The four P’s of purpose among College Bound students: People, propensity, passion, prosocial benefits

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ABSTRACT

College preparation programs, such as College Bound, aim to increase low-income students’ preparation for achieving future goals. Yet, little research has examined the nature of these students’ future goals and purposes from their own perspectives. In this study, in-depth interviews with 10 adolescents (six males and four females) participating in College Bound were analyzed using a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory. Four interrelated themes related to the development of youth purpose emerged: (a) people; (b) propensity; (c) passion; and (d) prosocial benefits. These themes were further categorized across two major dimensions: influences (i.e. capability and motivation) and sources of such influences (i.e. intrinsic and extrinsic). Moreover, ways in which students’ unique social contexts contributed to their experiences of purpose are discussed. Findings inform an understanding of the development of purpose in underrepresented youth, as well as provide insights for programs designed to promote their positive development and post-secondary school success.

Researchers in the field of positive psychology have increasingly focused on the role purpose plays in human thriving. A growing body of theoretical and empirical literature suggests that purpose is a key developmental task (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Damon, 2009) as well as a major contributor to thriving and flourishing (Benson, 2006; Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). According to Seligman’s (2002) authentic happiness theory, purpose and meaning result when individuals use their signature strengths to contribute to the greater good. He calls this ‘the meaningful life’ – and it is one of the three components of authentic happiness theory. The theory contends that, ‘the meaningful life’ is the primary way to achieve subjective well-being. Empirical research supports this claim that purpose among adolescents is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being (e.g. Bronk et al., 2009). Meaning and purpose are usually derived from multiple sources including, but not limited to, family and friends, religion, and work (Seligman, 2002).

Steger et al. (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) have also developed a comprehensive and foundational definition of meaning in life. They define it as ‘the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence’ (Steger et al., 2006, p. 81), and identify two aspects of meaning: (a) the presence of meaning or the subjective sense that one’s life is meaningful; and (b) the search for meaning or the drive and orientation toward finding meaning in one’s life. Lastly, they conceptualize meaning in life as a major protective factor for the mental and physical health of adolescents. Specifically, Brassai, Piko, and Steger (2011) found that meaning in life not only facilitates well-being, but also plays a protective role against negative health behaviors for adolescents.

Adolescence represents a particularly critical period in purpose development (Erikson, 1968; Loevinger, 1976; Marcia, 1980). It is during this period that young people attempt to form their sense of identity and define who they are in relation to the world, ‘making a series of ever-narrowing selections of personal, occupational … and ideological commitments’ (Erikson, 1968, p. 245). Scholars have argued that adolescents need to search for and to commit to goals that give them a sense of purpose (Damon, 2009). Within the field of youth purpose, scholars have defined purpose in a way that goes beyond a sense of meaning. Youth purpose includes three elements: (a) an aspiration toward future-oriented, purposeful goals, (b) an active engagement with one’s aspiration, as indicated by
committed time, energy, or resources, and (c) an intention to contribute to the broader world (Damon et al., 2003).

In general, research has confirmed that purposeful, future-oriented youth are more likely to be academically engaged (Damon, 2009; Nurmi, 1991) and successful (Adelabu, 2008; Damon, 2009) compared to their counterparts lacking in future aspirations. For example, purposeful youth scored higher on intelligence tests (Minehan, Newcomb, & Galaif, 2000), had more positive academic self-concepts (Dukes & Lorch, 1989), and had higher grade point averages (Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011). Related work demonstrates that future orientation (i.e., thinking about the future and working toward future goals) is a powerful motivating factor in adolescents’ current and future success (Nurmi, 1991). Moreover, the limited literature suggests that future orientation is beneficial for youth across cultural and racial groups (Seginer, 2009). For example, African-American middle school students who participated in a program aimed at enhancing their ability to imagine themselves as successful adults were much more engaged in school compared to those in the control group (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002).

Consistent with studies on youth purpose and future orientation, research has demonstrated that increasing youths’ aspirations for post-secondary education is critical for post-high school success (Gottfredson, 1981; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Thus, programs targeted at potential first-generation college and low-income urban students (i.e., College Bound) have been initiated to provide mentoring, academic tutoring, and guidance regarding access to post-secondary education. Research suggests that students whose parents did not go to college, compared to students whose parents did, have a much lower post-secondary education enrollment rate, and thus they are the most frequently targeted group for College Bound type programs (Engle, 2007; Swail & Perna, 2000). Moreover, these programs have arisen to address common challenges that students from schools in low socioeconomic status (SES) districts face – including limited exposure to educational opportunities partly due to the underfunding of their schools (Books, 2004; Kopkowski, 2005), as well as limited family resources (Gerson, 1997; Luna De La Rosa, 2006). For instance, many parents in these districts lack information about preparing for and applying to college, and thus have trouble guiding their children (Freeman, 2005). These combined disadvantages have historically inhibited students’ future aspirations and goals. College Bound programs exist to boost students’ future-oriented aspirations and pursuit of goals by increasing their ability to achieve their academic and vocational dreams.

Given that social context helps shape purpose, it stands to reason that there may be differences in the path to purpose and the nature of purpose among underprivileged groups. Youth purpose researchers have identified two main types of purpose: (a) self-oriented purpose as a desire to become wealthy or successful with no mention of using this success to help others; and (b) beyond-the-self purpose as a typically prosocial desire to make the world better (Bronk & Finch, 2010). In qualitative interviews, affluent adolescent girls’ with beyond-the-self purpose described their quests for success as linked with prosocial goals that would benefit others on a macro level, such as ‘do[ing] something that I find worthwhile that can also help a lot of others’ or ‘giv[ing] back to the community’ (Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Mousseau, & Lund, in press, p. 25). It remains unclear, however, whether youth from less privileged backgrounds, compared to these more affluent youth, would describe their aspirations for beyond-the-self purpose in the same way (Kiang & Fuligni, 2009).

In addition to the need to better understand urban, low SES youths’ aspirations and purposes, Kiang (2011) suggests there is still much to understand regarding their paths to purpose. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) have proposed three primary pathways to purpose: proactive, reactive, and social learning. A proactive pathway to purpose is conceptualized as an effortful searching process. The reactive pathway to purpose places less emphasis on conscious purpose-seeking behaviors, and more on transformative life events that then prompt individuals to seek meaning in life. Finally, those who cultivate a sense of purpose through the social learning pathway observe others engaged in various behaviors, and then imitate these behaviors. Existing research demonstrates that youth typically exhibit a combination of these three pathways to purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Kashdan and McKnight’s (2009) work has provided a theoretical model, rather than empirical research with youth from diverse populations.

As a part of understanding pathways or mechanisms for the development of youth purpose, research is needed to explain urban, low SES youths’ perceptions on whether and how social-contextual and relational influences may shape the development of purpose. Studies have suggested that there are several primary influences on adolescent purpose in typically high-functioning, middle-class or affluent communities (Blattner, Liang, Lund, & Spencer, 2013; Bronk, 2012). For example, parents, mentors, and like-minded peers buffered the stress associated with seeking purpose, as well as cultivated an escalating commitment to one’s future-oriented goals over the course of adolescence.

The current study

This study sought to contribute to the gap in the empirical literature on the development of youth purpose in underrepresented populations (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009).
Specifically, a qualitative method that utilized aspects of a grounded theory approach was used to conduct and analyze in-depth qualitative interviews among students participating in College Bound, a college preparation program for urban, low-income youth (see Methods section below for a more thorough program description). Research questions included: How do these students describe their sense of purpose? Moreover, who or what do they say contributes to their development of purpose?

To date, empirical studies (qualitative and quantitative) focused explicitly on the nature of purpose in diverse populations are rare. Very little is known about the pathways to or the nature of their purpose. Experts in the field of positive psychology and positive youth development contend that meaning and purpose are highly context dependent and therefore individualized (Bronk, 2011; Damon, 2009; Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). They assert that, although there are some quantitative measures of purpose, one of the best methods for measuring and understanding it is through open-ended interviews that allow for exploration of a wide variety of topics and perspectives (Duckworth et al., 2005). Therefore, in line with recommended research practices in the field of positive psychology, this study employed a qualitative methodology to best capture the highly individualized and potentially "idiosyncratic" experiences of purpose among youth from diverse backgrounds (Duckworth et al., 2005, p. 640). Indeed, related research suggests that adolescents’ future-oriented aspirations are tied to their perceptions of economic constraints and socioeconomic status (Ananat, Gassman-Pines, Francis, & Gibson-Davis, 2011; Baldwin, Baldwin, Sameroff, & Seifer, 1989; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). Moreover, the presence of purpose seems associated with the way that individuals perceive themselves relative to the broader society (Bronk, 2011; Damon, 2009). Qualitative research is needed to provide a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents’ perceptions of purpose are shaped by this variety of experiences and sociocultural contexts. Using pre-existing quantitative measures of purpose would limit the ability to capture understudied aspects of purpose from the perspectives of culturally diverse and low SES youth.

Methods

Methodology

In an effort to develop a more nuanced understanding of how purpose develops in underrepresented youth, we utilized a qualitative method that borrowed from grounded theory methodology. Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach allows the researcher to predetermine the general subject of inquiry before beginning the research. Specifically, we aimed to understand how purpose develops in underrepresented, low SES youth—an appropriate starting point for grounded theory methodology (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our method reflected grounded theory in that it goes beyond descriptions of youth purpose toward developing a theory for how purpose forms in this understudied population. Indeed, little research has been undertaken to inform a theory of purpose development in general; and such a theory would be relevant to College Bound type programs which seek in part to help foster youth purpose and future orientation.

Procedure

In-depth (Johnson, 2002), semi-structured (Seidman, 1991) one-on-one interviews were conducted with 10 students during the College Bound program. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The interview protocol informed by youth purpose research (Bronk, Menon, & Damon, 2004) was used merely as a guide, enabling interviewers to follow freely the accounts of each participant. Interview questions invited them to reflect openly on the things that matter most to them and any aspirations toward, active engagement in, and motivations for future-oriented, purposeful goals. Specific questions included: What are your goals and dreams? Where do you see yourself in 5, 10, and 15 years? How do you define success?

For each of these questions, the interviewer probed into why these things matter to the student in order to discern the motivation and reasons behind the student’s interest or potential purpose. The interview also raised questions about whether students were aware of any influences on their future aspirations and sense of purpose, what kinds of support had been provided to them, sources of stress, as well as views toward their academic and vocational plans, interests, and obstacles. Open-ended questions were followed by additional prompts to further investigate the experiences identified by students. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed using HyperTranscribe software, a qualitative research software program. The transcriptions were then verified—a process that entailed listening to recordings an additional time and making corrections to the transcripts as needed.

Participants

Ten high school students (6 female, 4 male, $M_{age} = 16.5$ years, age range: 14-19 years) volunteered to participate in interviews for this study through the College Bound program. These participants were part of a larger study that focused on adolescent achievement, stress, and well-being through quantitative online surveys. Interviewees received a $5 gift card. Participants and their parents provided assent.
and consent, respectively. The study was approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

We used an exemplar method of data collection consistent to that used in previous grounded theory approaches to studying the development of youth purpose (Bronk, 2012). This method involves the nomination of participants who exemplify the phenomenon of interest (i.e. youth purpose). Bronk (2012) argues that examining a construct among those who exemplify it in an intense form can be a useful way of observing the particulars of that phenomenon. Moreover, this method allows investigators to gather highly detailed data which are necessary for understanding the development of such a multifaceted, complex construct. The study utilized nomination criteria based on two characteristics of youth purpose (Damon et al., 2003) previously used in Bronk’s (2012) grounded theory study: (a) an aspiration toward future-oriented, purposeful goals, and (b) an active engagement with one’s aspiration, as indicated by committed time, energy, or resources. These criteria were shared with expert nominators (i.e. College Bound directors) as the basis for identifying qualified exemplars. It is important to note that we did not include as a nomination criterion, the third element of youth purpose, ‘the intention to contribute to the broader world,’ for two reasons. First, we recognized that motivation and intentionality behind purpose would be difficult for nominators to identify without a more in-depth interview. Second, we wished to investigate whether purposeful youth from underprivileged backgrounds necessarily had the same motivation to contribute beyond themselves noted in previous studies.

Of the 10 interviewees, six self-identified as Black/African-American, one as Hispanic/Latino, one as West Indian, and one as Multiracial. One student of color did not provide information about his racial and ethnic background. Five were enrolled in 12th grade, one was in the 11th grade, two were in the 10th grade, and one was in the 9th grade. The last participant did not provide information about his grade. This racial and grade composition is representative of the larger College Bound population; the program is primarily made up of racial and ethnic minority high school students who are approaching college-age (Table 1).

**College Bound**

The College Bound program is housed within a university, though participants are still in high school. It is designed to help urban students to gain access to, achieve success in, and graduate from quality post-secondary schools. Students are accepted on to the program based on their academic drive, leadership qualities, and commitment toward social justice in their schools and local communities. The program consists of an educational component, along with mentoring and academic tutoring. The educational sessions focus on college and vocational preparation and are held on Saturdays twice monthly. Students can also participate in select undergraduate and graduate courses, and innovative summer programs that provide them with hands-on research experience in the fields of science, technology, and mathematics. They receive academic tutoring as needed on weekdays. In addition, College Bound staff and university personnel work closely with students and their families in conjunction with liaisons at their respective high schools to guide them through the college admissions and financial aid process.

**Analysis**

The 10 interviews were analyzed using a subtle realist approach, which assumes that one can only interpret reality from one’s perspective (Hammersley, 1992). Rather than provide a necessarily universal truth about purpose development, we sought to discern the realities of underrepresented youth and their purpose development, which may have broader implications for understanding how young people develop a sense of purpose. Purpose is a highly context-dependent phenomenon (e.g. Bronk, 2011; Damon, 2009; Duckworth et al., 2005) and therefore, we carefully considered the sociocultural context of the adolescents when analyzing the data. Moreover, we analyzed each interview fully before proceeding to the next, and it was clear by the time of the final interview’s analysis that theoretical saturation had been reached and there was no
new information emerging. Consistent with Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) first phase of grounded theory analysis, study researchers read each of the transcripts multiple times, noting patterns and trends in memos. The patterns and trends became the basis for codes in the initial open coding process. During the open coding process, we intentionally looked for some themes from previous literature because it was our initial intent to examine whether emergent themes in this data would confirm those found in previous research on other youth populations. The second author worked with research team members to develop an initial codebook, part of which contained codes subsumed under two larger categories taken from the open coding process: (a) pathways to purpose and (b) stages of purpose. Specifically, pathways to purpose included proactive, reactive, and social learning (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009), and stages of purpose included dabblers, dreamers, disengaged, and purposeful youth (Damon, 2009).

We made this slight, rational departure from grounded theory’s inductive approach by identifying some codes through a deductive process in order to situate our data within the context of previous research on the development of youth purpose. However, we primarily utilized an inductive, open coding process. Indeed, because of our broader interview questions, meaningful inductive codes emerged well beyond what the deductively informed codes could capture. To reflect salient aspects of participants’ responses, a third group of codes—related to facilitators and detractors of purpose—was developed using an inductive approach. Once this version of the codebook was finalized after the open coding process, transcripts were coded using HyperResearch as a way for researchers to tag and organize the coded data, ask questions of each other, and write additional memos based on emerging trends. Two additional coders reviewed all coded work to ensure consistency, a standard of quality in qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

In the next phase of analysis, referred to in grounded theory as ‘axial coding,’ the researchers examined the coded data to search for relationships between the identified themes as well as any broader themes illustrating the contributors to purpose development in our participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To facilitate the exploration of patterns among coded data through a constant comparative method, conceptually clustered matrices were constructed for each code (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A matrix or chart was created for each code by entering all coded quotations from each participant associated with a given category from each transcript, allowing us to easily move between and ‘constantly compare’ our raw data and the developing codes. We then analyzed the matrices and made decisions to collapse and discard some of the aforementioned codes, leading to a focus on the intersection between pathways to and facilitators of purpose. More specifically, we broadened our interest from the specific pathways to purpose (e.g. proactive, reactive, and social learning) and the stages of purpose, as delineated in the previous literature, to encompass a more holistic set of themes and a framework that emerged from the data to shed light on the development of purpose for this population. This process ultimately yielded four conceptually distinct, interrelated candidate categories that captured the salient perceptions and experiences shared by purposeful students.

During the final phase of analysis (selective coding), further reading and analysis of the themes’ corresponding quotes revealed: (a) another minor category that captured the experiences of youth whose life circumstances prevented them from pursuing their aspirations, and (b) subthemes that described the type of support significant adults offered purpose-driven youth (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the research team finalized the theory or framework for the development of youth purpose, based on the four major and interrelated categories, two research assistants reviewed the associated quotes to ensure credibility and agreement among the researchers.

**Reflexivity**

As a critical part of qualitative inquiry that ensures a study’s credibility and integrity, the authors examined their positionalities, subjective values, and biases (Tracy, 2010). Each of them has extensive experience working with youth in a variety of capacities: one is a parent of an adolescent, and others have served as practitioners and researchers interacting with adolescents in the contexts of therapy, religious youth groups, and other community organizations. Each author has considerable interest and background in practice and research focused on positive youth development and social justice issues. Indeed, a commitment to social justice inspired the study’s focus on understanding how purpose develops among adolescents from low SES, underrepresented backgrounds. By engaging in a process of reflexive evaluation, the authors have remained cognizant of their inclination to notice youth strengths and positive adult relationships, and have reflected on personal ways of construing social justice in research and practice settings. They are aware that these lenses may shape study findings.

**Results**

The following sections describe the four themes (people, prosocial benefits, propensity, and passion) that emerged from the data (Table 2).
Students described in great detail how supportive adults had served as a catalyst or inspiration for their initial interest in a particular purpose, as well as a source of scaffolding support for engaging in activities relevant to it. Although we asked about sources of support in students’ lives in general, we did not ask about support for their development of purpose. Thus, we note this finding because students themselves described ways in which supportive adults contributed to their development of purpose. Significant adults whom they named included: parents, extended family members, teachers, mentors) who served as catalysts or inspirations for their initial interest in a particular purpose, and as a source of scaffolding support for engaging in activities relevant to that purpose.

**People: ‘Important others believe in me’**

Students described how two teachers recognized potential in him and helped him to pursue his purpose because of their belief in him. For example, Shatina discussed how she learned the people skills needed to become a nurse from her teachers. Jamal described how two teachers recognized potential in him beyond his current performance. They prodded him to join honors courses, and advocated for him so that he would be placed accordingly:

> When I was in a group of 30 kids, they noticed me and knew “Oh, he should be placed in Honors, he shouldn’t really be here”
> ‘[Name of mentor] helps me continue to strive and excel’
> ‘When I was worn out … she was the only one that actually managed to give me some good encouragement’
> ‘[My mentor] will like find us like opportunities and talk about our careers, what our goals are’

**Cultivation – important others nurture my sense of purpose**

Students also described how certain teachers and mentors cultivated and built upon the potential and purpose they observed in these youth. Youth felt ‘… helped to do more of what [they were] doing well,’ as well as ‘… challenged to do hard things’ relevant to their dreams and goals. Moreover, their teachers and mentors connected them to various opportunities directly related with their aspirations and purpose. Thus, we use the term cultivation to refer to behaviors and words that students noted had challenged and empowered them to do things that stretched them further, including providing them with skills and opportunities related to their aspirations and purpose. For example, Shatina discussed how she learned the people skills needed to become a nurse from her teachers. Jamal described how two teachers recognized potential in him beyond his current performance. They prodded him to join honors courses, and advocated for him so that he would be placed accordingly:

> ‘Make them proud’
> ‘Cause I know there’s a lot of kids that really need help, but they don’t know where to go for it. So I want to be that person to help them’
> ‘I like to try new things, meet new people, very kind and caring, determined and ambitious about my goals and my future’

**Passion: Purposeful students all described choosing a particular purpose because it sparked their interest, and they enjoyed the tasks associated with it.**

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### Table 2. Sample quotes for the four P’s of purpose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The four P’s of purpose defined</th>
<th>Sample quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>People</strong></td>
<td>‘… in a group of 30 kids, they noticed me … knew that I was intelligent and knew “Oh, he should be placed in Honors, he shouldn’t really be here”’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prosocial benefits</strong></td>
<td>‘[I want to be] able to get my mom her own house’; ‘Give back to [my parents]’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Propensity</strong></td>
<td>‘I wanted to be a child psychologist ‘cause I’m really interested in how the mind works and how kids develop’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passion</strong></td>
<td>‘I just found something that I really love to do and that just keeps pushing me, you know, to go through school’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Affirmation – important others value my purpose-related choices and actions**

Affirming relationships were those in which the students felt personally valued and believed in, and their actions and decisions affirmed. For example, Shatina stated ‘[My parents are] just proud of me because I’m doing well in school. They just believe in me that I can do anything that I want to do.’ Ana believed that even if she changed the direction of her post-high school plans, ‘My mom supports me regardless. I think she’ll be okay with it’.

Similarly, students described receiving affirmation from teachers and College Bound mentors. They expressed feeling emotionally bolstered by the presence of teachers/mentors who (a) noticed them (‘They notice things about you that [you] may not realize about yourself’); (b) affirmed their efforts (‘[My] teachers are very supportive all the time … they really do want to see everyone succeed’ and ‘[They] help me continue to strive and excel’; ‘They’re just supportive and they motivate you to like believe in yourself’), and (c) cheered them on (saying ‘You can do it. I did it. You can do it’ and ‘They tell you they believe you can do anything’).

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**Prosocial benefits**

Students were motivated to pursue their purpose because of its benefits to others, especially family members

‘[I want to be] able to get my mom her own house’; ‘Give back to [my parents]’

**Propensity**

Students described having certain skills and traits that were perceived to be relevant to their chosen purposes

‘I like to try new things, meet new people, very kind and caring, determined and ambitious about my goals and my future’

**Passion**

Purposeful students all described choosing a particular purpose because it sparked their interest, and they enjoyed the tasks associated with it.

‘I just found something that I really love to do and that just keeps pushing me, you know, to go through school’
skills and interests. They described mentors connecting them with a ‘… summer internship in the health field’; or ‘… help with the college process and ideas for studying psychology or social work’. Students also seemed aware that the opportunities provided by mentors clearly expanded their abilities and interests relevant to their future aspirations. For example, Shatina described how her mentor connected her with a variety of extracurricular activities, including a trip with Outward Bound, an outdoor experience-based leadership program, and a community service trip to Nicaragua – all of which increased her sense of competence and confidence that she could ‘go through challenges and be able to be successful in the end’. Jada’s mentor cultivated her interest in the health field by both talking with her about it and providing her hands-on opportunities to explore the field:

[My mentor] will like find us like opportunities and talk about our careers, what our goals are … This is like a little exposure for like young kids who don’t know like what they’re going to do in life so [my mentor] just gives [me] the opportunity to like, in the summertime, to just explore like the health field and stuff.

Guidance – important others concretely lead me in my sense of purpose

Lastly, the students valued how important adults in their lives offered them concrete and directive advice, guidance, and information pertaining to their interests and aspirations. Through this type of scaffolding support, students felt equipped to pursue their goals and purpose. For example, Jada and Ana described their teachers and mentors as being valuable resources because of the information and guidance they provided about applying to and selecting a college. At times, this guidance directly challenged them to do or think about things differently when they were feeling confused, discouraged, or uninspired. For example, Ana said her mentor kept ‘… encouraging me to do scholarships. I tell him all the time I don’t feel like it because 500 word essays and he’s just always there to be like “You can do it. I did it. You can do it.” Another student was guided by his College Bound mentor to consider community college given his financial constraints: ‘People go through things, and he’s always saying community college isn’t a bad choice. It’s just where you end up’.

An interesting aspect of the guidance that these youth valued from significant adults was that it supported their autonomy, rather than insisting on the adults’ way of pursuing purpose. Sarah, for example, noted her appreciation for a former English teacher who helped her cultivate her passion for writing by making suggestions to her written work, vs. imposing a certain style of writing. Similarly, Michelle described how her teacher offered open-minded opinions, rather than forcing ideas on her:

He’s really open-minded. He’s not like narrow, in the sense like if you say one thing to him, he’s gonna be like, ‘That’s interesting, I’ve never heard about that before. Tell me more about it, and I’ll see if it makes sense to me, and I’ll give my opinion. But I won’t tell you to go do it because I told you, and it’s just what I think.’ Like, he’s not forcing any ideas on you, but he’s like, ‘Are you sure? You know, there’s other things you can do. What makes you really want to do it? What makes you not want to do it?’ So he’s really open-ended.

Detractors – hindrances to purpose development

While positive adult relationships (as characterized above) facilitated development of purpose for the students in our study, certain stressors, such as excessive family burdens or problems, and/or a lack of autonomy and affirmation, seemed to undermine students’ personal growth and freedom to explore interests. For example, Kiara described feeling pressure to care for her younger brother every day, which limited her from pursuing her own interests:

… ’cause my brother goes to school now, I usually pick him up. And, it’s not like, I don’t want to do it, but sometimes I wish that I could but then, I think about like, it makes it easier for my mom. ‘Cause then she doesn’t have to pay for a babysitter.

Christina’s comments demonstrated how poor family relationships can have a negative impact on autonomy and freedom to explore healthy relationships and interests:

When I talk to [my aunt and uncle who are raising me], they get on my nerves so … ‘Cause whenever I say something to them, they always say I’m being disrespectful and rude, so I’m just like, I’m not talking to ya’ll, like its whatever … Like they don’t let me go out. They don’t let me go anywhere. Like, now I’m getting good grades and stuff, and you don’t even let me go nowhere.

Anthony, who is highly passionate about music, explains how his mother fails to attend his concerts, and thus deprives him of needed support: ‘So you can cheer me on, but you’re cheering me from a distance, and you’re not cheering me on where I feel like I need you’. Therefore, while positive relationships with adults afforded students the conditions and resources (instrumental and emotional) to develop their sense of purpose, deficits and stressors in relationships had the opposite effect.

Prosocial benefits: ‘I can give back to important others around me’

Rather than a sole focus on self-oriented benefits (i.e. money, prestige, or power), students often poignantly described how their purposes might benefit someone else. It is noteworthy that a number of students did admit that their aspirations were driven by a hope for monetary rewards and prestige; however, these benefits were typically described in the context of hopes they held for
their families. For example, family-oriented motives such as ‘make money to take the pressure off my mom’, ‘… give back to [my parents]’, and ‘… make them proud’, were peppered throughout the interviews as rationales for students’ aspirations and sense of purpose. The majority of students either expressed a sole desire to pursue their purpose for their family’s benefit, or the combined wish to better society and family. That is, even those students who talked about their goals to benefit the larger society (e.g. helping others through nursing and child psychology) also noted that they were motivated to achieve these goals in order to make their families proud and to improve their livelihood. Ana, for instance, aspired to graduate from college with a degree in psychology or social work in order to help underserved youth, as well as to make her family proud by being a first generation college student and achieving vocational goals her family would find admirable. Similarly, Michelle explained that she wanted to be a child psychologist ‘… ‘cause I know there’s a lot of kids that really need help, but they don’t know where to go for it. So I want to be that person to help them’. She later added that by becoming a child psychologist, she hoped to inspire similar purpose and ambition in her family members (‘None of us have ever gone way past college. So I feel like if I can break even then I know that my other cousins and sisters and brothers will be perfectly fine. They’ll see a role model kind of person, so at least they’ll have more of a goal to go to after’).

These young people repeatedly acknowledged their families’ hardships and the sacrifices parents had made for them so that they could achieve their future goals. They wished to pursue vocations that would (a) ‘give back’ to their families by providing material resources, social capital, and/or prestige to relieve their families of financial burden, (b) elevate their families’ social status, (c) make their families proud, and (d) even raise their standard of living. For example, Michelle expressed a desire to finish college in order to make her mom’s debt worthwhile, and to relieve her of financial burden in the future:

> My mom has four kids, and … it’s always been a struggle for her. Especially since only one of them went [to college] and finished. It’s a lot of debt for her, so I want to be the person to give more. I want to like try and get it off of her.

Travon expressed his desire to provide for his family this way:

> [I want to be] able to get my mom her own house. Just, like, typical things. Her own house, her own car, paying her bills. Giving back to her because she’s given so much to me. So, that’s what I want. nd not just my mom, but like my whole family, too. Making sure that if they call me and they need something that I won’t be hesitant and be like, ‘I can’t do that right now.’ I just want to be like, ‘Yes, you can have it.’

### Propensity: ‘I excel in my purpose-related field’

Also apparent in these youths’ accounts was their sense that they had a propensity for their particular purpose. That is, they named certain skills and traits they perceived to be relevant to their purpose. For example, Shatina explained why she had what it takes to become a nurse practitioner by enumerating several personal traits: ‘I definitely am a good student academically … school’s very important to me. I’m very outgoing. I like to try new things, meet new people, very kind and caring, determined and ambitious about my goals and my future’. Michelle described her desire to pursue an education in child psychology by explaining that ‘I’m really focused, and I’m really creative, so I try to see everything from every point of view. And I try to find creative ways to solve problems’.

Students also described how they gained skills and traits relevant to their purpose. For example, Ana provided an example of a proactive pathway by explaining how she had sought and gained employment at a local YMCA to gain experience working with children – a skill she would need to fulfill her aspiration to help underserved children as a psychologist or social worker. Michelle spoke of how she developed a sensitivity and mindset conducive to her purpose through a troubling experience in middle school when she watched a friend go through difficulties without support (reactive):

> I found out that her mother wasn’t really a motherly type. Like she’d go out and leave her alone … she had two younger sisters, and she’d be the one that had to come home every day to watch and take care of them … So I always thought she’d need someone to talk to …

Lastly, Christina exemplified a social learning pathway when she described the impact of watching her father work extremely hard to support his children, which has inspired her own work ethic, determination, and desire to pursue a purpose worthy of his sacrifice for her: ‘he’s like the person that motivates me to do anything in life’. Indeed, the pathway for acquiring skills and attributes relevant to purpose was often characterized as the development of personal growth due to adversity or challenges.

### Passion: ‘I love engaging in what gives me purpose’

Students all described choosing and sustaining engagement in a particular purpose because it sparked their interest, and they enjoyed the tasks associated with it. For example, Michelle said, ‘I wanted to be a child psychologist cause I’m really interested in how the mind works and how kids develop …’ As noted above, this interest arose through a reactive pathway because she recognized that there were many children in the world in need of help – including her own childhood friend – and so she wished
to meet this need. Travon described how his passion for engineering acts as a highly academically motivating force: ‘And I just found something that I really love to do and that just keeps pushing me, you know, to go through school.’

Students described how their enjoyment of tasks associated with their purpose rose above other interests. For example, Anthony described his purpose as the source of all enjoyment and his singular aspiration. Indeed, his passion fueled a proactive pursuit of everything associated with becoming a performing musician:

Music is my life. I tweet it every day, like if music never existed I don’t know what my life would be like. And I like tweet like, ‘Thank God like whoever created the first musical thing, did that! So that we could get to the point that we are now!’ because music, honestly, music really is my life … whenever I’m down I listen to music, whenever I’m happy I listen to music, just to change my mood, I listen to music … I just really want to be like a better performing musician. I want to be the best I can be, at being a musician. And to me, it’s like when I get in the zone, or when I’m ever around other musicians, I just feel like my only focus needs to be: me being a musician. I don’t need to focus on anything else. You can like do whatever you want, but I know where I am, [what] I’m trying to be, and what I’m trying to be doing.

Discussion

Given that purpose is considered a developmental asset (Benson, 2006; Damon et al., 2003), and that the goal of College Bound is to bolster the future-oriented aspirations and prospects of youth from urban, low SES backgrounds, this research was undertaken to investigate how these youth describe their development of purpose. The initial deductive analysis of the data suggested that youth in this study arrived at purpose in various ways, consistent with the proactive, reactive, and social learning pathways proposed by Kashdan and McKnight (2009). For example, the findings suggested that when youth leveraged mentors’ instrumental support (opportunities) by actively pursuing internships and jobs – they exemplified the proactive pathway. When they were motivated by their parents’ immigration status, SES, or general life circumstances, they exemplified the reactive pathway. When they described learning skills through watching adult role-models – they exemplified the social learning pathway. Moreover, the students’ pathways seemed consistent with research on growth following adversity, a phenomenon of positive psychological change that occurs as a result of one’s struggle with a challenging experience (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Masten, 2014).

The primary goal of the study, however, was to go beyond confirming the aforementioned existing literature in order to reveal themes and a framework for understanding the development of purpose in youth from underprivileged backgrounds. Inductive analysis of our data yielded the themes and framework for purpose development described below. There were four salient factors that collectively shaped purpose in this population: (a) relationships that empower youth to pursue the purpose (people), (b) a fit with the purpose (propensity), (c) an abiding interest in or zest for activities or things associated with a purpose (passion), and (d) a desire to benefit other people or society as a whole (prosocial benefits).

Analysis of this last factor (prosocial benefits) suggested that participants tended to espouse an other-oriented type of purpose; and the most salient aspect of this finding was that students typically described the intended beneficiaries of their life goals as their families. This is an interesting finding in that many current definitions consider youth purposeful if they have an aspiration that involves the intention to contribute to the broader world (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon et al., 2003), whereas students from this urban, low-income sample primarily mentioned their intention to contribute to their families (e.g. increasing family’s standard of living and socioeconomic status).

These findings are supported by previous research exploring the experience of purpose in underprivileged and immigrant populations. In one study, individuals who came from underprivileged backgrounds, yet had relatively high educational attainment, reported high levels of career-oriented and family-oriented purposes (Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003). In another study, youth from immigrant families found purpose in their ability to assist their families (Kiang, 2011). These findings together highlight the importance of understanding the development of purpose in urban, low SES youth who may be subject to particular socioeconomic and cultural influences. For example, focusing on aspirations that benefit their families may be especially salient for adolescents whose cultural backgrounds emphasize collectivistic values, such as family obligation and filial piety. It remains unclear as to whether youth from more privileged and/or different backgrounds would have similar family-motivated aspirations. Moreover, it is surmised that youth with more privileged families would be less concerned about supporting them, and able to move on to focusing on contributions to the larger society, whereas underprivileged youth would be more concerned about their families’ needs, and taking care of them would be a ‘noble purpose’.

Framework: Relationships between the four P’s of purpose

While each of the four separate factors (people, propensity, passion, and prosocial benefits) augment existing literature related to the nature of purpose development, together they provide a unique framework for understanding the
distinct ways in which purpose develops for this group of youth. In this section, the interrelations between the four P’s of purpose are discussed as depicted in the 2×2 matrix in Figure 1. Specifically, the four P’s result from certain influences (capability and motivation) and sources (intrinsic and extrinsic). In general, purpose develops for these youth when they are motivated to engage in tasks and when they feel capable of being successful with the tasks. Motivation and feelings of success stem from both intrinsic and extrinsic sources. We have mapped the influences and sources of the four P’s onto a 2×2 matrix, where each quadrant within the matrix corresponds to one of the P’s of purpose development for the youth. In this matrix, propensity is a function of intrinsic feelings of capability, passion comes from being intrinsically motivated, people are an extrinsic source that help the youth feel capable, and prosocial benefits are an extrinsic source that motivate the youth. The quadrants of the matrix are further elaborated on in the following sections.

**Influences of the four P’s of purpose**

The two influences, capability and motivation, were demonstrated in that students tended to pursue purposes they felt capable of achieving and motivated or inspired to achieve. In essence, these influences represented a combination of realism (‘I can do this’) and idealism (‘I dream of doing this’). In other words, the adolescents articulated their valuing of choosing a purpose for which they felt equipped, as well as toward which they felt inspired and motivated. Capability to pursue a given purpose was characterized by their perceived fit with the purpose (propensity) and the presence of empowering relationships (people). Motivation/inspiration was characterized by an abiding interest in or zest for activities or things associated with a purpose (passion) and a desire to do something with one’s life that will benefit others or the whole of society (prosocial benefits).

The important roles that passion and prosocial benefits (i.e. motivation/inspiration) played in the development of purposeful goals for our participants are consistent with previous theory and research (Bronk, 2012; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2013). For example, an examination of the role of motivation in persistence, performance, and productivity for people engaged in other-centered work (e.g. firefighters and fundraisers) revealed a complementary relationship between prosocial and intrinsic motivation (Grant, 2008). Prosocially motivated people tended to be most driven when they were engaged in tasks that they found interesting and enjoyable. Similarly in our study, purpose seemed most developed when characterized by a determination to improve the lives of others (prosocial benefits), as well as personal or intrinsic interest (passion). Vallerand and colleagues (Vallerand et al., 2003) defined passion as a strong intrinsic motivator to engage in a self-defining activity that people like or love, find important, and in which they invest energy and time. Moreover, their findings revealed two types of passion: harmonious and obsessive. Harmonious passion, the type most similar to that described by the participants in the current study, led people to autonomously engage in the activity that they love; whereas obsessive passion was characterized by feeling forced to engage in the activity out of a need, such as social acceptance. Indeed, our participants described being prosocially and intrinsically motivated by harmonious passion to pursue their purposeful goals.

Furthermore, participants’ tendency to identify skills and traits (propensity) and supportive resources (people) relevant to their purpose suggests their need to feel capable of reaching their goals. This is consistent with Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy that highlights the need for individuals to perceive they are capable of a goal, in order to choose to engage in it. Individuals who have a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to develop deeper interest in their goal, and a strong sense of commitment to it. Similarly, self-determination theory explains that people pursue goals and activities that enable them to satisfy the basic psychological needs of autonomy (the desire to act on personal initiative rather than under coercion from others), competence (the desire for a efficacy in interactions with their environment), and relatedness (the desire for connection with significant others; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, taken together, it appears that a sense of one’s capability or efficacy may be an essential consideration in the selection and pursuit of purposeful goals. These findings suggest that cultivating purpose may entail helping...
adolescents to identify pursuits that they are both passionate about and well-suited for based on their personal traits, skills, and supportive resources.

**Sources of influence for the four P’s of purpose**

Similar to other areas of positive youth development, the four P’s of purpose (people, propensity, passion, and prosocial benefits) may further be explained by two sources of influence: *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*. Specifically, the influences of capability and motivation each have *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* sources. People are an *extrinsic* resource; Propensity is an *intrinsic* resource; Prosocial Benefits are an *extrinsic* source of motivation; Passion is an *intrinsic* source of motivation. In this study, *intrinsic* sources refer to those personal attributes, skills, and interests that are situated within and belonging to the young person. Of course, we acknowledge that individual factors, even including differences in biological characteristics, are subject to the influence of environmental factors (Gottlieb, 1991). But for our purposes, it is helpful to contrast individual attributes from sociocultural influences. Therefore, we make a distinction between *intrinsic* (i.e. propensities and passions) and *extrinsic* sources (i.e. people and prosocial benefits) influencing the development of purpose.

From a developmental perspective, it is posited that purpose is the outgrowth of an iterative process between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* factors. Specifically, youth may present individual differences in their propensities and passions; supportive adults may then play a critical role in building on and inspiring youth skills and interests – fanning the flames of youths’ ‘sparks’. Findings suggest that these formative relationships provide affirmation, cultivation, and guidance, enabling youth purpose to find expression. That is, purposeful students all described how significant people in their lives had direct bearing on their sense of direction and confidence in committing to a purpose. Supportive adults *affirmed* participants’ decisions and goals and made these youth feel valued as individuals. They also helped *cultivate* participants’ dreams by challenging and empowering them to do things that stretched them further, including providing them with skills and opportunities related to their aspirations and purpose. Finally, supportive adults also offered *guidance*, including information about colleges, internships, and other post-secondary plans. In the formation of purpose, it seemed important to these students to have someone to dream with (parents/teachers) and to challenge them with a high standard (teachers). It was also important to have people to provide role-modeling and instrumental advice (mentors/teachers).

**Strengths, limitations, and future research**

Several steps were taken to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of our study, which are paramount for qualitative research (e.g. Shenton, 2004). Credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or faithfulness of the description of purpose development, was achieved through the use of data collection methods (i.e. open-ended interviews) recommended by experts in the field of purpose and interview questions that were based on youth purpose research, familiarity with the College Bound program and participants prior to conducting the open-ended interviews, and triangulation of a wide range of participants. Moreover, we used probes during open-ended interviews to elicit detailed and nuanced information, conducted frequent debriefing sessions among researchers during data analysis, and situated the study findings in current research.

Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or the extent to which our findings can be applied outside the context of the individual study, was addressed by providing a rich description of the study setting and participants. In particular, we addressed the boundaries of the study by detailing information about the College Bound program and its participants, as well as those students who participated in the study (see previous sections on Participants and College Bound). This detailed information about the demographic, social, economic, and cultural context of our study should allow readers to make connections between elements of our study and their own experiences.

Dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or clarity of our research process for the sake of replication, was addressed by providing a detailed description of the methodology, as well as the analysis technique. Some researchers question the ability to achieve dependability given the changing nature of many phenomena under scrutiny in research (e.g. Fidel, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Confirmability, or the assurance that our findings reflect the experiences of the participants, rather than merely the researchers’ perspectives and biases, is the final marker of trustworthiness and is typically achieved by ensuring credibility, transferability, and dependability. Indeed, through the process of reflexivity described above, researchers sought to be conscious of and make explicit their personal biases, perspectives, and experiences (Creswell, 2013). A rigorous check and recheck process was also utilized, whereby research assistants carefully reviewed all quotes associated with each aspect of the theoretical model to ensure objectivity in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Additionally, it is an important ethical concern to recognize that underprivileged youth were being interviewed by adults. The researchers attempted to be sensitive to these power dynamics by enabling youth to be interviewed on
their own turf, rather than come to our offices. Moreover, researchers recognized the importance of phrasing questions in a manner that is not leading and that is open to participants’ ideas of what is most important (Callary, 2013).

Although this study was conducted with extreme care and rigor, there are some limitations and challenges that must be recognized. For example, a disadvantage of this study’s inductive approach is that it does not fully leverage existing knowledge of the phenomenon of interest. Indeed, the inductive nature of grounded theory approaches requires that researchers resist imposing their preconceived notions of purpose development, in order to allow an analytic, substantive theory to emerge from the data (Creswell, 2013). The benefit of this approach, however, is that it allows for an ‘open-minded’ consideration of participants’ experiences, in contrast to deductive approaches, which risk obscuring, reframing, and overlooking key themes because of the preconceptions imposed by the investigators.

Another limitation of this study is that it employed only one way of collecting data (open-ended interviews), whereas triangulation by method would have helped to overcome the limitations of any given data collection method (e.g. Brewer & Hunter, 1989). Future studies would do well to integrate supporting documents or observations in order to enhance our understanding of how the youth experienced and expressed their purpose in the context of their day-to-day lives. Moreover, while this study supported the generation of a substantive theory, additional research is required for further validation and development into a formal theory.

Despite its limitations, the current study is one of the first to use a qualitative approach in exploring the development of purpose, based on the perceptions of urban, low SES youth. Previous research on purpose has predominantly focused on relatively privileged, racially and ethnically homogeneous populations. Thus, the findings here offer rare, in-depth insights into a unique sample of youth who are being supported in their development of purpose. Taken together, the adolescents in this study pursued purposes they were interested in, capable of, and believed would produce a meaningful outcome for others (especially family). Thus, College Bound programs may do well to work closely with youth to identify students’ motivations and value systems. These may serve as a conduit to the pursuit of purposeful activities. The programs would also do well to work closely with students’ families, teachers, and mentors by encouraging them to support youth through affirmation, cultivation, and guidance, as well as remaining sensitive to individual and sociocultural influences on the pursuit of youth purpose.

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