choice to follow one’s vocation.

McKnight and Kashdan (2009) further define purpose by its five requisite ingredients: 1. behavioral consistency, 2. approach motivated behaviors, 3. psychological flexibility, 4. efficient allocation of resources leading to more productive cognitive, behavioral, and physiological activity, and 5. a higher level of cognitive processing by the cerebral cortex (*i.e.*, purpose is not driven from a primal motivation like food, safety, or pleasure). These scholars hold that all five of these elements must be present for an individual to experience purpose in life.

Ryff (1989a) conceives of purpose as the goals, intentions, and sense of directedness in life that combine to: 1. produce the feeling that one's life is meaningful, and 2. act to integrate the various aspects of one's life into a comprehensive whole. Ryff (1989a, 1989b) includes purpose in life as one of six fundamental elements in her theory of psychological well-being, the others being self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy.

Keyes (2011) defines purpose as “an intention and a cognitive sense of one's life” (p. 281)—or as a determination to do or accomplish some end. Keyes (2011) further states that purpose involves two elements: psychological purpose, or the sense or direction one has in life (as defined by Ryff (1989a)), and social contribution, or the collective benefit that one's life provides. From the combination of these two elements, four different classifications of purpose emerge: aimless but useful, aimless and useless, directed but useless, and authentic purpose. Keyes (2011) purports that “authentic purpose” (p. 285), one that provides a strong sense of direction and is significantly useful to others, is the most worthwhile and most fulfilling form of purpose in life.

Keyes (2011) equates living out one's authentic purpose with the realization of one's vocation: “a purpose for one's life that employs one's gifts, brings a deep sense of worth or value, and provides a significant contribution to the common good” (p. 286). Purpose, he says, provides an individual with the recognition that he or she has personally important and socially useful work to do. Thus, under Keyes's conception, various types of purposes exist, but the most worthwhile and beneficial harness one's unique capacities to provide a sense of direction in life and benefit to someone other than the self.

Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) define purpose 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). Under this definition, purpose is a stable and far-reaching aim, desire, or goal that is part of one’s personal search for meaning. This definition requires that purpose involve something external to the self—the desire to make a difference or contribute to something larger than the self. Notably, Damon and colleagues (2003) hold that purpose must be directed at some end that one can make progress toward. This aim need not be material or concrete; rather, it just must provide an objective for or direction in one’s life.

Rockind (2011) builds off of several of the definitions presented above, conceiving of purpose as a unique and central life aim that is active, forward looking, and of impact to others. Rockind says purpose is “the active way in which one uniquely impacts the world” (personal communication, 2014, July 29). She views purpose as a verb (rather than some type of identifying noun, such as “lawyer” or “parent”), which acts to pull an individual forward in life in a socially beneficial way.

Aside from these stand-alone definitions, purpose is also often defined of as a part of or as synonymous to meaning in life. In order to arrive at a truly adequate understanding of purpose, it is necessary to review these more entangled conceptions of purpose as well.

Viktor Frankl (1963), the psychological pioneer of the study of meaning, speaks of meaning and purpose as inextricably linked phenomena: he conceives of purpose as a by-product of an individual’s attempt to make life meaningful. He explains that there is a “uniqueness and a singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives meaning to his existence” (p. 79). This “uniqueness,” it has been said, is one’s purpose (Rockind, 2011). A meaningful life, according to Frankl, is one in which an individual elects to act in a way that uniquely and appropriately fulfills

the tasks (enjoyable or not) that life sets before him or her. Frankl (1963) explains purpose as one's "why" for living, saying that it allows an individual to make sense of his or her circumstances (past and present) and provides him or her with some future goal to live for.

Seligman (2011) also uses meaning and purpose indiscriminately. He, highlighting meaning as one of the essential elements of well-being, explains that human beings inherently crave a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Seligman (2011) defines meaning as, "belonging to and serving something that you believe is larger than the self" (p. 17).

Baumeister (1991) theorizes that purpose is one of four fundamental ingredients of meaning—the others being values, self-efficacy, and self-worth. In this model, Baumeister conceives of purpose as the process of connecting present events with those in the future, and of using imagined future events to find direction for present action.

Steger (2009, 2012) also conceives of purpose as a component of meaning. He argues that meaning is comprised of two elements: one cognitive, the other motivational. The cognitive component of meaning consists of an individual's understanding of him- or herself, the world around him or her, and how he or she fits within it. The motivational component entails the aspirations and goals that provide an individual with a purpose or mission in life. This motivational component, according to Steger, is purpose—delineating what one's life is for, what purpose it serves, and what one will do with his or her life.

As is evident from the discussion above, many definitions of purpose exist. Fortunately, many of these definitions overlap, indicating the key ingredients of purpose. First, purpose is repeatedly described as a consistent part of one's true and unique self—stemming from an individual's unique strengths, values, passions, interests, and abilities. Second, it is almost always described as something that provides direction and creates goals for the future—goals

which act to direct present behavior. Third, purpose is recurrently seen as something that one must continually strive and/or live for, rather than some “end” that can be accomplished. Fourth, purpose is consistently viewed as something that makes life meaningful. Fifth, purpose is often defined as something that provides a benefit and/or connection to someone or something other than the self. And finally, purpose is repeatedly held to be something that an individual must deliberately elect to follow or fulfill.

For the purposes of this paper, *purpose* will be defined as a consistent and central life aim that 1. draws upon one’s unique strengths, talents, skills, values, and passions, 2. stimulates goals for the future that influence one’s present actions, 3. is at once personally meaningful and of contribution to someone or something outside the self, and 4. is volitionally fulfilled. Purpose, under this definition, can be viewed as an intrinsically motivated² framework for personally and socially meaningful goals that pull one into the future. It can be thought of as a system that creates and organizes higher- and lower-order goals in many different domains of life. This definition draws from the primary components of the definitions outlined above and highlights what I have come to believe are the key features of purpose.

Distinguishing “Purpose” from “Meaning”

As can be seen from the review above, “meaning” and “purpose” are highly interrelated, and often confused, constructs in psychology. In order to understand that the struggle for *purpose* is not the same thing as the struggle for *meaning* in life (a point which will be refined later), it is necessary to disentangle these two constructs. After reviewing the relevant literature, there seem to be two primary distinguishing factors between meaning and purpose—their orientation toward cognition or action and their temporal frames:

² Intrinsically motivated activity is that which is done for the inherent enjoyment of the activity itself. It is driven by one’s personal interests (Brown & Ryan, 2004).

Baumeister and Vohs (2002) note that meaning is most essentially about connection—that it involves the uniquely human ability to cognitively process and mentally connect ideas, memories, events, people, and objects that are physically unrelated. Other scholars similarly suggest that meaning involves the perception that there exists an underlying coherence among external stimuli (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Hicks, Cicero, Trent, Curton, & King, 2010). Meaning, then, is cognitively oriented; it provides one with the feeling that life “makes sense” (Heintzelman & King, 2014, p. 154). Purpose, conversely, is action-oriented (Rockind, 2011). It is motivational, spurring action rather than comprehension (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Frankl (1963) noted that the proper response to the tasks of life—the fulfillment of one’s purpose—“must consist not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct” (p. 77). Purpose, unlike meaning, involves more than just comprehension and understanding. It necessitates action; it requires doing.

Furthermore, meaning relies upon one’s memories of the past and one’s understanding of present circumstances in order to provide unity, grounding, and comprehension. Baumeister and Vohs (2002) explain that individuals find (or make) meaning by revising or reappraising memories of past events and by connecting past memories to present experiences. Purpose, on the other hand, encompasses the notion of what one *will* do with his or her life, or what purpose his or her life *will* serve (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Steger, 2009, 2012). Purpose gives one belief and hope in the *future* (Frankl, 1963). It involves a connection between present and future events, so that the future acts to guide present action (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Steger, 2009, 2012). Purpose then, is forward looking; it pulls an individual forward in life (Rockind, 2011; Seligman, 2011). Purpose, in short, is temporally bound to the future, while meaning is temporally bound to the past.

Also in need of clarification is the developmental relationship between meaning and purpose—the idea of whether one precedes or creates the other. McKnight and Kashdan (2009) propose that purpose originally develops from meaning, but that purpose then goes on to create “a self-sustaining source of meaning through continual goal pursuit and accomplishment” (p. 242). Frankl (1963), Steger (2012), and Baumeister (1991) conversely purport that purpose is (or is part of) what drives the development of meaning in life. Because meaning and purpose are capable of giving rise to each other, it seems most logical to classify the relationship between the two as bi-directional. That is, meaning can lead to the development of purpose, just as purpose can lead to the development of meaning.

In sum, while some psychologists conceive of meaning and purpose as synonymous constructs, it seems most logical to conclude that two are distinct phenomena that differ in their orientation toward cognition or action and in their temporal framing. Meaning and purpose are separate, albeit highly related, constructs that build off of one another so as to contribute to the broader concept of the “good,” or *meaningful* life.

Who Experiences Purpose?

Not everyone experiences, or even desires to experience, purpose in life (Keyes, 2011; Rockind, 2011; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). So what differentiates those that either have or crave a sense of purpose from those that do not? The psychological literature sheds some interesting insight on the biological motivation systems, personality traits, demographics, and socioeconomic variables that influence one’s experience of purpose in life.

Many scholars hypothesize, and some empirical research indicates, that individuals who are approach oriented, as opposed to avoidance oriented (according to the biologically based motivation systems literature (Watson, Wiese, & Vaidya, 1999)) are more likely to seek out and

develop a sense of purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Approach oriented individuals are generally extraverted, experience high positive affect, and create and pursue approach goals—goals that aim to obtain (rather than avoid) something.

Psychologists also theorize that individuals who are highly curious and open to new experiences are more likely to search for and live out their purpose in life (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Some research supports this hypothesis, indicating that curiosity bolsters one's sense of meaning in life (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). Research also reveals that the personality traits of openness, tendermindedness, absorption, drive, and artistic and investigative interests are most highly related to the search for meaning (Steger et al., 2008).

Purpose also seems to depend, at least in part, upon age. Human development theory suggests that one's sense of purpose and one's actual purpose in life changes with the each different stage of life (Erikson, 1980)³. Erikson, the hallmark psychologist of human development research, posited that individuals move through eight stages of life: infancy, early childhood, pre-school, school age, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and maturity. He speculated that at each of these stages, individuals have a specific purpose and must work to fulfill that purpose in order to develop into a mentally healthy, high-functioning human being. Erikson (1980) suspected that the founding of one's purpose is a key task for adolescence and young adulthood as it coincides with the formation of one's identity.

Based on this human development theory, it seems that one's sense of purpose *should* increase until adulthood, at which point it *should* become stable. While the theory is logical, the research on the relation between age and purpose offers some evidence for and some evidence

³ As is clear from my definition of purpose, I disagree with the idea that one's purpose changes over the course of one's life. Rather I believe that the *way* in which one lives out his or her purpose, but not the purpose itself, will change over time.

against this idea: Steger, Oishi, and Kashdan (2009) find that those at later life stages generally experience more meaning in life compared to those at earlier life stages. Similarly, Ryff and Keyes (1995) find that older individuals report a greater sense of purpose later in life. However, other research indicates that purpose is strongest among youth and actually declines steadily with age (Keyes, 2011; Meier & Edwards, 1974; Sato & Tanaka, 1974). These conflicting results highlight the need for more research on the relationship between age and one's sense of purpose in life.

Studies also indicate that purpose is related to one's educational achievement and status as a minority. A study conducted by Ryff, Keyes, and Hughes (2003) showed that those who are more educated experience a greater sense of purpose in life, and that minority groups (*i.e.*, African Americans) have a higher sense of purpose than non-minority groups (*i.e.*, Caucasians). Notably, however, the relationship between ethnicity and purpose was moderated by respondents' level of education. At low levels of education, African Americans and Caucasians reported similar levels of purpose. As the levels of education rose, both groups' sense of purpose rose, but the African Americans' sense of purpose grew significantly more than did that of the Caucasians'.

In sum, one's inherent biological motivation systems, personality traits, age, level of education, and ethnicity seem to influence the degree to which a person experiences (or desires to experience) purpose in life. Those who are approach oriented, curious, open to new experiences, older, more educated, and/or are a minority are the most likely to seek out and experience purpose.

Can People Have Multiple Purposes?

While most psychologists do not address the notion of multiple purposes, some have speculated about the possibility and benefit of this idea. McKnight and Kashdan (2011), for example, suspect that it is possible for a person to have multiple purposes, and that doing so might be beneficial. An individual could, they say, identify several completely independent purposes for each different domain of his or her life. McKnight and Kashdan hypothesize that these multiple purposes would allow an individual to live purposefully on a more continual basis, and thus experience the benefits that come with purposeful living more often.

That being said, McKnight and Kashdan (2011) also note that beyond a certain point, having multiple purposes may actually become detrimental. Because purpose influences the goals one pursues, the decisions one makes, and the way in which one allocates his or her limited resources, having multiple purposes would necessarily mean less attention, effort, and resources allocated to each. For this reason, too many purposes could prevent progress from being made toward any one of them (McKnight & Kashdan, 2011). It thus seems that a singular purpose—one that is specific enough to provide direction, but broad enough to cross life domains—would act as a more motivating, meaningful, and beneficial resource for individuals to have in life⁴.

III. WHY IS PURPOSE IMPORTANT?

“There is no greater gift you can give or receive than to honor your calling. It’s why you were born. And how you become most truly alive.”

- Oprah Winfrey, 2010

“He who has a ‘why’ for which to live can bear with almost any ‘how’.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

⁴ While some might argue that multiple purposes would make the search for purpose easier and less distressing, this assertion seems short-sided. Because a singular purpose is a stronger motivational force, the struggle to find one, unifying purpose seems to be worth the costs.

Before exploring the ill-effects of struggling for purpose, it is first important to understand why purpose is even worth striving for. While purpose has been defined and measured in many different ways within psychology, its presence has consistently been found to be associated with a host of beneficial outcomes. In the paragraphs that follow, I will outline research findings on the psychological and physical benefits of purpose and offer several hypotheses as to why these benefits abound. Because many scholars conceive of meaning and purpose as either interrelated or synonymous constructs, the research findings that will be presented come from studies on both.

The Psychological Benefits of Purpose

Having a strong sense of purpose in life has been found to build a wide variety of positive psychological outcomes. Research reveals that purpose and/or meaning is linked to higher levels of overall well-being (Bonebright, Clay, & Akenmann, 2000), global happiness (Debats, van de Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), hope and optimism (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Steger & Frazier, 2005), life satisfaction (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009), sense of control (Ryff, 1989b), self-acceptance (Garfield, 1973; Ryff, 1989b) and self-esteem (Blattner, Liang, Lund, & Spencer, 2013).

Purpose has also been found to correct and prevent psychological ill-being. Having a strong sense of purpose or meaning is associated with less negative affect, depression and anxiety (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Debats et al., 1993; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010), a reduced need for therapy (Battista & Almond, 1973), and less suicide ideation, substance abuse, and stress over competing goals (*i.e.*, work and life goals)(Bonebright et al., 2000; Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986). Research also indicates that purpose and/or meaning helps

individuals cope with and grow from traumatic experiences (Steger, Frazier, & Zacchanini, 2008). Furthermore, psychologists have demonstrated that actively working toward one's purpose remedies some of the negative outcomes of social anxiety disorder (*i.e.*, low self-esteem, low meaning in life, few positive emotions)(Kashdan & McKnight, 2013). Together these findings indicate that purpose can act as a buffer against or remedy for a variety of psychopathologies.

Notably, research also shows that the *absence* of purpose and/or meaning in life is linked to psychological ill-being. Heisel and Flett (2004), for example, find that a lack of purpose correlates with psychopathologies, like depression, suicide ideation, and self-derogation. Park, Park, and Peterson (2010) similarly find that those who lack meaning and are searching for it experience diminished life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect and increased depression and negative affect.

In sum, purpose is capable of both enhancing psychological well-being *and* remedying or protecting against psychological ill-being. While there are many plausible explanations as to why purpose can confer such benefits, it is interesting to explore three possible reasons in detail: purpose can 1. fulfill basic human needs, 2. sway one's prospections in a positive direction, and 3. enhance each constitutive element of well-being.

Purpose Fulfills Basic Human Needs

First, purpose can satisfy a variety of basic human needs. Maslow (1943) outlined a hierarchy of needs that explains what motivates human behavior. He described these needs as a "hierarchy of prepotency" (p. 375), meaning that lower level needs dominate an individual until they are fulfilled (partially or completely), at which point higher level needs emerge which then begin to drive cognition and behavior. Notably, Maslow conceived of these needs as universal.

That is, he viewed them as desires that drive all human beings regardless of demographic disparities such as age, gender, or ethnicity. There are, according to Maslow (1943), five basic human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

Physiological needs, the most prepotent of all, are those that drive an individual to maintain physical homeostasis, or balance within the body. These needs are relatively primitive motivators such as hunger, thirst, and sexual reproduction. Safety needs motivate an individual to find and live in a safe environment—one where he or she is protected from danger and illness and can perceive the world as predictable, dependable, and orderly. The need for safety, then, entails a sense of both physical and mental security. The love needs prompt individuals to crave affection, love, and a sense of belonging. These needs involve both romantic love and companionate affection. The esteem needs are those that spur an individual to desire a high evaluation of him- or herself—they stem from a desire to feel “useful and necessary in the world” (Maslow, 1947, p. 382). Notably, the esteem needs are two-faceted: they involve the desire for strength, accomplishment, adequacy, and self-confidence, and also, the want for reputation, prestige, and respect from others. Maslow (1947) suggests that an individual who fulfills these first four needs can be thought of as “basically satisfied” (p. 383), but that basic satisfaction is not sufficient for a fifth need will always arise: the need for self-actualization.

The need for self-actualization involves “the desire to become more and more of what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1947, p. 382). Maslow (1947) explains that an individual becomes self-actualized when he or she does what he or she is “fitted” for. He states, “what a man *can* be, he *must* be” (p. 382). In short, self-actualization drives the desire to fulfill one’s own unique potential.

Purpose seems capable of contributing to the fulfillment of the need for love, esteem, and perhaps most significantly, self-actualization. Because purpose requires an element of social contribution, it inherently involves meaningful interaction with others—be it an individual, a group, or society at large. Through the act of giving to or benefiting another, one can develop a sense of belonging to and feelings of love for/from that individual, group, or society. As such, purpose can help satisfy an individual's need for love.

Purpose can also satisfy the need for self-esteem. As it is one's "why" for living—one's framework for creating personally meaningful and socially beneficial goals for the future—purpose can provide an individual with the sensation that his or her life is necessary and worthwhile. Notably, empirical research supports the notion that purpose driven action can satisfy the esteem needs: Blattner, Liang, Lund, and Spencer (2013) found that purpose predicts higher self-esteem in adolescent girls.

Given that they both involve the realization of one's unique potential, it seems obvious that purpose can satisfy the need for self-actualization. With each purposeful action an individual becomes more and more of who he or she truly is, and in doing so fulfills the need for self-actualization. Put simply, purposeful living is what enables self-actualization. In sum, purpose may confer so many psychological benefits for its ability to satisfy a variety of basic human needs.

Purpose Stimulates Positive Prospections

Human beings' natural tendency toward prospection also offers a compelling explanation as to why purpose so profoundly influences psychological well-being. Many traditional psychologists, like Freud (1901/2002), used to believe that human beings are driven by the past—that one's past experiences determine his or her present state (or current psychological

well-being). Many modern scholars argue against this thinking, speculating that human beings are most influenced by the future. They assert that the future pulls an individual forward, that rather than Homo Sapiens—“men of wisdom,” human beings are Homo Prospectus—“men of prospection” (Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013; Seligman & Sripada, 2013, September 4).

Prospection is defined as the mental “representation of possible futures” (Seligman et al., 2013, p. 119). Research suggests that prospection is an evolutionary adaptation, and is therefore an inherent and universal human ability (Seligman & Sripada, 2013, September 4). Man’s prospective mind, scholars speculate, evolved to serve as his guidance system, helping him make decisions about what to say, do, think, feel, and work for. Notably, psychologists also suspect that prospection underlies almost every facet of psychological functioning: perception, cognition, memory, affect, motivation, and action (Seligman et al., 2013).

It is important to note that prospection can be carried out either consciously or implicitly. That is, one can actively imagine and evaluate possible futures, or he can do so spontaneously, without any explicit initiation or monitoring (Seligman et al., 2013). Interestingly, research indicates that individuals implicitly imagine the future more often than one might assume: neuroimaging studies show that, when not occupied by a demanding cognitive task, a particular region of the human brain, “the default network,” becomes active. When individuals willfully engage in prospection this same region of the brain becomes highly active, indicating that when the mind is free and at rest, it has a natural propensity to simulate the future (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Prospection, then, is a cognitive process that tends to dominate the human mind.

It seems logical to conclude that, because individuals habitually imagine the future and because prospection involves so many different facets of the human psyche, one’s prospective

tendencies would significantly impact his or her psychological well-being. For example, if an individual has a tendency to prospect negatively about the future—to habitually imagine and expect the worst for him- or herself and the world—he or she is likely to become overwhelmed by negative emotion and fail to develop the desire, motivation, or self-efficacy⁵ necessary to take corrective or proactive action. If, on the other hand, an individual tends to have more optimistic prospectations—those that involve positive imaginings of the future—he or she is more likely to feel hopeful and take the steps necessary to bring about that imagined future. In this way, one’s habitual way of imagining the future can sway his or her psychological state toward either psychological ill-being or well-being.

The connection between purpose and prospectation is rather simple—because purpose is inherently forward looking, it relies upon the act of prospecting. As individuals live out a purposeful existence, they prospect about their personally meaningful and socially beneficial goals for the future and take action toward the attainment of those imaginings. Purpose, in short, seems capable of swaying one’s prospectations in a positive, self-actualizing direction, and thereby conferring psychological well-being.

Purpose Enhances Each Element of Well-being

Purpose might also provide psychological benefit through its potential capacity to enhance each constitutive element of well-being (per Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model)⁶:

The research above confirms that purpose can increase one’s experience of positive emotions—the first element of PERMA. Scholars speculate that these positive emotional outcomes abound because individuals derive the most happiness when they participate in activities that are intrinsically motivated and consistent with their personality (Brown & Ryan,

⁵ Self-efficacy: the belief that one has the capacity to accomplish some end (Maddux, 2009).

⁶ This hypothesis is evaluated in the present study. See “VI. The Study” for results.

2004; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), like those that are aligned with their unique purpose.

Second, purpose seems capable of encouraging engagement—or the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi notes that in order for an activity to be engaging, it must be intrinsically motivated. He also explains that flow experiences are “intimately related to the sources of what is ultimately meaningful” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 77) in life. Thus, purposeful action—that which is autonomously motivated and is personally and socially meaningful—lends itself very well to the flow experience. Past research supports this claim, indicating that employees who find more meaning in their jobs feel more engaged at work (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2010).

Purpose may also enhance one’s social relations. While research indicates that individuals often find meaning and/or purpose in life through their relationships (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Gabinsky, 2013; Steger, 2009), it is plausible that the causal arrow could point in the opposite direction as well. Because purpose requires an element of social usefulness (Damon et al., 2003; Keyes, 2011; Rockind, 2011; Seligman, 2011), it can create the opportunity for more numerous and more meaningful social interactions.

Third, because purpose and meaning are so highly interrelated, it is rather obvious that purpose can deepen one’s sense of meaning in life. As noted earlier, many scholars believe that purpose helps drive and sustain the perception of meaning (Frankl, 1963; Keyes, 2011; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Steger, 2009, 2012). Kashdan and McKnight (2013) even note, “a sense of meaning in life is the most obvious dimension of well-being that can be expected to rise when people strive or make progress toward their purpose” (p. 1151).

Finally, purpose seems capable of enhancing accomplishment. Grit, or one's passion and persistence for long-term goals, predicts accomplishment in a wide variety of domains (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit involves "working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years of failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087-1088). Scholars suggest that purposeful activity feels relatively effortless and highly enjoyable because it is autonomously selected (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Research also indicates that engaging in intrinsically motivated and mood-boosting activities, like those aligned with one's purpose, can bolster self-regulation and increase vitality during mentally and physically challenging activities (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006; Muraven, Gagn, & Rosman, 2008). Battista and Almond (1973) even find that purpose is associated with commitment to one's goals. Thus, purpose might be able to bolster accomplishment through its ability to sustain one's grit over time.

In sum, purpose's potential capacity to enhance each constitutive element of well-being offers an explanation as to why purpose confers so many psychological benefits.

The Physiological Benefits of Purpose

Purpose also positively influences physiological well-being. First, and perhaps most impressively, purpose has repeatedly been linked to longevity. Krause (2009), Sone and colleagues (2008), Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, and Bennet (2009), and Koizumi, Ito, Kaneko and Motohashi (2008) all found that older adults who reported a higher sense of purpose in life experienced a significantly diminished risk of mortality over time (a period of 7-14 years) compared to those who reported a lower sense of purpose. Notably, these findings held true when scholars controlled for known predictors of mortality (Boyle et al., 2009).

Hill and Turiano (2014) recently expanded this research by studying the relationship between purpose and longevity *throughout* adulthood. Their findings revealed that a greater sense of purpose predicts a diminished likelihood of mortality in adults of all ages (adults ranged from 20-75 years old at the start of the study). In fact, for every one standard deviation increase in purpose, the risk of mortality over the next 14 years decreased by 15%. Importantly, the significance of these findings held true after controlling for other psychological and social variables relevant to mortality, such as social relationships (Holt-Lunstad & Smith, 2012), positive affect (Pressman & Cohen, 2005), and negative affect (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002; Hill & Turiano, 2014). These results indicate that maintaining a strong sense of purpose *throughout* life (not just in old age) is important for physical health.

Purpose is also associated with a substantially reduced risk of Alzheimer disease (Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett, 2010). A 7-year study revealed that individuals who reported a higher sense of purpose were 2.4 times more likely to remain free of Alzheimer disease than those who reported a lower sense of purpose. This association did not differ based on demographic factors and held true after researchers controlled for depressive symptoms, neuroticism, social network size, and a number of other chronic medical conditions. Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, and Bennet (2010) also found that a stronger sense of purpose was associated with higher levels of cognitive ability, a slower decline of cognitive functioning, and a reduced risk of mild cognitive impairment (a precursor to Alzheimer disease) over time. These findings suggest that purpose may protect against age-related neurological decline.

Purpose seems to influence one's immune functioning and cardiovascular system as well. A study conducted by Ryff, Singer, and Love (2004), for example, showed that higher levels of purpose correlated with significantly lower levels of sIL-6r—a cytokine (protein associated with

the immune system) that marks chronic bodily inflammation. This research also indicated that a greater sense of purpose was associated with higher levels of HDL, or good cholesterol, and lower waist-to-hip ratios—both factors relevant to cardiovascular disease.

With evidence mounting for the potential health benefits of purpose, it is interesting to explore why this connection might exist. Purpose might influence one's physiological well-being by: 1. promoting the expression of genes associated with good health, and 2. reducing one's perception and physiological response to stress.

Purpose Promotes The Expression of Genes Linked to Good Health

Fredrickson and colleagues (2013) investigated the effects of eudaimonic well-being (defined in terms of a purposeful, meaningful, self-actualizing lifestyle) versus hedonic well-being (defined as a purely pleasurable existence) on the expression of certain genes within the human genome. Specifically, they looked at a region called the conserved transcriptional response to adversity (CTRA)—a region expressed by immune system cells during periods of prolonged stress, threat, or uncertainty. An expression of the CTRA gene composite results in increased bodily inflammation and a decreased antiviral response (Cole, 2013). Fredrickson and colleagues (2013) explain that a chronic expression of the CTRA gene composite may increase the likelihood of inflammation-mediated diseases, such as cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, and neoplastic illnesses, as well as impair one's ability to fight viral infections. In other words, a prolonged expression of these CTRA genes increases one's risk for ill health.

This study revealed that, although eudaimonia and hedonia feel similarly at the subjective level, the two are associated with disparate patterns of gene expression. High levels of eudaimonic well-being are correlated with a significant down-regulation of the CTRA gene composite, while high levels of hedonic well-being are linked to a significant up-regulation of

the gene composite. That is, a purposeful life is associated with decreased bodily inflammation and a better functioning immune system, while a purely pleasurable life is related to higher bodily inflammation and a poorer functioning immune system (Fredrickson et al., 2013). These findings indicate that having a strong sense of purpose in life may spark the expression of genes that positively influence one's physical health.

Purpose Reduces Stress

Purpose might also impact physical health by influencing one's psychological perception of and physiological response to stress. Stress is linked to the development and progression of a broad array of clinical conditions such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes (Creswell et al., 2005; McEwen & Seeman, 1999). Furthermore, research indicates that chronic stress leads to a reduced immune response (Ader & Felten, 2007). Thus, if one reduces his or her stress levels, he or she will be more likely to experience better overall health.

McKnight and Kashdan (2009) purport that purpose is particularly well poised to buffer against stress and create ample reserves for one to draw upon during strenuous times. And notably, a host of research studies offer support for this claim: Ryff, Singer, and Love (2004) find that those who score higher on purpose in life have lower levels of salivary cortisol (a stress hormone) at both the start of the day and throughout the day than those who have lower scores. Other research reveals that having a strong sense of purpose in life helps mitigate the stress that stems from making decisions involving competing goals—between work and home life, for example (Bonebright et al., 2000). Researchers have also found that reflecting upon and affirming one's personal values, a key component of one's purpose, is associated with significantly lower levels of salivary cortisol and lower levels of self-reported stress before, during, and after a stress-inducing event (Cresswell et al., 2005). It thus seems that spending time

thinking about one's purpose could reduce both the neuroendocrine response to and psychological perception of stress. Together, these findings make a strong case for the notion that purpose might lead to improved physical health through reduced stress levels.

In sum, empirical research indicates that purpose in life not only influences psychological well-being, but also physical health as well. While the means through which this effect occurs is somewhat uncertain, it seems that purpose is capable of reducing bodily inflammation, diminishing stress levels, and improving immune functioning. All of the evidence presented above indicates that it is physiologically worthwhile to pursue and live out one's purpose in life.

IV. THE SEARCH FOR PURPOSE

“Without a target or goal, one is left with the animal default: Just let the elephant graze or roam where he pleases. And because elephants live in herds, one ends up doing what everyone else is doing. Yet the human mind has a rider, and as the rider begins to think more abstractly in adolescence, there may come a time when he looks around, past the edges of the herd, and asks: Where are we all going? And why?”

- Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, p. 218

As previously stated, most psychologists agree that nearly no one is born knowing their purpose—they suggest that most often purpose must be found, created, or learned (Baumeister & Vohs, 2006; Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010). The vast majority of individuals must, therefore, embark on some sort of search or development process. So what exactly does this search process involve? And, what effect does it have on an individual's well-being?

What Motivates an Individual to Search for Purpose?

Psychologists hold disparate views about what motivates an individual to search for purpose and/or meaning in life (Steger et al., 2008). While some claim that the search for purpose is a healthy and naturally occurring human motivation (Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970; Maslow, 1947), others argue that it is triggered by dysfunction—occurring only when one

struggles with some psychological deficit (Baumeister, 1991). Steger and colleagues (2008) offer a third possibility, suggesting that different things motivate different individuals to search for meaning in life. I suspect that this final hypothesis holds the most truth, as each individual is unique and exposed to a distinctive array of life experiences.

How Does an Individual “Find” Purpose in Life?

Scholars agree that individuals can develop purpose in many different ways (Frankl, 1963; Keyes, 2011; Steger, 2009, 2012), but Kashdan and McKnight (2009) note that each of these means can be classified under three broad avenues: proactive search, reactive development, and social learning. Purpose, they say, can originate within an individual through any one or any combination of these three processes. Notably, Kashdan and McKnight do not purport that any one or any combination of these avenues is better or more conducive to the development of purpose than any other.

Proactive search involves “an effortful and gradual development process” (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009, p. 307). It is a process of trial and error—an active search for purpose, experimentation with that purpose, and then adoption/integration, alteration, or negation of that purpose. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) explain that proactive search requires curiosity, exploration, introspection, behavioral change, restoration, and integration. They also say that it necessitates openness to new and alternative conceptions of oneself and the world in which one lives. To a large extent, a person encounters potentially meaningful and/or illuminating experiences in life that might contribute to the development of purpose only by chance. Thus, proactive search requires both intentional trial and error and an element of serendipity (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009).

One may also find purpose through a process of reactive development. Reactive development relies heavily on chance—on the experience of some transformative life event that either forms or helps initiate the development of purpose in life. These transformative life events can either be direct—happen to the individual—or indirect—witnessed by the individual. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) explain that such events offer the opportunity for the development of purpose because they spur an individual to re-evaluate his or her life, values, direction, and goals. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) explain that reactive development is a condensed version of a proactive search—one that does not require lengthy trial and error, but still necessitates reflection, integration, openness, and serendipity.

Finally, purpose may be developed through social learning (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Social learning, as Bandura (1977) describes it, involves observing others, mimicking the behavior that resulted in desired outcomes, and modeling that behavior to others. In other words, social learning allows individuals to develop a sense of purpose by copying behavior that they saw produce desirable consequences (subjective or objective). Kashdan and McKnight (2009) describe this process as a “viral transmission of purpose” (p. 310)—one in which purpose spreads between and among individuals when they observe, evaluate, and mimic one another’s behaviors.

It is important to note here that while purpose can conceivably be “transmitted” between individuals, I stand by my assertion that purpose is unique to each individual. Thus, individuals who find purpose through social learning would go through two steps. First, they would observe a social cause or way of living that they themselves find personally meaningful. They would then bring their own strengths, talents, values, etc. into that cause or way of life so as to enact that purpose in a way that is unique to them.

It seems imperative to make a special note about the role that religion plays in the development of purpose in life. Steger and Frazier (2005) note that religion is particularly important to the experience of meaning. They note, referencing Emmons and Paloutzian (2003), that one of the primary functions of religion is “to provide individuals with the means through which they can experience purpose in their lives” (p. 574). Thus, religion might act as a particularly useful domain through which individuals might develop—via any of the three processes outlined above—a sense of purpose in life.

It is similarly essential to acknowledge the role that suffering plays in the development of purpose. Frankl (1963) identifies the ability to reflect upon and grow from suffering and negative experiences as especially pertinent in finding purpose. Baumeister and Vohs (2002) similarly note that suffering often stimulates individuals to search for meaning and purpose in order to cope with that trying event. Notably, finding purpose through suffering would most likely fall under the category of reactive development as described above.

The Effects of Searching for Purpose in Life

Searching for purpose is, quite obviously, not the same thing as *knowing* or as *living* one’s purpose. Nor is searching for purpose necessarily the same thing as *lacking* a sense of purpose in life (Steger et al., 2008). It follows then, that there would be marked differences in the outcomes of the search for purpose versus the presence or absence of purpose in life.

Most scholars conceive of the search for purpose as an arduous and stress-inducing process, but one that is ultimately worthwhile. Frankl (1963) observed that the search process often leads to inner tension, frustration, and distress. He referred to this state of existential distress as “noögenic neurosis” (p. 106). Notably, Frankl did not conceive of this existential frustration as either pathological (obsessive or unrealistic) or pathogenic (an illness). Rather, he

suggested that the struggle to find and live out one's unique purpose is an individual's primary responsibility—one that would ultimately be well worth the discomfort.

Maddi (1970) viewed the search process in much the same way—theorizing that the search for purpose is a primary human motivation that often involves psychological anguish, but is ultimately rewarding. Modern scholars hold similar views: Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) have hypothesized that the search for meaning is associated with stress, discomfort, and frustration. Keyes (2011) has suggested that while the process of searching for purpose may be a transformative growth experience, it is most likely to be a daunting, stressful, and temporarily isolating endeavor. In short, the general consensus among psychologists, past and present, is that the search for purpose is accompanied by psychological discomfort, frustration, and distress.

Notably, scholars have also speculated about *when* the search for purpose is most likely to result in ill-being. Based on human development theory (e.g., Erikson, 1968), which deems it appropriate for the young to spend considerable resources (time and energy) exploring their identities, future aspirations, and preferred companions, Steger, Oishi, and Kashdan (2009) speculate that searching for meaning during adolescence and emerging adulthood is normative and adaptive. They also suggest, however, that because such personal and existential exploration has not traditionally been viewed as an appropriate task for later life stages, the search for meaning during adulthood is psychologically disadvantageous. Bronk and colleagues (2009) agree with this reasoning, suggesting that because purpose aligns with the search for identity—a task for adolescence and emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968)—the search for purpose during adulthood is likely to result in diminished psychological well-being.

Clearly, many scholars have *hypothesized* about the ill-effects of the search for purpose, yet only a few empirical investigations have been conducted to directly explore these claims.

Steger and colleagues (2006), for one, found small to medium correlations between the search for meaning and negative affect, depression, and neuroticism when surveying undergraduate college students. Park, Park, and Peterson (2010) similarly found that while the *presence* of meaning is positively associated with life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect and negatively associated with depression and negative affect, the *search* for meaning is negatively correlated with life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect and positively correlated with depression and negative affect.

Interestingly, Park and colleagues (2010) discovered that the search for meaning is positively associated with well-being—specifically, greater life satisfaction, more happiness, and less depression—among those who already had substantial meaning in their lives. In other words, their research revealed that once meaning is present in an individual's life, a *further* search for meaning is actually associated with greater well-being. Cohen and Cairns (2011) furthered this line of research, discovering that individuals who reported high levels of the search for meaning were protected from the negative outcomes of the search process if they had high levels of self-actualization. Together, these studies indicate that having a strong sense of meaning in life and fulfilling the need for self-actualization may negate the detrimental effects of the search process.

Psychologists have also investigated the hypotheses regarding the search for meaning in relation to life stages. Steger, Oishi, and Kashdan (2009) found that older individuals report a greater presence of meaning in life, while those at earlier life stages report a greater search for meaning in life. That being said, their research also indicated that most people, regardless of their age, are searching for meaning (or *more* meaning) in life. They found that searching for meaning in life leads to diminished psychological well-being for those at later life stages, but not for those

at earlier life stages. A study conducted by Bronk and colleagues (2009) yielded similar results: searching for purpose during adolescence and emerging adulthood was predictive of life satisfaction, but doing so during early to middle adulthood was not.

However, not all studies offer support for the notion that searching for purpose during early life stages is psychologically beneficial. Blattner, Liang, Lund, and Spencer (2013), for example, found that searching for purpose negatively predicts self-esteem in adolescent girls. This study indicates that even in a time when individuals “should” be finding their purpose (according to human development theory), they are likely to experience diminished well-being.

As is evident from the research outlined above, most psychological research has focused on the disparate outcomes of the presence versus the search for *meaning* in life. Very few psychologists have looked at the search for *purpose* specifically⁷. This is an issue not only because meaning and purpose are distinct constructs (as was previously established), but also because the way in which “the search for meaning” is defined in these studies deviates considerably from the way in which “the search for purpose” is defined in this paper:

Steger and colleagues (2008) define the “search for meaning” as “the strength, intensity, and activity of people’s desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives.” In this paper⁸, “the search for purpose” entails working to discover one’s unique life-mission as well as finding a way to successfully enact that mission. Thus, while the search for meaning is concerned with developing a comprehension of what makes life *meaningful* (cognition), the search for purpose is concerned with realizing what one’s unique purpose is and how that purpose can be lived out (active living). These deviating

⁷ To the best of my knowledge, the only empirical investigation on the search for *purpose* specifically was conducted by Blattner and colleagues (2013).

⁸ Most scholars speak of the search for purpose merely as the attempt to discover what one’s purpose is. However, it seems most logical to also include the attempt to enact one’s found purpose because individuals must also find a way to live out their purpose in order to garner the benefits of purposeful living.

definitions render the results of the studies outlined above less enlightening on the search for purpose in life.

What is more, most of the aforementioned research has focused on the outcome of the search process on general well-being—usually life satisfaction, global happiness, and depression. Little research exists that explores what specific aspects of well-being the search for purpose influences. It seems evident that there is far more to discover about the search for purpose in life—both the search process itself and its impact on an individual’s ability to flourish.

V. PURPOSE ANXIETY

“Without knowing what I am or why I am here, life is impossible.”

- Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Part Eight, Chapter 9

As the research above reveals, the search for purpose has long been associated with psychological distress. I would like to propose a new construct to encapsulate this phenomenon: purpose anxiety. *Purpose anxiety* can provisionally be defined as the negative emotions experienced in direct relation to the search for purpose—experienced either while struggling to find or struggling to enact one’s purpose in life. In the paragraphs that follow, I will further detail purpose anxiety and explicate my hypotheses regarding 1. why it may be prevalent in modern society, 2. what might contribute to or exacerbate it 3. who it is likely to affect, and 4. how it might act as a vicious cycle and social contagion. In the last section of this paper, I will report the findings of a research study that empirically investigated the construct of purpose anxiety, many of the hypotheses presented in this section, and purpose and the search for purpose more generally.

Please note that I am proposing this construct simply to highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the search for purpose in life. It is my deepest hope that a heightened

understanding will allow for the development of interventions that enable individuals to overcome purpose anxiety and go on to live a life of purpose.

Defining Purpose Anxiety

Purpose anxiety can provisionally be defined as the experience of negative emotions in direct relation to the search for purpose. It may be experienced at two different stages during the search process: while 1. struggling to find purpose itself—when an individual feels as if he or she does not know his or her purpose or how to find it, or 2. struggling to find a way to enact one’s purpose—when an individual feels as if he or she cannot or does not know how to live out his or her purpose in life. It seems reasonable that purpose anxiety could involve almost any one of the many negative emotions, but that it would most often include stress, worry, anxiety, frustration, and fear. As with most emotional states, it is likely that purpose anxiety is experienced on a spectrum, ranging in intensity from mild, to moderate, to severe.

Why Might Purpose Anxiety Be Prevalent in Modern Society?

I suspect that purpose anxiety is a very common phenomenon in modern, affluent societies—a premise that will be evaluated in the coming study. I believe this prevalence stems from the simple fact that more and more individuals are beginning to crave a sense of purpose in life (Levit & Licina, 2011; Net Impact, 2012). But this upwelling begs the question, why are more people becoming focused on their purpose?

While it is likely that a variety of factors have acted to spur more individuals to consider their purpose in life, it is interesting to explore a few of these in detail: a greater fulfillment of basic needs, longer life spans, and a cultural shift in the way individuals define their “true selves.”

A More Widespread Fulfillment of Basic Needs

First, a more widespread fulfillment of basic human needs may have acted to increase the craving for purpose, and in turn, the incidence of purpose anxiety. Back in 1943, Maslow believed that individuals who were “basically satisfied” (Maslow, 1943, p. 383), those who had fulfilled (at least partially) the first four basic needs, were the minority. While this is most likely still true at the global level, it could be argued that some modern societies have made progress toward a more substantial satisfaction of mankind’s most basic needs, opening the door for more individuals to begin considering their purpose—their means to self-actualization and optimal well-being (C. Rockind, personal communication, 2014, July 20; Rockind, 2011).

United States census data offers support for the assertion that society is becoming more basically satisfied: The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the poverty rate in America has declined from 22% in 1959 to 15% in 2012 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013). The US Real GDP (chained to 2009 dollars) has increased 420% in the last 54 years: from 3,028 billion in 1959 to 15,761 billion in 2013 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2014, June 10). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2014, June 10a) reports that the rate of violent crime in America has fallen from 75.8 per 10,000 in 1992 to 38.6 per 10,000 people in 2012—a 49% decline in just 20 years. Similarly, property crime rates in America have fallen 44.3%—from 514.0 per 10,000 in 1991 to 285.9 per 10,000 in 2012 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014, June 10b). These statistics indicate that America is getting both wealthier and safer, allowing one to infer that more (but certainly not all) Americans are able to satisfy their physiological and safety needs (at least partially). With these most basic needs met, according to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of prepotency, individuals become motivated by higher order needs, including the need for self-actualization. In short,

because modern society is becoming more basically satisfied, individuals are more likely to feel the need for self-actualization, and thus, to consider their unique purpose in life.

Longer Lifespans

Longer lifespans, combined with human beings' natural tendency to imagine the future, may have also acted to increase the number of individuals concerned with their purpose.

Advances in science and medicine have profoundly extended the number of years one can expect to live. In the United States the average life expectancy of a child at birth in 1900 was 47.3 years (both genders); by 2010 it was 78.7—a difference of more than 30 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). It has been suggested that with this added time, mankind's existential considerations have shifted from solely questions of death, to also those of life (Keyes, 2011). Keyes (2011) explains, “science has succeeded in putting death further at bay, leaving in its wake new questions for individuals regarding what to do with the added years of life and how to make that time meaningful” (p. 282). Yet why might this be?

As was previously explained, human beings have an inherent tendency to imagine the future (Seligman et al., 2013). It is logical to conclude that shorter lifespans used to sway our imaginings of the future toward death and life after death, as that was what the near future entailed. As lifespans have become longer, an individual's projections are likely to include more imaginings of life, as the future now involves so much more of it. Thus, longer lifespans, combined with the human tendency to imagine the future, may be causing individuals to become more preoccupied with fundamental questions regarding how to live: What is my life for? Why am I here? What is my purpose? And, this preoccupation with purpose may be driving the prevalence of purpose anxiety.

A Shift in How People Define Their “True Selves”

Third, more individuals may be concerned with finding their purpose due to a cultural shift in the way individuals are defining their “true selves.” Turner (1976) notes that during the last half of the 20th century, massive cultural shifts began to take place. These changes, he stated, included a gradual turn away from institutions that provided social roles, as well as a shift from a production-centric society that valued cooperation and altruism, to a consumption-centric one, which celebrates unique personal tastes and expressive styles. Turner hypothesized that, with these shifts, a change in the way individuals conceived of their “real selves” occurred.

Traditional cultural norms, Turner (1971) explained, originally promoted an *institutional* anchor for one’s real self. As culture shifted, however, individuals slowly abandoned this view for one centered on *impulse*. In this context, the terms “impulse” and “institution” refer to two different loci of the self, or ways in which individuals develop beliefs about who they really are and what their role is in life. Institutionally based self-concepts arise from volitionally fulfilling a societal role, such as in a family, social group, workplace, or religion. Being one’s real self under this locus involves *attaining* one’s self by properly enacting an institutional role, regardless of personal desire or interest to do otherwise. Impulse based self-concepts, conversely, emphasize a process of *discovering* one’s real self. Under the impulse locus, becoming one’s real self involves fulfilling personally meaningful desires and aspirations, potentially in spite of what one’s institutional role might dictate.

Turner (1976) theorized that, because culture was shifting, the manner in which individuals defined and became their true, or authentic selves was becoming more individualistic—a matter of personal, rather than institutional, responsibility. He speculated that members of modern society no longer feel as if they are being their “true selves” when enacting

an established institutional role. Rather, he suspected, people have come to believe quite the opposite—seeing the suppression of personal motivations as inauthentic. Turner (1976) suspected that individuals now believe that the only way to be authentic is to *discover* their true selves for themselves—a determination of one’s self by oneself.

It seems likely that with this belief, the burden of finding or determining one’s purpose—a core part of one’s self—also falls on the individual. If Turner’s hypotheses are correct, many now feel that they must personally determine their purpose because it is no longer considered authentic to accept one offered by society. In short, the shift to an impulse-based locus of the self has increased the number of individuals searching for their purpose in life, and potentially, struggling with purpose anxiety.

What Might Contribute to or Exacerbate Purpose Anxiety?

It is also interesting to consider the factors that might contribute to or exacerbate the experience of purpose anxiety. While it is likely that many factors play into purpose anxiety, I suspect that certain perceptions, beliefs, and patterns of thinking are particularly pertinent to its experience. More specifically, I posit that 1. the perception that purpose is a choice, 2. a tendency toward pessimism, 3. a lack of self-knowledge, and 4. the belief that language is limiting all might contribute to the individual experience of purpose anxiety. The present study will evaluate the hypothesized relation between these four factors and purpose anxiety.

Perception of Purpose as a Personal Choice

First the perception that one’s purpose—both what it is and how it might be fulfilled—is a matter of personal choice might contribute to the experience of purpose anxiety. Traditionally, purpose (defined as one’s “calling”) was thought of as something that was bestowed upon an individual by God (Keyes, 2011), or as something that was provided by an institution or society

(as explained above)(Keyes, 2011; Turner 1976). Yet these beliefs have waned with the evolution of American culture, and in their place, I hypothesize, has arisen the perception that purpose is a matter of personal choice—something that must be determined by an individual for him- or herself, rather than something that is provided, bestowed upon, or offered by an institution, society, or divinity.

Support for this assertion can be found in the way in which many psychologists speak of purpose. Keyes (2011), for example states, that because human beings are born “tabula rasa” (p. 282) (as blank slates) and with the capacity for self-reflective thought, they are granted the freedom to decide: “What purpose, to what end?” (p. 282). “Humans,” he says, “have a purpose in life, but the ability to *choose* from multiple opportunities complicates the nature of this purpose” (Keyes, 2011, p. 281). Frankl (1963), Maddi (1970), and Baumeister and Vohs (2006) also speak of purpose as a matter of personal responsibility—each asserting that purpose “must be learned, discovered, or created” (Park et al., 2010, p. 3) by the individual, rather than as something that is inherently known or provided. And yet, why is the perception that one’s purpose is a choice even an issue? Why would it result in the psychological distress of purpose anxiety?

While personal choice is indeed conducive and necessary to healthy human functioning (Maslow, 1948; Schwartz, 2000, 2004; Seligman, 1998), an *overabundance* of choice, Schwartz (2000, 2004) purports, changes personal freedom from a form of liberty to a form of tyranny, from a source of control to a source of distress. He explains,

Perhaps there comes a point at which opportunities become so numerous that we feel overwhelmed. Instead of feeling in control, we feel unable to cope. Having

the opportunity to choose is no blessing if we feel we do not have the wherewithal to choose wisely. (Schwartz, 2004, p. 104)

Notably, empirical research offers support for these claims. A series of three studies conducted by Iyengar and Lepper (2000) revealed that, contrary to popular belief and traditional psychological lore, more choice is not always better: Extensive choice, while initially more enticing than limited choice, actually hampers intrinsic motivation, diminishes performance, increases feelings of regret and dissatisfaction with one's decisions, and even creates decision deferment or paralysis all together. What is more, Schwartz (2004) finds that heightened choice creates a deeper feeling of personal accountability for the outcome of any given decision. A rise in the number of options leaves an individual feeling that there is no reason, outside of his or her own personal aptitude, for a decision to turn out as less than satisfactory.

Schwartz (2004) refers to this negative interplay between choice and well-being as *the paradox of choice*, explaining that it arises because the real and perceived costs of making decisions rise with an increasing array of options and/or an increasing number of decisions one must make. When extrapolated to the notion of purpose, this paradox offers an explanation as to why the perception that purpose is a choice sparks psychological distress.

When purpose is perceived as a matter of personal choice, the search for purpose becomes subject to the negative ramifications of too much personal freedom. It seems quite obvious that the belief that one must choose his or her purpose, as well as the manner in which to enact that purpose, out of a seemingly infinite array of possibilities could result in profound psychological discomfort. And, because the psychological and emotional costs of being forced to make choices are exacerbated when one is dealing with a high stakes decision (Schwartz,

2004)—like what one’s purpose is and how it might be enacted—purpose anxiety might be *especially* distressing.

Please note that I do not wish to deemphasize the importance of choice, personal freedom, and self-determination. Abundant choice enables human beings to get what they want and need; it grants individuals the opportunity to express themselves and fulfill their desire for autonomy (Maslow, 1948; Schwartz, 2004; Seligman, 1998). Thus, the personal freedom to define one’s own purpose is indeed beneficial—it liberates individuals from the oppressiveness of confining (and perhaps even immoral) social scripts and cultural constraints. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that this perception can carry significant psychological costs.

A Tendency Toward Pessimism

Second, pessimistic tendencies (or a low level of optimism) might contribute to or exacerbate purpose anxiety. Seligman (2013, November 15) explains that optimistic and pessimistic beliefs diverge on two elements: pervasiveness and permanence. Pervasiveness refers to the notion that a good or bad thing generalizes to infiltrate all other domains of life, while permanence encompasses the belief that a good or bad thing will persist in the future. Pessimists believe that negative events are permanent and pervasive, while positive events are temporary and specific. Optimists hold just the opposite: negative events are temporary and specific, while good events are permanent and pervasive (Seligman, 1998).

It seems likely that one who is searching for purpose and has pessimistic tendencies (or who is lacking in optimism) would be more prone to experience purpose anxiety. Such a person is likely to believe that he or she will *never* be able to find or enact his or her purpose in life (permanence), and that this inability to do so makes him or her inadequate in general (pervasiveness). Such beliefs are, quite obviously, going to stir a multitude of negative emotions

in relation to one's purpose and to one's self. And unfortunately, they might also inhibit one from finding the confidence and motivation necessary to take action toward finding or living one's purpose in life. In short, a tendency toward pessimism might not only increase the likelihood of purpose anxiety, but also act to prolong this negative state.

A Lack of Self-Knowledge

A lack of self-knowledge could also contribute to or exacerbate the experience of purpose anxiety. Because purpose draws upon one's unique strengths, values, talents, skills, and interests, it seems obvious that one must first be *aware* of those inherent capacities in order to fully realize his or her unique purpose. It has been suggested that purpose fulfills the need for self-actualization. Yet it would be rather difficult to become self-actualized—to become even more of who one actually is—without knowing (at least partially) who one is to begin with.

Like Rockind (2011), I suspect that, in order to evade or overcome purpose anxiety, one must not only know him- or herself, but also *accept* and *value* him- or herself. Unfortunately, it seems that many fail to accept, value, and be their true selves for one's more basic desire to belong, or to "fit in," overrides one's reverence for his or her unique self (C. Rockind, personal communication, 2014, July 30). Without accepting or valuing one's true self, it is likely that an individual will lack the self-efficacy needed to successfully live out his or her purpose in life. Of course one must first know him- or herself, in order to value him- or her herself, and for this reason, a lack of self-knowledge might contribute to or worsen the individual experience of purpose anxiety.

Belief that Language is Limited

Finally, the belief that language is limited when it comes to one's purpose might spur or exacerbate purpose anxiety. Human beings crave clarity and consistency, and in an effort to

satisfy that craving, use language to give clear, consistent meaning to things around them (Baumeister & Vohs, 2006). Quite obviously humans do this both for concrete things, such as nature, man-made objects, and people, and for abstract things, like ideas, beliefs, values, and goals. Notably, many have a difficult time articulating abstract things—like complex thoughts, emotions, or ideas.

Because of this inherent desire for clarity and consistency, it is likely that individuals crave a purpose that they can easily define and describe with words. Yet it is also probable that many struggle to find such clarity—because purpose is a highly abstract and complex aspect of one's self, many will struggle to clearly verbalize their purpose in life. The feeling that one is unable to put his or her purpose into words, or that language is too limited to fully capture his or her purpose, is likely to violate one's craving for clarity, consistency, and freedom, and thereby stir a variety of negative emotions. If this perceived inability to articulate one's purpose continues (assuming one believes that he or she must be able to clearly *state* their purpose in order to *live* with purpose), so too will the negative emotions that this belief elicits. In this way, the perception that language is limited might contribute to or worsen the experience of purpose anxiety.

In sum, a variety of factors may act to contribute to or exacerbate purpose anxiety. I have hypothesized that four factors—the perception of purpose as a personal choice, a tendency toward pessimism, a lack of self-knowledge, and the belief that language is limited—are particularly likely to contribute to the experience of purpose anxiety. I doubt that there is any one single “cause” of purpose anxiety, but rather many factors that combine to create and/or worsen this difficult existential experience.

Who Is Purpose Anxiety Likely to Affect?

Purpose anxiety could theoretically affect anyone at any stage of life (so long as their basic needs like food and shelter are sufficiently satisfied). That being said, I imagine that individuals in transition fall victim to this state most often—adolescents, emerging adults, “empty-nesters,” and retirees, for example. Individuals undergoing transitions are likely to be faced with important, potentially life-altering decisions—such as which college to attend, whom to marry, where to live, which career to pursue, whether to have children, and what to do in retirement. Such decisions tie into one’s self-concept, and thus to one’s purpose. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that individuals facing life transitions would be more likely to consider their purpose (either what it is or how to enact it), and thereby, be more likely to experience purpose anxiety.

Notably, life paths are far more diffuse than they once were—a result of American society’s efforts to maximize self-determination (Schwartz, 2004). As such, life transitions could theoretically occur at nearly any age. For this reason, it is unlikely that any one age group would be completely immune from purpose anxiety. However, I suspect that emerging adults (aged 18-25) and young adults (25-30) are *particularly* susceptible to purpose anxiety as individuals at these ages face the most staggering array of major life decisions (Arnett, 2000). So although some past research has shown that it is normal, adaptive, and conducive to well-being to search for purpose early in life (Bronk et al., 2009), I believe that the search for purpose at any age can take a significant psychological toll.

Purpose Anxiety as a Vicious Cycle and Social Contagion

Purpose anxiety is a construct worth addressing not only because negative emotions feel bad subjectively, but also because these emotions might trap an individual in a vicious cycle.

Studies indicate that negative emotions narrow one's thought-action repertoires, or the scope of their cognitive capacities (attention, cognition, and action)(Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

Negative emotions limit the array of perceptions, thoughts, and actions that one is able to recognize or hold in their mind. They create a narrowed mindset, which hinders one's ability to integrate disparate information, prevents one from realizing new possibilities, and keeps an individual critically focused (Fredrickson, 2009). In short, when one is overcome with negative emotion, it becomes difficult to see anything but those emotions and their source.

It seems that an individual suffering from purpose anxiety—one who is overcome with negative emotions in relation to their purpose—could become mentally trapped by the critical, focused, and narrowed mindset sparked by their psychological distress. Such an individual would be less likely to realize alternative ways of looking at his or her purpose (Rockind, 2011)—whether the issue in question be what one's purpose is, how one's purpose might be found, or how one's purpose might be enacted.

The vicious cycle could theoretically progress like this: an individual struggles in some way with his or her purpose, he or she feels negative emotions as a result of that struggle, the negative emotions trigger a narrowed mindset, this narrowed mindset inhibits that person's ability to overcome their struggle, and this inability spurs more negative emotions—starting the vicious cycle all over again. In short, purpose anxiety has the capacity to keep an individual mentally trapped in a vicious cycle of limiting and narrowing negative emotions, and thereby, blocked from the benefits of a purposeful existence.

And what is more, the negative ramifications of purpose anxiety may spread beyond the lone individual. Social contagion research indicates that emotions, both negative and positive, spread throughout social networks over time (Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Fowler & Christakis,

2009; Hill, Rand, Nowak, & Christakis, 2010). Thus, the negative emotions that one individual is feeling in relation to his or her purpose may spread to those directly around him or her, and then to those secondary individual's social relations. Eventually, this cascade of negative emotions could bring down the emotional mean of an entire social network—negatively impacting its overall well-being and collective ability to see creative solutions to any problems they face (let alone to each individual's struggles with purpose).

For these reasons, it seems evident that purpose anxiety is something worth understanding and addressing. But before interventions can confidently be developed to counteract, prevent, or help individuals cope with purpose anxiety, the phenomenon must be empirically investigated. And it is this fact, combined with the need for more research on the search for *purpose* in general, that created the need for the present study.

VI. THE STUDY

Understanding Purpose, the Search for Purpose, and Purpose Anxiety

The present study was conducted to gather empirical data on purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety as perceived and experienced by American adults (aged 18 and older). More specifically, this study had three objectives. First, it aimed to investigate the relation between well-being and the *presence of* versus the *search for* purpose in life. Second, it intended to gather general information on purpose—what it is, its perceived importance, and how it is “found” by the average adult. Finally, it aimed to gather empirical evidence for, and general information about, the new construct of purpose anxiety.

Hypotheses

Aside from gathering general, empirical data on purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety, this study was designed to test several hypotheses:

First, I hypothesized that, consistent with past research, individuals who were currently searching for purpose would experience lower overall well-being than those who had found their purpose. I further speculated that these individuals would have significantly lower scores on each individual element of well-being under Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, higher scores on negative emotion, and lower scores on self-reported health—relations that had never before been empirically evaluated.

Second, I hypothesized that purpose anxiety would be a common occurrence in modern American society and that it would not be specific to any one population. However, based on the theoretical evidence presented above, I did suspect to find the highest prevalence of purpose anxiety among emerging and young adults (aged 18-30).

Third, I hypothesized that those individuals who were currently experiencing purpose anxiety would report lower scores on general well-being, as well as on each element of well-being under the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). I further suspected that these individuals would have lower scores on self-reported health.

Fourth and finally, I suspected that individuals who were currently experiencing purpose anxiety would report higher scores on the aforementioned factors believed to contribute to or exacerbate purpose anxiety. I expected that those experiencing purpose anxiety would have higher scores on items measuring the perception of purpose as a choice and the belief that language is limited, and lower scores on items targeting optimism and self-knowledge.

Methods

Participants

179 participants completed the survey (out of 269 individuals who began it). These participants were American adults aged 18 and above. Participants were recruited through social

media outlets (Facebook) and personal networks from May 2014 to June 2014. See Appendices A and B for the recruitment script and participant consent form respectively. Table 1 organizes the demographic data (age, gender, household income, and religious affiliation) that was collected from study participants. Participants were also asked to report their current occupation. Results indicated that participants held a wide variety of occupations. All identifying data was deleted prior to analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants

Age			Current household income in U.S. dollars		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
18-24	31	17.3	Under \$25,000	21.00	11.70
25-30	23	12.8	\$25,000 - \$39,999	14.00	7.80
31-40	24	13.4	\$40,000 - \$49,999	12.00	6.70
41-55	69	38.5	\$50,000 - \$74,999	22.00	12.30
56-65	17	9.5	\$75,000 - \$99,999	17.00	9.50
65+	14	7.8	\$100,000 - \$150,000	19.00	10.60
Missing	1	0.6	Over \$150,000	54.00	30.20
Total	179	100	Prefer not to say	20.00	11.20
			Total	179.00	100.00

Gender			Religious affiliation		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Male	43	24	Christian	77	43
Female	136	76	Catholic	32	17.9
Total	179	100	Jewish	3	1.7
			Buddhist	2	1.1
			Spiritual, but not religious	31	17.3
			Other (please specify)	27	15.1
			Prefer not to say	7	3.9
			Total	179	100

Measures

The present study involved a completely anonymous, cross-sectional, online survey that was developed and distributed using Qualtrics software. The survey first consisted of a 23-item

measure of well-being: the PERMA profiler (Butler & Kern, 2014). This questionnaire uses an eleven-point Likert scale to measure participants' positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (3 items for each element). The questionnaire also contains three items about one's physical health (as perceived by the individual), and one item on overall happiness. The survey then posed a series of 28 quantitative questions and two to four open response qualitative questions (dependent on participants' responses). This series related to purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety. As purpose anxiety is a new construct, this second set of questions was original. The survey concluded with five items measuring demographic variables. Appendix C provides a complete list of survey questions as they were presented in the study.

Results

I will first present the findings on the differences between the search for and the presence of purpose in life. I will then outline general findings on purpose in life as perceived by modern Americans. And finally, I will detail the findings on purpose anxiety.

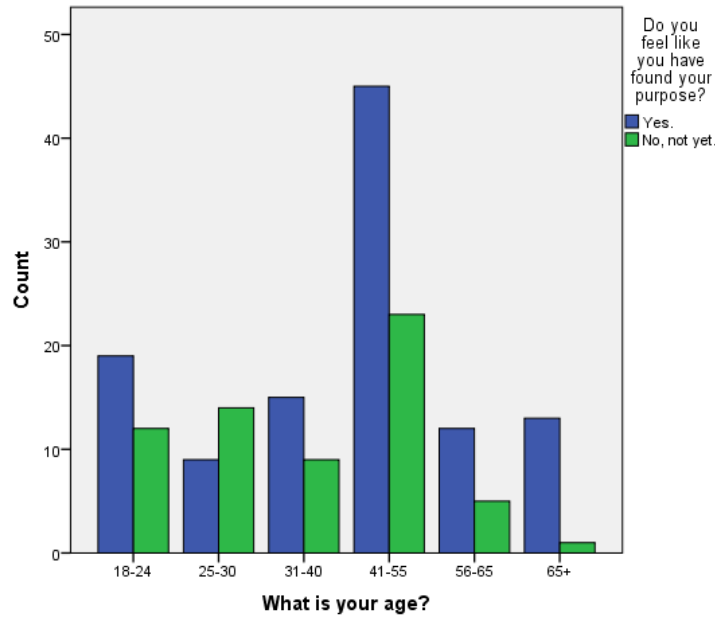
The Presence of Versus the Search for Purpose in Life

36% (n = 64) of all respondents reported that they had not yet found purpose in life. Chi square analyses were conducted to determine whether or not certain demographic variables were predictive of having found purpose. These analyses revealed that only age was a significant predictor of having found versus not having found purpose ($X^2(5) = 11.8, p < .05$). Those at younger ages (aged 18-30) were significantly less likely to state that they had found their purpose. Graph 1 details these results.

The other demographic variables (gender, income, and religion) were not found to be significant predictors of having found one's purpose. That being said, far more individuals with a

household income of over \$150,000 had found their purpose than those of the same income who had not. Similarly, the majority of individuals who identified themselves as Christian had found their purpose in life. These findings, while not statistically significant, indicate that financial resources and religion might help an individual find a sense of purpose.

Graph 1. Graph of chi square analysis between found/not found purpose and age



Correlational analyses were conducted to test the relationship between searching for purpose and well-being. Not having found purpose was significantly negatively correlated with overall well-being, as well as with each element of PERMA (Seligman, 2011) (Pearson correlation, 2-tailed, $p < .01$) (see table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlational analysis with not found purpose subgroup

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max	R
Overall well-being	64	6.84	6.94	5.31	1.28	2.75	9.19	-.396**
Positive emotion	64	6.45	6.67	7.33	1.55	3.00	9.67	-.352**
Engagement	64	6.90	7.00	8.00	1.59	3.33	9.67	-.272**
Relationships	64	7.34	7.67	7.33	1.73	3.00	10.00	-.229**
Meaning	64	6.68	7.00	6.00	1.83	1.33	10.00	-.459**
Accomplishment	64	6.86	7.00	6.33	1.44	2.33	9.33	-.274**

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level ($p < .01$) (two-

Independent t-tests were used to test the difference between the mean scores of overall well-being, the individual elements of PERMA, general negative emotion, and self-perceived health for those who had found their purpose and those who were searching for it. Individuals who had not yet found their purpose (M_1) reported significantly lower overall well-being compared to those who had found their purpose (M_2) ($M_1=6.84$, $M_2=7.88$, $t(176) = 4.98$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, individuals who were searching for their purpose had significantly lower scores on every one of the five elements of well-being under Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, as well as significantly higher levels of negative emotion than those who had found purpose. Table 3 details these results.

Table 3. T-tests of found versus not found purpose and well-being

	Has found purpose			Has not found purpose			t	df	p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
Overall well-being	114	7.88	1.09	64	6.84	1.28	5.72	176	0
Positive emotion	114	7.66	1.56	64	6.45	1.55	4.98	176	0
Engagement	114	7.71	1.26	64	6.90	1.59	3.75	176	0
Relationships	114	8.11	1.49	64	7.34	1.73	3.13	176	0.002
Meaning	114	8.27	1.25	64	6.68	1.83	6.86	176	0
Accomplishment	114	7.63	1.23	64	6.86	1.44	3.77	176	0
Negative emotion	114	3.44	1.80	64	4.37	1.57	-3.44	176	0.001

These results offer support for the first hypothesis of the study: the presence of purpose does positively influence well-being, both overall and each of its constitutive elements. These results are also consistent with and build off of past research studies that found the search for purpose or meaning to be associated with lower overall well-being (Bronk et al., 2009; Cohen & Cairns, 2011; Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2009; Park et al., 2010).

This study did not, however, find support for the hypothesis regarding the relation between self-perceived physical health and the presence of versus search for purpose. There was no significant correlation between health and the search for purpose, nor was there a significant

difference in the mean scores between the self-perceived health of those who had found their purpose compared to those who were searching for it. This absence of relation might be due to the fact that physical health was self-reported as opposed to objectively measured (most past studies that found significant relations between purpose and physical health used objective measures—e.g., Boyle et al., 2009; Hill & Turiano, 2014).

Purpose: General Findings about Purpose in Life

In order to better understand how the average American thinks about and defines purpose in life, an open-ended qualitative question was asked: “How do you define purpose? In other words, what does purpose mean to you?” This question was given to respondents before any other items involving purpose so that their conceptions of purpose would not be swayed. Several common threads emerged from these responses, all of which supported the definition of purpose that has been used throughout this paper.

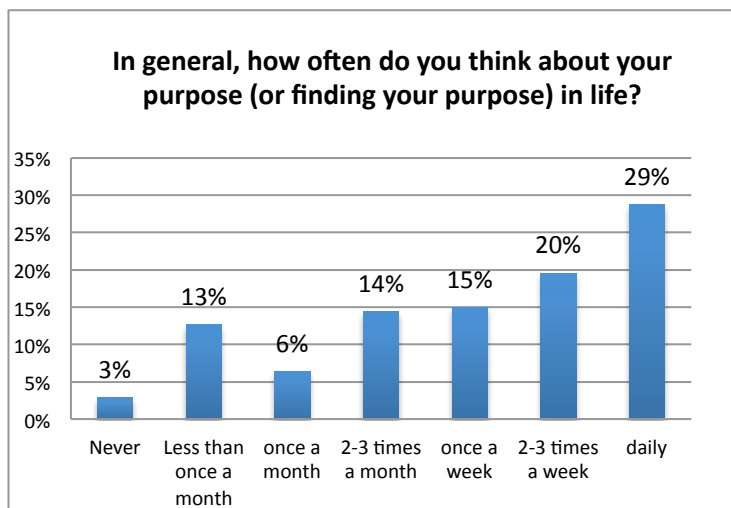
Nearly all participants spoke of purpose as an overarching life mission that drives one forward and is important both to one’s self (“personally meaningful,” “fun to enact,” “brings joy,” “creates a sense of belonging”) and to others (“helps others” in some way, “makes the a world better place”). Many respondents also explained purpose as one’s reason for living, or what one is “meant to do” with his or her life. While some respondents conceived of purpose as a God given mission, the vast majority did not—offering support for the notion that most people view finding purpose as a personal responsibility. Most wrote about purpose as creating a sense of connection to “something that is bigger than [themselves],” or a sense of being needed by others. Another common theme that emerged was deliberateness—many noted that purpose requires a conscious choice about how to live and what to work for. In sum, participants’ responses indicated that most view purpose as one’s *why* for living—a *why* that creates meaning

for one’s self, benefits others, connects one to something greater than him- or herself, and is undertaken deliberately.

Interestingly, the data revealed that a massive portion of the population holds purpose in life as exceedingly important. A series of three items asked respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed (on a seven point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) with prompts involving the importance of living with purpose. 95% (n = 170) of participants reported that they either “agree” or “strongly agree” with the prompt, “I want to live in a way that is personally meaningful.” 93% (n = 166) of respondents reported “agree” or “strongly agree” to the prompt “I want to live in a way that benefits others.” And 97% (n = 173) of people responded “agree” or “strongly agree” to the prompt, “For me, it is important that I live a purposeful life.”

The data also revealed that people think about their purpose in life quite often. Participants were asked to indicate how often they think about their purpose in life on a scale ranging from “never” to “daily.” 49% (n = 84) of participants reported that they think about their purpose (or finding their purpose) in life either 2-3 times a week or daily. Graph 2 summarizes the findings. These results offer more support for the notion that a large proportion of the population has become concerned with their purpose in life.

Graph 2: Descriptive statistics of the frequency that participants think about their purpose

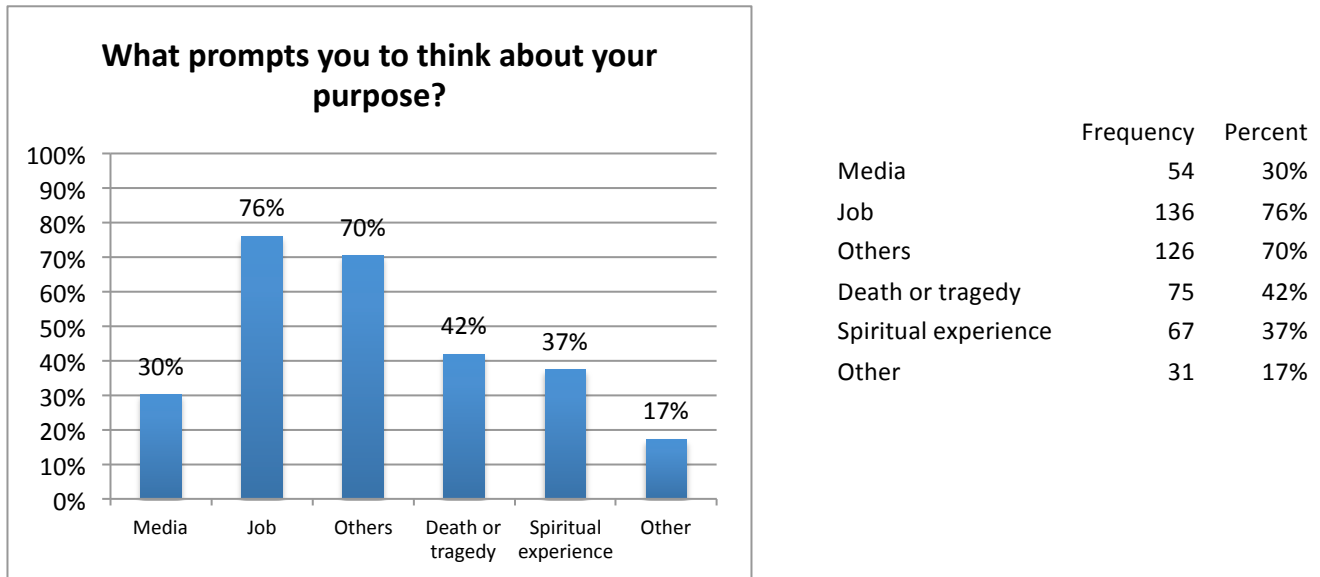


	Frequency	Percent
Never	5	3%
Less than once a month	22	13%
Once a month	11	6%
2-3 times a month	25	14%
Once a week	26	15%
2-3 times a week	34	20%
Daily	50	29%
Missing	1	1%
	174	100%

Notably, there was no significant difference in the average numbers of times individuals reported thinking about their purpose between those who were searching for their purpose ($M_2=4.80$, $SD=1.64$) and those who had already found their purpose ($M_1=5.12$, $SD=1.94$) ($M_1=5.12$, $M_2=4.80$, $t(175)=1.14$, $p=0.258$). These results imply that the presence versus the search for purpose does not influence how often an individual considers his or her purpose in life. In other words, individuals who have yet to find their purpose seem to be no more or less likely to think about their purpose more or less often than those who have already found it.

Participants were also asked to indicate what prompts them to think about their purpose in life. A variety of potential triggers (the media, thinking about one’s job, talking with others, hearing of a death or tragedy, and having a religious experience) were provided for individuals to select (or not select), as was an “other” option with an open response text box. Graph 3 details participants’ responses.

Graph 3. Responses to “What prompts you to think about your purpose?”



As is evident from these graphs, thinking about one's job (current or future) and talking with other people were the most common reasons people reported as spurring them to think about their purpose in life. Yet, a relatively high percentage of individuals also indicated that hearing about a death or tragedy, having a spiritual experience, or hearing about purpose in the media prompts them to think about their purpose. These findings indicate that a wide variety of things trigger an individual to consider his or her purpose in life.

To garner insight on what helps people find their purpose, participants who reported that they had found their purpose were asked to briefly describe what enabled them to do so. Several themes emerged from these qualitative responses. While a few respondents reported that they felt they had always known their purpose, the vast majority described a gradual, effortful, and deliberate search and realization process. Participants credited family, children, mentors, role models, God (or religion and spirituality), education, job opportunities, illness, hardship, and tragedy as helping them find their purpose. Many participants also noted the importance of curiosity, hope, and exploration in finding their purpose—offering support for Kashdan and McKnight's (2009) assertion that curiosity and exploration are fundamental in the development of purpose in life. A final theme that emerged was the importance of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Participants reported that taking time to know, understand, accept, and *value* themselves (their strengths, passions, values, talents) enabled them to discover their purpose in life. These findings offer some initial support for the hypothesis that an individual must know and see value in him- or herself in order to experience purpose (Rockind, 2011).

Purpose Anxiety

Purpose anxiety has been defined as the negative emotions experienced in direct relation to the search for purpose in life. As the study aimed to determine the prevalence of purpose

anxiety experienced at any point in life, purpose anxiety (current or past) was measured using participants' affirmative response to the question: "Have you experienced negative emotions (stress, anxiety, fear, frustration, sadness, worry, anger, etc.) while searching for or living out your purpose?" Based on this classification, 91% (n = 157) of participants reported experiencing purpose anxiety at some point in their lives. 77% (n = 122) of these (68% of the full sample) reported that they experienced purpose anxiety while trying to find their purpose, and 66% (n = 104) (58% of the full sample) reported feeling it while trying to live out their purpose (note: participants had the option to select one or both boxes). These statistics offer support for the hypothesis that purpose anxiety is an extremely prevalent experience in contemporary American society. They also offer support for the proposed definition of purpose anxiety—namely, that it can be experienced either while struggling to find or struggling to live out one's purpose in life.

If participants responded "yes" to having experienced negative emotions in relation to their purpose, they were asked to indicate which negative emotions they experienced, the intensity of those emotions (on a scale of 0 (as not at all) to 10 (as intensely)), and when they experienced those emotions. The list of negative emotions that was provided included, stress, anxiety, sadness, fear, frustration, anger, worry, jealousy, and other (please specify). The descriptive statistics of these emotions for the full sample are outlined in table 4. As is evident from the table, the most commonly experienced and intensely felt negative emotions felt in direct relation to purpose were stress, anxiety, frustration and worry.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the negative emotions of purpose anxiety (full sample)

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
Stress	157	6.13	6.00	8.00	2.32	0.00	10.00
Anxiety	157	5.84	6.00	8.00	2.62	0.00	10.00
Sadness	157	4.25	4.00	5.00	2.83	0.00	10.00
Fear	157	4.07	4.00	1.00	2.98	0.00	10.00
Frustration	157	5.53	6.00	7.00	2.76	0.00	10.00
Anger	157	3.20	3.00	0.00	2.70	0.00	10.00
Worry	157	5.43	6.00	7.00	2.73	0.00	10.00
Jealousy	157	2.52	2.00	0.00	2.60	0.00	10.00
Other	157	0.82	0.00	0.00	2.54	0.00	10.00

These same analyses were conducted to compare the difference in the experience of purpose anxiety between those who had found purpose and those who were searching for it. As with the full sample, descriptive statistics were used to compare when each of these sub-groups (found versus searching for purpose) experienced purpose anxiety. 78% (n = 50) of those who had not yet found their purpose and 62.3% (n = 71) of those who had found their purpose reported feeling/having felt negative emotions during their *search* for purpose in life. These high percentages indicate that purpose anxiety is very often felt when an individual is attempting to discover his or her purpose in life. 64% (n = 73) of those who had found their purpose reported feeling these negative emotions while attempting to live out their purpose. Together these findings offer more support for the notion that purpose anxiety may be felt either while one is attempting to find or attempting to enact his or her purpose in life.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the negative emotions experienced in direct relation to purpose for these two sub-groups (found versus searching for purpose). Table 5 displays the results:

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of negative emotions: Has found versus has not found purpose

	Has found purpose							Has not found purpose						
	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
Stress	98	5.98	6.00	8.00	2.21	0.00	10.00	58	6.38	7.00	5.00	2.51	0.00	10.00
Anxiety	98	5.57	6.00	8.00	2.58	0.00	10.00	58	6.29	7.00	9.00	2.66	1.00	10.00
Sadness	98	4.01	4.00	1.00	2.92	0.00	10.00	58	4.62	4.50	3.00	2.66	0.00	10.00
Fear	98	3.91	3.00	1.00	2.89	0.00	10.00	58	4.40	5.00	7.00	3.12	0.00	10.00
Frustration	98	5.21	5.00	7.00	2.73	0.00	10.00	58	6.09	6.50	8.00	2.77	0.00	10.00
Anger	98	3.07	2.00	0.00	2.79	0.00	10.00	58	3.45	3.00	0.00	2.57	0.00	10.00
Worry	98	5.32	6.00	6.00	2.73	0.00	10.00	58	5.67	6.00	5.00	2.74	0.00	10.00
Jealousy	98	2.21	1.00	0.00	2.59	0.00	10.00	58	3.07	3.00	0.00	2.56	0.00	10.00
Other	98	0.88	0.00	0.00	2.73	0.00	10.00	58	0.72	0.00	0.00	2.23	0.00	10.00

As can be seen from the mean scores in the table, individuals who were searching for purpose reported higher levels of each and every one of the negative emotions listed (except for “other”) than those who had found their purpose. Independent t-tests were used to determine the significance in these differences. Results indicated that only jealousy was significantly more intense for those who had not yet found their purpose (M_1) than for those who had (M_2) ($M_1=3.07$, $M_2 = 2.21$, $t(154) = -2.00$, $p < .05$). There was no significant difference between the two groups for any of the other negative emotions.

So as to capture the full emotional spectrum of purpose in life, all participants were also asked the same exact questions about positive emotions in relation to their purpose. More specifically, individuals were asked, “Have you experienced positive emotions (happiness, joy, inspiration, excitement, gratitude, etc.) while searching for or living out your purpose?” If participants responded affirmatively to this question, they were asked to identify which positive emotions, the extent to which they felt these emotions, and when they felt these emotions.

98% ($n = 176$) of participants reported feeling positive emotions in direct relation to their purpose at one point or another. 76% ($n = 134$) of these respondents (75% of the full sample)

indicated that they felt these positive emotions while living out their purpose. And somewhat surprisingly, 54% (n = 95) (53% of the full sample) indicated that they experienced positive emotions while searching for their purpose. This statistic reveals that the search for purpose in life is not only psychologically distressing (as so many psychologists hypothesized it to be), but *also* emotionally uplifting. It indicates that purpose, either living it out or searching for it, is not only emotionally draining, but also emotionally rewarding. Table 6 details the descriptive statistics of the full sample's perceptions of positive emotions in relation to their purpose.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of positive emotions in relation to purpose (full sample)

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
Happiness	171	7.92	8.00	9.00	1.79	1.00	10.00
Joy	171	7.70	8.00	9.00	2.17	0.00	10.00
Inspiration	171	7.88	8.00	10.00	2.06	0.00	10.00
Gratitude	171	8.29	9.00	10.00	2.03	0.00	10.00
Excitement	171	7.81	8.00	10.00	2.18	1.00	10.00
Pride	171	7.20	8.00	10.00	2.49	0.00	10.00
Love	171	7.92	9.00	10.00	2.47	0.00	10.00
Other	171	0.68	0.00	0.00	2.42	0.00	10.00

As can be seen in the table, no one positive emotion stands out as more prevalent than the rest. However, it does seem that positive emotions ($M_1 = 55.41$, $SD = 12.62$) were experienced, based on cumulative average, as more intense than their negative counterparts ($M_2 = 37.78$, $SD = 16.50$). However, this difference was not tested for significance.

As was done for negative emotions, these same analyses were conducted to compare the presence and timing of positive emotions for those who had found with those who were searching for their purpose in life. 100% (n = 114) of those who had found purpose and 95.3% (n = 61) of those who were searching for it responded affirmatively to feeling positive emotions in relation to their purpose. A large proportion of individuals in both groups reported feeling these

positive emotions in direct relation to their search process: 62.5% (N = 40) of participants who had not yet found their purpose and 48.2% (N = 55) of those who had found their purpose. 85.1% (N = 91) of those who had found their purpose reported experiencing positive emotions while enacting their purpose. These statistics offer further support for the finding that searching for and enacting one's purpose in life is a positive emotion inducing (as well as a negative emotion inducing) experience.

That being said, it does seem that fewer individuals who are searching for purpose experience positive emotions in direct relation to their search than do those who have already found purpose. Independent t-tests were used to test the significance between the intensity (mean scores) of positive emotions felt in relation to purpose for those who had found versus not found purpose in life. These analyses revealed that individuals who were searching for purpose felt significantly less intense positive emotions—both overall (calculated as the cumulative average of each emotion) and for each individual positive emotion (aside from other)—compared to those who had found their purpose. Table 7 details these findings.

Table 7. Independent t-test of positive emotions: Has found versus has not found purpose

	Has found purpose			Has not found purpose			t	df	p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
Overall	110	58.88	10.39	60	49.12	14.02	5.16	168	0
Happiness	110	8.35	1.53	60	7.17	2.00	4.30	168	0
Joy	110	8.22	1.81	60	6.72	2.44	4.55	168	0
Inspiration	110	8.33	1.77	60	7.03	2.31	4.08	168	0
Gratitude	110	8.71	1.78	60	7.50	2.25	3.85	168	0
Excitement	110	8.23	2.00	60	7.05	2.30	3.47	168	0.001
Pride	110	7.75	2.23	60	6.27	2.64	3.90	168	0
Love	110	8.55	1.80	60	6.80	3.07	4.70	168	0
Other	110	0.75	2.54	60	0.58	2.23	0.42	168	0.679

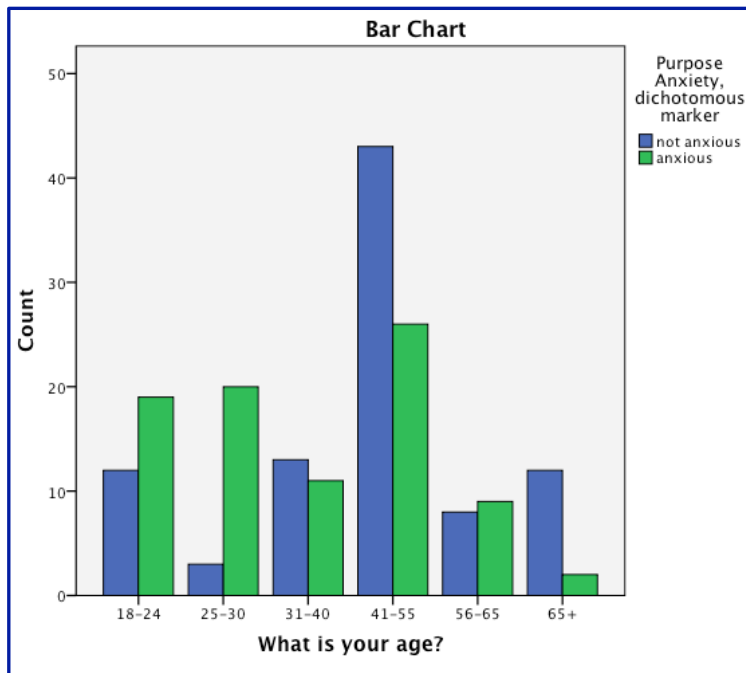
The analyses outlined above provide evidence for the proposed definition of purpose anxiety, as well as its prevalence in modern American society. But the present study also aimed to delve a bit deeper into purpose anxiety—to begin to discover the effects of purpose anxiety, the factors that might contribute to or exacerbate it, and the demographic variables that may predispose one to it. For these next analyses, the full sample was broken down into those who were currently experiencing purpose anxiety and those who were not.

Participants were classified as *currently* experiencing purpose anxiety if they responded “yes” to feeling negative emotions in relation to their purpose *and either* responding “no” to having found their purpose *or* “no” or “sometimes” to feeling as if they are able to live out their purpose in life. Based on this classification, 49% (n = 87) of all participants were currently experiencing purpose anxiety. 69% (n = 60) (33.5% of full sample) of which were experiencing purpose anxiety in relation to their search for purpose, and 31% (n = 27) (15% of full sample) was experiencing purpose anxiety in relation to their struggle to enact their purpose. These statistics offer further support for the two proposed time frames of purpose anxiety. Notably, they also indicate that purpose anxiety is more prevalent during the struggle to find purpose in life (as opposed to living out one’s purpose).

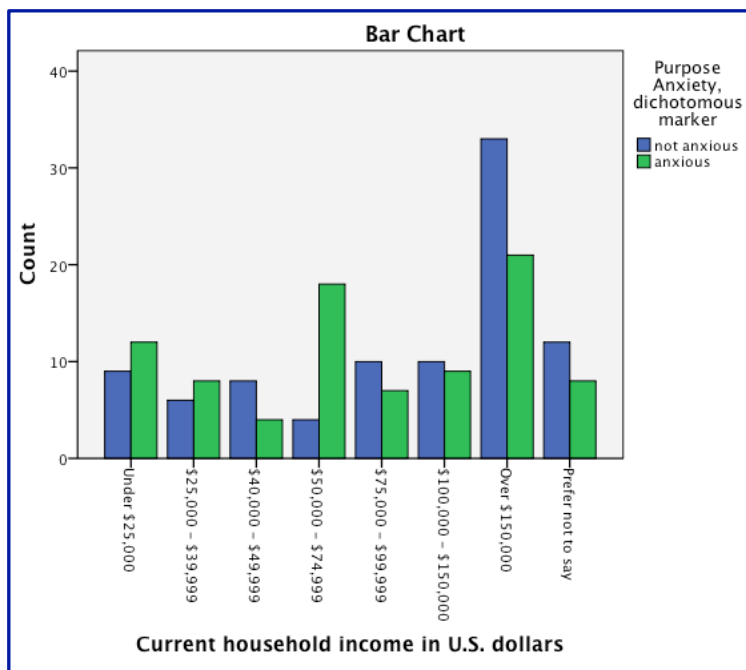
Pearson chi-square analyses were conducted to determine whether or not certain demographic variables were predictive of the current experience of purpose anxiety. While gender and religion were not found to be significant predictors of purpose anxiety, age and income were. More specifically, those at younger ages (18-30) were significantly more likely to experience purpose anxiety than those at older ages ($X^2(5) = 25.63, p < .001$), as were those with lower incomes (< \$75,000) ($X^2(7) = 14.87, p < .05$). These findings support the hypothesis that emerging and young adults are the most likely populations to experience purpose anxiety. And,

because purpose anxiety was found to exist in every age group, the hypothesis that no one population would be immune to purpose anxiety was also supported. Graphs 4 and 5 offer graphs of these findings.

Graph 4. Graph of chi-square analysis of purpose anxiety and age



Graph 5. Graph of chi-square analysis of purpose anxiety and income



To better understand why individuals might perceive an inability to live out their purpose, an open-ended, qualitative question was given to some respondents. Participants who responded “yes” to having found their purpose *and* either “no” or “somewhat” to feeling as if they are able to enact their purpose were asked to briefly describe what prevents them from living out their purpose. Participants reported that time, money, other obligations/commitments, fear, inexperience, and beliefs about their own capacities inhibited them from living out their purpose.

To determine the relation between purpose anxiety and well-being, correlational analyses were conducted. These analyses found purpose anxiety to be significantly negatively correlated with overall well-being and each individual element of PERMA (Seligman, 2011), as well as significantly positively correlated with general negative emotion (Pearson correlation, two-tailed, $p < .01$). The effect sizes were small to medium. Table 8 summarizes these results.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics and correlational analysis of purpose anxiety and well-being

	N	Mean	SD	R
Overall well-being	87	6.98	1.20	-.410**
Positive emotion	87	6.62	1.55	-.353**
Engagement	87	7.02	1.49	-.279**
Relationships	87	7.43	1.61	-.243**
Meaning	87	6.98	1.69	-.419**
Accomplishment	87	6.83	1.38	-.381**
Negative emotion	87	4.16	1.54	.209**

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level ($p < .01$) (two-tailed)

Independent t-tests were used to further investigate the relation between well-being and purpose anxiety. These tests revealed that individuals experiencing purpose anxiety had significantly lower overall well-being ($M_1 = 6.98$, $SD = 1.20$) than those who were not experiencing purpose anxiety ($M_2 = 8.01$, $SD = 1.11$) ($M_1 = 6.98$, $M_2 = 8.01$, $t(177)=5.99$, $p < .01$). These tests also revealed that participants currently experiencing purpose anxiety had

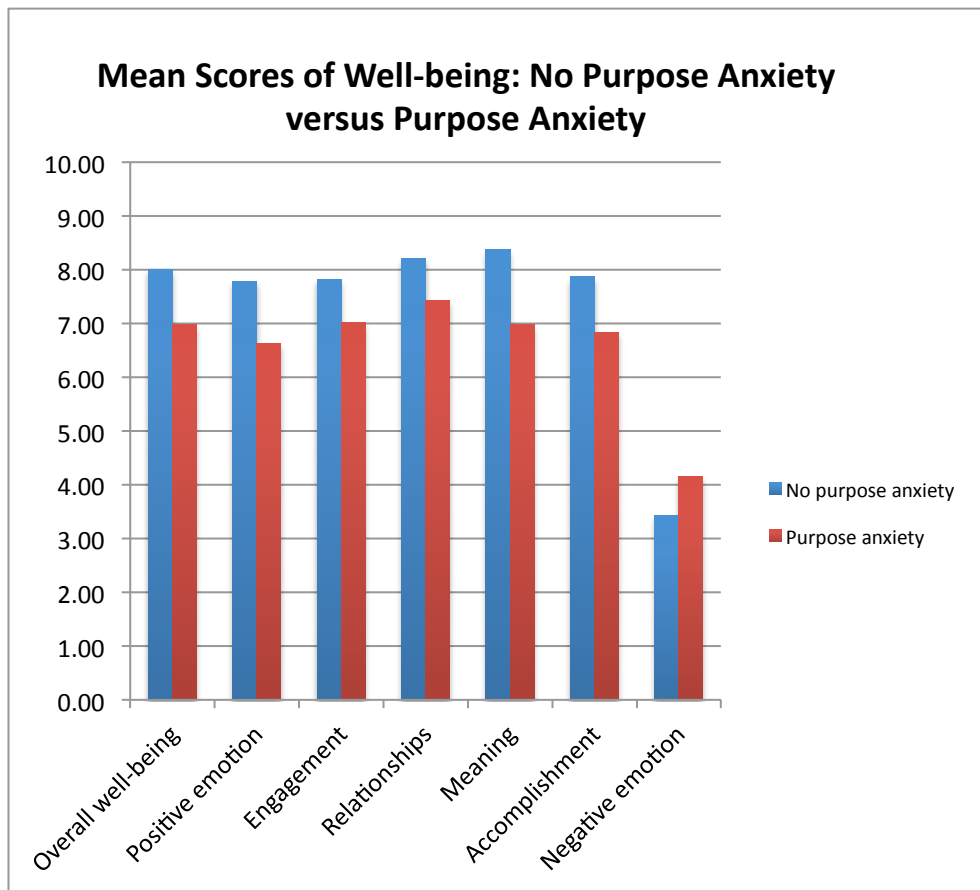
significantly lower scores on every one of the five elements of well-being, as well as significantly higher levels of negative emotion than those not experiencing purpose anxiety.

Table 9 and Graph 6 detail these results.

Table 9. T-tests of the absence versus the presence of purpose anxiety and well-being

	No purpose anxiety			Purpose anxiety			t	df	p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
Overall well-being	92	8.01	1.11	87	6.98	1.20	5.99	177	0
Positive emotion	92	7.79	1.55	87	6.62	1.55	5.02	177	0
Engagement	92	7.82	1.28	87	7.02	1.49	3.86	177	0
Relationships	92	8.21	1.53	87	7.43	1.61	3.34	177	0.001
Meaning	92	8.37	1.33	87	6.98	1.69	6.14	177	0
Accomplishment	92	7.87	1.14	87	6.83	1.38	5.49	177	0
Negative emotion	92	3.42	1.90	87	4.16	1.54	-2.84	177	0.005

Graph 6. Graph of mean scores between the absence and presence of purpose anxiety



As with the presence versus the absence of purpose, no significant relations (neither correlations nor difference in means) were found between self-reported health and purpose anxiety. In sum, the hypothesis that purpose anxiety would be negatively related to well-being (overall and each of the PERMA elements) was supported, but the hypothesis that purpose anxiety would be negatively related to self-perceived physical health was not.

The presence versus the absence of purpose anxiety also significantly influenced the extent to which positive emotions were experienced in relation to one's purpose. Independent t-tests revealed that those individuals who were currently experiencing purpose anxiety felt significantly less intense positive emotion overall (calculated as the cumulative average of the positive emotions) in relation to their purpose, as well as significantly less intense individual positive emotions in relation to their purpose (except for "other"). Table 10 details these results.

Table 10. Independent t-test of positive emotion in relation to purpose: Absence versus presence of purpose anxiety

	No purpose anxiety			Purpose anxiety			t	df	p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
Overall	87	60.53	1.07	84	50.11	1.41	5.91	169	0
Happiness	87	8.52	0.17	84	7.31	0.20	4.67	169	0
Joy	87	8.47	0.18	84	6.89	0.26	5.09	169	0
Inspiration	87	8.46	0.17	84	7.27	0.25	3.92	169	0
Gratitude	87	8.92	0.18	84	7.63	0.24	4.36	169	0
Excitement	87	8.47	0.21	84	7.13	0.24	4.22	169	0
Pride	87	7.93	0.24	84	6.45	0.27	4.06	169	0
Love	87	8.89	0.17	84	6.93	0.31	5.64	169	0
Other	87	0.87	0.30	84	0.49	0.22	1.04	169	0.299

Note: Analyses regarding the intensity of negative emotions experienced in relation to one's purpose were not be conducted as this variable was used to indicate the presence of purpose anxiety.

To further investigate purpose anxiety, all participants were asked to respond to a series of 15 items. 12 of these items aimed to gather information on the factors hypothesized to contribute to or exacerbate purpose anxiety, including the perception of purpose as a choice, optimism, self-knowledge, and the limitations of language. The other three items were crafted to capture purpose anxiety itself—to offer an alternative means of measuring the construct. For each of these items, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements on a 7-point Likert-scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). See Appendix C for a complete list of these items.

Independent t-tests were conducted on the 12 “contributing factor items” to compare the difference in response between those who were experiencing purpose anxiety and those who were not. These analyses revealed that individuals currently struggling with purpose anxiety had significantly lower scores on each and every one of the items measuring optimism and self-knowledge and significantly higher scores on each and every one of the items measuring the perception of purpose as a choice and the belief that language is limited. Table 11 details these results.

Table 11. Independent t-tests of contributing factors: Presence versus absence of purpose anxiety

	No purpose anxiety			Purpose anxiety			t	df	p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
I feel like I can put my purpose into words.	92	5.72	1.31	87	3.77	1.69	8.64	177	0
I know myself well.	92	6.26	0.80	87	5.55	1.10	4.97	177	0
Generally, I consider myself to be an optimistic person.	91	6.00	1.26	87	5.51	1.34	2.54	176	0.012
I cannot explain my purpose in words.	92	2.33	1.27	86	4.30	1.74	-8.69	176	0
I'm afraid I'll make the wrong choice about what to do with my life.	92	2.65	1.59	86	4.19	1.82	-6.00	176	0
I know what I want to accomplish in life.	92	5.86	1.01	86	4.30	1.67	7.59	176	0
Searching for my purpose brings me joy.	92	5.74	1.19	87	5.02	1.28	3.88	177	0
Putting my purpose into words seems limiting.	92	3.72	1.93	86	4.26	1.47	-2.09	176	0.038
Making a choice about what to do with my life excites me.	92	5.63	1.20	86	4.85	1.32	4.13	176	0
I don't know what my goals are.	92	2.35	1.46	86	3.93	1.68	-6.72	176	0
I don't expect good things to happen in the future.	92	1.58	1.13	85	2.24	1.41	-3.44	175	0.001

These findings offer initial support for the hypothesis that the perception of purpose as a choice, a tendency toward pessimism, a lack of self-knowledge, and the belief that language is limited when it comes to purpose contribute to or exacerbate the experience of purpose anxiety.

Correlational analyses were also conducted to test the relation between the 12 “contributing factor items” and purpose anxiety. All 12 items were significantly correlated in the expected direction with purpose anxiety with small to medium effect sizes (Pearson correlation, two-tailed, $p < .05$)(see table 12). These findings offer more support for the notion that a significant relationship exists between the perception of purpose as a personal choice, a lack of optimism, a deficit in self-knowledge, and the capacities of language and purpose anxiety.

These same correlational analyses were conducted a second time, but with purpose anxiety classified in an alternative manner. For this alternative qualification, individuals were classified as currently experiencing purpose anxiety if they responded “agree” or “strongly agree” to the following items:

- The question, “What should I do with my life?” makes me feel anxious.
- I feel overwhelmed when I think about choosing what to do with my life.
- Searching for my purpose causes me stress, worry, or frustration.

Significant correlations (small to medium) were found between purpose anxiety and 11 of the 12 “contributing factor items” (see table 12) (one item measuring the limitations of language was not significantly correlated). Notably, these correlations were quite similar in size and strength (although not equal) to the correlations found between the “contributing factor items” and purpose anxiety as it was originally classified. The closeness of these correlations indicate that purpose anxiety may also be measured using continuous (rather than dichotomous)

questions, and that similar results may have been obtained for this study if the presence of purpose anxiety had been measured in an alternative way.

Table 12. Correlations between contributing factor statements and purpose anxiety

Statements	Purpose Anxiety		Alternative Class.	
	N	R	N	R
I feel like I can put my purpose into words.	87	-.545**	179	-.334**
I know myself well.	87	-.350**	179	-.155*
Generally, I consider myself to be an optimistic person.	87	-.188*	179	-.416**
I cannot explain my purpose in words.	86	.548**	179	.358**
I'm afraid I'll make the wrong choice about what to do with my life.	86	.412**	179	.661**
I know what I want to accomplish in life.	86	-.496**	179	-.321**
Searching for my purpose brings me joy.	87	-.280**	179	-.235**
Putting my purpose into words seems limiting.	86	.155*	179	0.137
Making a choice about what to do with my life excites me.	86	-.297**	179	-.302**
I don't know what my goals are.	86	.452**	179	.356**
I don't expect good things to happen in the future.	85	.252**	179	.322**

* Correlation is significant at the .01 level ($p < .05$) (two-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level ($p < .01$) (two-tailed)

Discussion

Summary of Main Findings⁹

Consistent with past research, the present study found the presence of purpose to be associated with heightened levels of well-being and the search for purpose to be associated with lower levels of well-being. This study also offered new information about this relationship: those who had found their purpose reported significantly more positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, as well as significantly lower negative emotion than those who were searching for it. Thus, the presence of purpose is positively associated with each element of PERMA, while the search for purpose is negatively associated with each

⁹ Please note that not *all* findings are presented in this summary section.

element of PERMA. Also consistent with past research, this study found that those at older ages were more likely to have found their purpose in life than those at younger ages.

In relation to purpose in general, this study revealed that purpose in life is exceedingly important to an overwhelming majority of modern Americans: 97% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the prompt, “For me, it is important that I live a purposeful life.”

Furthermore, results indicated that individuals think about their purpose more often than one might have assumed—nearly half of participants said they think about their purpose *at least* 2-3 times a week. Respondents reported that their jobs and relationships are what spur them to consider their purpose in life most often.

Participants who had found their purpose explained that a variety of factors enabled them to do so, such as family, friends, mentors, teachers, jobs, tragedy, illness, religion, curiosity, and self-acceptance. These findings offer support for past hypotheses about the role that religion, suffering, curiosity, and self-acceptance play in the development of purpose in life.

But perhaps the most interesting and innovative findings were those that related to the search for purpose specifically. Participants were asked questions both about the negative emotions and the positive emotions they experienced in direct relation to their search for purpose—either while attempting to find or attempting to live out their purpose in life. Results from these questions offered immense support for the notion of purpose anxiety as a “real” and prevalent phenomenon. 91% of participants reported having (at one point or another) experienced negative emotions in direct relation to their purpose and 49% of the sample reported *currently* experiencing purpose anxiety.

This study also offered support for the proposed definition of purpose anxiety—namely, that it could be experienced either while struggling to find *or* struggling to enact one’s purpose in

life: A vast majority of individuals (77%) who had, at one point or another, experienced purpose anxiety indicated that they felt purpose anxiety while struggling to find purpose, and a smaller, but still rather large proportion (66%) indicated that they felt it while struggling to enact their purpose. Based on participants' responses, purpose anxiety can involve many different negative emotions, but entails stress, anxiety, frustration, and worry most often and most intensely.

The items measuring emotion also revealed several somewhat unexpected findings on positive emotions in relation to the search for purpose. Unsurprisingly, nearly all respondents (98%) reported that they experienced positive emotions in relation to their purpose in life. While 76% of these individuals reported positive emotions in relation to enacting their purpose—an unsurprising finding, an impressive 54% indicated that they felt positive emotions while searching for their purpose. This last statistic adds necessary nuance to psychologists' understanding of the search for purpose in life. While this study and much past research has found the search for purpose to be a distressing process, it clearly can spur a multitude of positive emotions as well.

The full sample was broken down between those who were currently experiencing purpose anxiety (49%) and those who were not. Most of these individuals (69%) were struggling with purpose anxiety as a result of struggling to find for their purpose, but a substantial proportion (30%) was experiencing it as a result of struggling to enact their purpose. These statistics indicate that purpose anxiety is most common during the search for one's "why" for living, but still definitely pertinent during the search for means to enact that "why."

The presence of purpose anxiety influenced the intensity to which individuals experienced positive emotions in relation to their purpose. Those experiencing purpose anxiety felt significantly less intense positive emotions (both overall and each individual positive

emotion) in relation to their attempt to find, or their attempt to enact their purpose in life compared to those not struggling with purpose anxiety.

As had been hypothesized, emerging and young adults (aged 18-30) were the most likely age demographic to experience purpose anxiety (as were those with an income of less than \$75,000. Notably, it is unclear whether these two groups were actually comprised of the same individuals). Thus, while past research found the search for purpose to be psychologically adaptive and associated with heightened well-being at earlier life stages (e.g., Bronk et al., 2009), the findings from the present study indicate that this is not *necessarily* true. Yes, the search for purpose is *ultimately* a beneficial journey, but psychologists must recognize that it can be an arduous process at any stage of life—one that can take a significant psychological toll on the young and the old alike.

The hypotheses regarding the relation between purpose anxiety and well-being were also supported: Purpose anxiety was found to be significantly negatively correlated with overall well-being, as well as with each individual element of PERMA (Seligman, 2011). It was also significantly positively correlated with the general experience of negative emotions in life. Furthermore, individuals experiencing purpose anxiety reported significantly lower scores on overall well-being, positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment and significantly higher scores on general negative emotion. However, as with the search for purpose, the hypothesis that purpose anxiety would be negatively related to physical health was not supported.

Finally, the hypotheses regarding the factors that might contribute to or exacerbate purpose anxiety were supported. Four factors were tested: the perception of purpose as a choice, one's level of optimism, one's level of self-knowledge, and the belief that language is limited.

Statistical analyses indicated that those experiencing purpose anxiety had significantly lower scores on items measuring optimism and self-knowledge and significantly higher scores on items targeting the perception of purpose as a choice and the belief that language is limited.

Correlational analyses also indicated that each item for each of these four factors was significantly correlated with the presence of purpose anxiety in the expected direction. All together, these findings offer preliminary support for the notion that the perception that purpose is a choice, a tendency toward pessimism, a lack of self-knowledge, and the belief that language is limited all contribute to purpose anxiety in modern American society.

Practical Implications: Potential Remedies for Purpose Anxiety

Although more research needs to be conducted to fully understand purpose anxiety, the present study offers several insights on a variety of ways the phenomenon could be counteracted:

First, the information gleaned from participants' responses about what enabled them to find their purpose may be used to help individuals struggling to discover their purpose succeed in finding it. For example, many participants noted the importance of curiosity, exploration, and self-acceptance in finding their purpose. As such, practioners of positive psychology could work to help build these capacities within individuals who are hoping to find their purpose in life. Notably, Rockind (2011) has already developed a conglomerate of interventions to help individuals find their purpose in life. She has found great success in using these practices to help individuals overcome their purpose anxiety and live a life of purpose (C. Rockind, 2014, July 30).

Similarly, the insights gained on what prevents individuals from living out their purpose may be used to develop hypotheses, interventions, or workshops for individuals looking to find ways to *live* their purpose. As most individuals credited time, money, and other obligations as

inhibiting them from living out their purpose, practitioners could work to help individuals find creative ways to live their purpose given their present circumstances. They could use an intervention like *job crafting* (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010)(but with an eye toward purpose), for example, to help individuals successfully make this purpose-focused re-frame.

Furthermore, as results indicated that the majority of individuals feel many positive emotions during their search for purpose, it seems that practitioners could work to deliberately take advantage of these already occurring positive emotions to help individuals escape the negative cycle of purpose anxiety. Practitioners could harness these positive emotions so as to break individuals from the narrowed mind-set of negative emotions and help individuals find new insight about or creative solutions for their purpose-related struggles.

Because the present study indicated that a tendency toward pessimism and a lack of self-knowledge were both significantly linked to the experience purpose anxiety, it seems that interventions designed to boost optimism and enhance self-knowledge could also be used to help prevent or mitigate this phenomenon. For example, practitioners of positive psychology could use interventions like the VIA character strengths survey and any one of the associated character strengths activities (Peterson & Park, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the ABC model (Reivich & Shatte, 2002), or the thinking traps exercise (Reivich & Shatte, 2002) to build self-awareness, cultivate optimism, and bolster positive emotions. These interventions might help bolster self-knowledge and optimism, and thus mitigate or prevent purpose anxiety.

As the belief that language is limited when it comes to purpose was found to be significantly associated with purpose anxiety, practitioners might work with individuals to reframe or re-evaluate this perception. Practitioners could introduce the idea that an individual might not need to be able to clearly articulate their purpose in a few words or sentences in order

to live purposefully. They might also help individuals realize that using their unique strengths, abilities, values, and passions in a way that is socially beneficial *is* a way of living their purpose—regardless of their ability to clearly and concisely articulate their purpose. Discussions and re-frames like these might help an individual overcome purpose anxiety.

Because purpose anxiety was found to be significantly linked to the perception that purpose is a choice (and thus subject to the paradox of choice), psychologists might find it beneficial to alter the way they discuss and write about the notion of purpose in life—and hopefully, this alternative conception would spread to popular culture. It seems that a great deal of purpose anxiety could be alleviated with the explanation that purpose is not somewhere out in the world waiting to be found, but rather, something that is already present inside a person, simply waiting to be recognized and utilized. This re-frame might help individuals realize that there are not unlimited choices when it comes to their purpose or means of enacting their purpose. It might help individuals realize that their purpose already exists within them, that its fulfillment just necessitates a heightened sense of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and creative, deliberate action.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to the present study. First, because participants self-selected into the study, the sample might have been biased towards those interested in or troubled by the notion of purpose in life. What is more, because the survey was distributed online, the sample was likely skewed toward individuals of a higher socio-economic status—to those who have access to the internet. Second, the questions of purpose anxiety were original—they were not tested in a laboratory setting for reliability or validity prior to the study. Third, the majority of study participants were aged 41-55 (38.5%), which may have swayed the results of the study.

Finally, the sample size (N=179), while satisfactory for statistical analyses, was not all that large. Future studies should attempt to recruit larger, and perhaps more representative samples in order to determine whether the present study's findings hold true.

There are many exciting areas of research on purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety that merit further investigation. More research is needed to better understand the relationship between purpose and health and purpose and the individual PERMA elements, for example. Further research is also needed to better understand what contributes to, moderates, mediates, and predicts purpose anxiety. Future research might also look into the direction of causality between purpose anxiety and well-being, and the patterns of purpose anxiety over time. Finally, as a deeper understanding of purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety are gained, practitioners of positive psychology can develop and empirically test interventions designed to prevent or mitigate the negative ramifications of the struggle for purpose in life.

Conclusion

This study does not mean to imply that individuals should not search for their purpose in life. Rather, it simply indicates that the struggle for a purposeful existence is, as so many hypothesized, quite taxing. Results indicate that individuals should not be continually encouraged to “find their purpose” and “live their passions” without being offered some sort of support on how to go about doing so—the struggle for purpose, as evidenced by this study, can take a significant toll on one's well-being at any age or stage of life. Psychologists must continue to work to understand the search for purpose in life so that they can become better poised to prevent and/or mitigate the experience of purpose anxiety.

VII. CONCLUSION

“Life is filled with unanswered questions, but it is the courage to seek those answers that continues to give meaning to life.”

– J. D. Stroube (2012)

This paper has reviewed what positive psychology knows about purpose and the search for purpose in life. It has also explored a new construct: purpose anxiety—a term that is meant to encompass the negative ramifications of the struggle for purpose in life. Finally, it has detailed the findings of a research study that was conducted to gather empirical data on purpose, the search for purpose, and purpose anxiety as perceived and experienced by American adults.

As is evident from this project, purpose is an incredibly important resource in life. Purpose enhances an individual’s subjective experience, helps one cope with hardship or tragedy, and is associated with robust physical health. But purpose is not usually inherently known, meaning that it often must be found, created, or learned. While some individuals do effortlessly happen upon and live out their purpose, many struggle to discover, understand, and fulfill their “why” for living. As the present study indicated, this search for purpose can be psychologically taxing at any stage of life—spurring significant stress, anxiety, worry, and frustration and thoroughly dampening every element of individual well-being for nearly all who search for purpose.

All that being said, it seems obvious that the benefits of having a strong sense of purpose in life ultimately outweigh the negatives of purpose anxiety. The pain of struggling for purpose will be well worth it, for it is purposeful living that gives meaning to life and positively affects one’s emotional landscape, engagement, relationships, and sense of achievement. As positive psychologists continue to strive to understand and cultivate human flourishing, they must do more than simply advocate purposeful living. They must work to better understand the purpose

anxiety that so often accompanies the development and enactment of purpose in life. They must help individuals overcome the struggle for purpose so that they can escape the grasp of negative emotions, live their purpose, and go on to experience enduring well-being.

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

– E. E. Cummings

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Appendix A: Recruitment Script

My name is Larissa Rainey and I am currently a student in the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that explores purpose, the search for purpose, and these constructs' relation to well-being. The only requirements for this study are that you are over the age of 18 and can read English.

Your participation is completely confidential and very much appreciated. If you choose to participate, you will take an anonymous online survey that will take about **10-15 minutes to complete**. As a result of taking the survey, you may experience greater self-awareness and a sense of satisfaction knowing that you are helping to further a ground-breaking field of study!

Here is the link to the survey:

https://upenn.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3n12Hnr8OkeW4W9

NOTE: Please feel free to forward this to friends, family, and colleagues who you think might be interested in participating!

If you have questions, please contact me at lrainey@sas.upenn.edu or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Margaret Kern, at mkern@sas.upenn.edu.

Thank you so much,
Larissa

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Understanding Purpose and the Search for Purpose: Consent Information

This study aims to explore purpose and the search for purpose and these constructs' relation to well-being. You do not need to have any special characteristics or skills, though you must be at least 18 years old and able to read English. Please read the information below before proceeding.

Procedure: Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an electronic survey that asks various questions related to purpose and well-being. The survey will take about **10 to 20 minutes** to complete, depending on how long you spend on each question.

Risks: The study involves minimal risk. The questions are commonly encountered in everyday life. Completing the questions is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any of the questions, or end that study at any time by closing your browser window.

Benefit and compensation: There is no direct compensation for your response. By being part of this research, there is an opportunity to add to our knowledge of purpose and the search for purpose.

Privacy and Confidentiality: In the survey, you will not be asked to provide any personal identifying information. You may take the survey at your convenience in a location of your choice.

This research is being conducted by Larissa Rainey and Margaret Kern at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact us by email at lrainey@sas.upenn.edu or mkern@sas.upenn.edu. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you would like to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania with any questions, concerns or complaints by calling (215) 898-2614.

Conflict of Interest: The investigator of this research does not have any financial interest in the sponsor or in the study; this means that the investigators will not be financially affected by the results of the study (positive or negative). If at any time you have specific questions about the financial arrangements or other potential conflicts for this study, please feel free to contact any of the individuals listed above.

Voluntary Participation Statement

I am at least 18 years old.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to answer any question or discontinue my involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I might otherwise be entitled. My decision will not affect my future relationship with the University of Pennsylvania. By clicking on the button below and starting the survey, I am indicating that I

have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions I have about the study.

- Yes, I consent to participate in this study.
- No, I do not consent to participate in this study.

If you would like a copy of this consent for your records, please print this page before giving consent.

Appendix C: Survey

Understanding Purpose and the Search for Purpose**PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2014)**

In general... (rate on scale 0 to 10)

1. How much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals?
2. How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?
3. How often do you feel joyful?
4. How often do you feel anxious?
5. How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself?
6. How would you say your health is?
7. To what extent do you lead a purposeful and meaningful life?
8. To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?
9. To what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?
10. To what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?
11. How lonely do you feel in your daily life?
12. How satisfied are you with your current physical health?
13. How often do you feel positive?
14. How often do you feel angry?
15. How often are you able to handle your responsibilities?
16. How often do you feel sad?
17. How often do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy?
18. Compared to others of your same age and sex, how is your health?
19. To what extent do you feel you have a sense of direction in your life?
20. How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?
21. To what extent do you feel loved?
22. To what extent do you feel contented?
23. Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?

0 = never, terrible, or not at all

10 = always, excellent, or completely

Purpose and Purpose Anxiety Questions

What does purpose mean to you. In other words, how do you define purpose?

Do you feel like you have found your purpose?

If yes: Please explain what enabled you to find your purpose.

If yes: Do you feel like you are able to live your purpose?

If no or somewhat: Please briefly state what prevents you from living your purpose.

I want my life to be personally meaningful.

7 point Likert-scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree

I want to live in a way that benefits others.

7 point Likert-scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree

For me, it is important that I live a purposeful life.

7 point Likert-scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree

Have you experienced negative emotions (stress, anxiety, fear, frustration, sadness, worry, anger, etc.) while searching for or living out your purpose?

If yes: Please indicate the extent to which you experienced the following emotions:

Sliding bars 0-10: stress, anxiety, sadness, fear, frustration, anger, worry, jealousy, other (please specify: open response)

If yes: Please indicate when you experience(d) these emotions. (Check all that apply):

While trying to find my purpose.

After having found my purpose.

While living (or trying to live) my purpose.

Other: (open response)

Have you experienced negative emotions (happiness, joy, inspiration, excitement, gratitude, etc.) while searching for or living out your purpose?

If yes: Please indicate the extent to which you experienced the following emotions:

Sliding bars 0-10: happiness, joy, inspiration, gratitude, excitement, pride, love, other (please specify: open response)

If yes: Please indicate when you experience(d) these emotions. (Check all that apply):

While trying to find my purpose.

After having found my purpose.

While living (or trying to live) my purpose.

Other: (open response)

Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can. Please be honest—there are no right or wrong answers!

(7 point Likert-scale strongly disagree to strongly agree)

1. The question, “What should I do with my life?” makes me feel anxious.
2. I feel like I can put my purpose into words.
3. I feel overwhelmed when I think about choosing what to do with my life.

4. I know myself well.
5. Generally, I consider myself to be an optimistic person.
6. Searching for my purpose causes me stress, worry, or frustration.
7. I cannot explain my purpose in words.
8. I'm afraid I'll make the wrong choice about what to do with my life.
9. I know what I want to accomplish in life.
10. I feel stuck in life.
11. Searching for my purpose brings me joy.
12. Putting my purpose into words seems limiting.
13. Making a choice about what to do with my life excites me.
14. I don't know what my goals are.
15. I don't expect good things to happen in the future.

In general, how often do you think about your purpose (or finding your purpose)?

- Never
- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Daily

What prompts you to think about your purpose? Please check all that apply:

- Hearing about it in the media.
- Thinking about my job (current or future).
- Talking about it with others (friends, family, strangers).
- Hearing about a death or tragedy.
- Having a religious/spiritual experience.
- Other (please specify): (open response)

If you have any thoughts about purpose (or the search for purpose) that you would like to share with the researchers, please do so here:

(Open response)

Demographic Information:

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Age

- 18-24
- 25-30
- 31-40
- 41-55
- 56-65
- 65+

Occupation

- Open response

Household income in US Dollars

- Under \$25,000
- \$25,000-\$39,999
- \$40,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000-\$150,000
- Over \$150,000
- Prefer not to say

Religion

- Christian
- Catholic
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Spiritual, but not religious
- Other (please specify: open response)
- Prefer not to say