

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 21 | Number 21

Article 2

2022

Purpose and Autonomous Functioning in College Students

Michelle Steffenhagen
Bethel University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Steffenhagen, Michelle (2022) "Purpose and Autonomous Functioning in College Students," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 21: No. 21, Article 2.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol21/iss21/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.



Purpose and Autonomous Functioning in College Students

Michelle Steffenhagen, M.S.

Bethel University

6

Abstract

This study sought to understand the relationship between a sense of purpose and autonomous functioning in college students. Further, the results were compared with the independent variables of gender, volunteerism, and faith community participation. Participants ($n = 356$) were undergraduate college students at a small private liberal arts Christian institution located in the Midwest of the United States of America. Measures included the Claremont Purpose Scale and the Index of Autonomous Functioning. Pearson correlations were used to analyze the data, and purpose and autonomous functioning were positively correlated. Women reported higher levels of a sense of purpose and autonomous functioning. Students who were involved in faith communities reported higher levels of autonomous functioning and also were more likely to report a higher sense of purpose. Finally, volunteerism was only associated with a beyond-the-self focus (one of the dimensions of the Claremont Purpose Scale).

Introduction

College students in the United States are decreasingly likely to believe it is important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life: in 1968, 85.8% of first-year college students thought it was essential or very important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life compared to 46.5% of first-year students in 2015 (Eagan et al., 2016). Living with purpose gives life a deeper sense of meaning (Damon et al., 2012), and the concern about the number of college students who are not identifying a life purpose is growing (Damon, 2009; Gallup & Bates College, 2019; Mercurio, 2017). Yet, finding purpose is a journey of self-exploration that takes effort (Damon, 2009; Fry, 1998), and researchers still do not fully understand the nature of purpose development (Bronk, 2014; Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Hill et al., 2013).

Regrettably, many adolescents and young adults do not have a sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Moran, 2009). After surveying 1,200 and interviewing almost 300 young people ages 12–26, Damon (2009) found that only 20% of adolescents and young adults reported commitment to a sense of purpose. Fifty-five percent of adolescents and young adults had not made a purpose commitment, some had an idea of what their purpose might be but had not acted on their suspected purpose, and others had explored purpose but had no resolution regarding their specific purpose. However, perhaps most worrying is that 25% of youth were disengaged and uninterested in exploring or committing to purpose all together (Damon, 2009).

In addition, when 2,503 college students were asked to identify their purposes, Glanzer et al. (2017) found that happiness was the number one reported purpose (representing 81.2% of students), while the majority of students did not report that making a difference beyond themselves was one of their purposive goals. A minority of students interested in contributing to the world around them is troubling because research suggests that a focus beyond oneself is a vital dimension of purpose (Damon et al., 2003).

Not only do a majority of undergraduate students miss the benefits of purpose, but research on adolescents or young adults and purpose is also limited (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003). Purpose research prior to the early 2000s focused on adults (Bronk et al., 2018), and much is to be learned about how adolescents and young adults construct purpose (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Bronk et al., 2018; Claremont Graduate

University, 2018; Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). In addition, researchers originally designed purpose scales to measure two dimensions, personal goal orientation and meaningfulness, but missed the dimension of purpose that focuses on making a difference in the world (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003).

Researchers have not expansively investigated the connection between autonomy and a sense of purpose (that includes a focus beyond oneself) among college students. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between autonomous functioning and the criteria of purpose in college students. In addition, three independent variables were included in this research study: gender, volunteerism, and participation in a faith community.

Research questions included: What is the relationship between the level of autonomous functioning and the likelihood that one will meet the criteria for purpose? Is there a significant difference for criteria met for purpose between males and females, students who volunteer and students who do not volunteer, and students who participate in a faith community and students who do not participate in a faith community? Is there a significant difference of autonomous functioning between males and females, students who volunteer and students who do not volunteer, and students who participate in a faith community and students who do not participate in a faith community?

Literature Review

Purpose

Understanding purpose is challenging because the definition is not widely agreed upon within academic literature and authors often use it synonymously with meaning (Damon et al., 2003; Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). Currently, thinking of meaning as a broader concept about personal significance is becoming more common; many experiences can give life meaning and help people make sense of their lives—having a sense of purpose is one of them (Bronk, 2014; Bronk & Dubon, 2015; Claremont Graduate University, 2018; Weinstein et al., 2012). To try to provide structure to the purpose construct, Damon et al. (2003) offered the following definition, “Purpose is 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). Within this definition, there are three dimensions of purpose: a goal orientation,

a sense of meaning, and a beyond-the-self focus (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon, 2003).

Purpose provides direction. Thus, not any goal will qualify as a purpose goal (Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009). The purpose goal must be significant and relatively stable because a purpose goal provides the overarching framework from which all other objectives and action steps arise (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Damon et al., 2003; Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009). Motivation for the goal must be intrinsic and personally inspirational (Claremont Graduate University, 2018) therefore, making progress toward the goal provides a sense of meaning (Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009). However, purpose goals do not just provide meaning; they also contribute something of value to the external world (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Damon et al., 2003; Frankl, 1985).

Youth purpose is associated with higher self-esteem, achievement (Damon et al., 2003), positive emotions, hope, happiness (Burrow & Hill, 2011), and higher well-being (Byron & Miller-Perrin, 2009). Undergraduate students who reported a higher sense of purpose were also more likely to have a higher sense of perceived self-efficacy in college (DeWitz et al., 2009).

Across the lifespan, people with a sense of purpose are more likely to be satisfied with their lives (Bronk et al., 2009). Adults with a sense of purpose report more emotions that are positive (Hill et al., 2018; Ryff et al., 2004; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and experience more contentment and self-esteem (Bigler, 2001). People with a sense of purpose experience fewer negative emotions (Hill et al., 2018; Ryff et al., 2004) and are less likely to experience depression, anxiety (Bigler, 2001), or boredom (Fahlman et al., 2009). Beyond subjective well-being, individuals who reported a sense of purpose, experienced physical health benefits (Hill et al., 2018; Ryff et al., 2004) and data suggested these individuals live longer (Boyle et al., 2009; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Krause, 2009).

Autonomous Functioning

Self-determination theory focuses on understanding and explaining human behavior and motivation and posits that individuals need to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, individuals are more likely to experience flourishing and thriving (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 2017). A second and connected mini theory within the self-determination framework is the causality orientations theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which suggests that as a result of social contexts satisfying or frustrating needs, people learn to orient themselves to

their environments (Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017). Causality orientations go beyond having needs met within specific contexts and are more broadly focused on the person's disposition across various contexts or times (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Weinstein et al. (2012) referred to dispositional autonomy as autonomous functioning and suggested three dimensions: authorship/self-congruence, interest-taking, and a low susceptibility to control. People who function autonomously feel as though they are authoring their lives instead of someone else writing their narrative, they live with self-congruence and alignment between their values and beliefs. Individuals with an autonomous orientation are reflective, becoming more aware of their emotions, interests, values, and experiences, and use this knowledge and insight to guide their self-determined goals. Finally, dispositional autonomy is negatively correlated with susceptibility to control because behavior derives from the integrated self rather than responding to internal or external pressure.

Autonomous functioning is correlated with many factors that influence health and well-being (Weinstein et al., 2012). The researchers also found that among college students, dispositional autonomy was positively correlated with curiosity, self-awareness, mindful attention, positive affect, self-esteem, vitality, life satisfaction, sense of life meaning, and personal growth. Further, students with high levels of autonomous functioning reported that in relationships they experienced more closeness, more openness (to experiencing closeness to people different from them), and increased happiness and life meaning following the interactions.

Important to note is that some critics have argued that autonomy is not relevant in cultures that value inter-connectedness over independence. Throughout academic literature, autonomy has been used synonymously with independence and has been critiqued for being a gendered or individualistic construct (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, self-determination theorists argued for a distinction between the terms, autonomy does not infer independence or individualism (Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017). While autonomy may lead to acting independently, it is possible to function autonomously and consent to acting interdependently or dependently (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Methodology

Higher education professionals have a vested interest in helping students develop as autonomous and purposeful people, yet little is understood about the relationship of these two developmental aims, especially when purpose is operationalized to include a beyond-the-self focus. This study utilized a quantitative non-experimental methodology using bivariate analysis to investigate the relationship between autonomous functioning and the criteria for purpose in traditional undergraduate college students.

The variables of this study were purpose and autonomous functioning. In this study, purpose was defined as a personal and overarching intention to contribute something of value to the world (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003). Autonomy was defined as self-endorsed behavior that concurs with, and is, an expression of the integrated self (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomous functioning is when individuals embody autonomy to such an extent that they believe they are capable of a self-endorsed life (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Three independent variables were included in this research study: gender, volunteerism, and participation in a faith community. The study explored the associations between the demographic variables and purpose and autonomous functioning by using reliable and valid instruments.

Claremont Purpose Scale

The criteria for purpose were measured with the Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk et al., 2018), which seeks to understand one's intention to contribute to the world beyond oneself in a manner that is personally meaningful (Damon et al., 2003). Purpose includes three dimensions: goal orientation, personal meaningfulness, and beyond-the-self influence (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003). Both the purpose scale and individual subscales (measuring each dimension) demonstrated validity and internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the entire scale in the first two studies was .917–.945. The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the subscales also demonstrated internal consistency (i.e., goal orientation = .862, meaningfulness = .924, beyond-the-self = .917). The Claremont Purpose Scale was designed to measure how many criteria for purpose the respondents have met (rather than as a measure of low, medium, or high purpose) (Bronk et al., 2018). In addition, the

researchers stated that the scale is nuanced enough to measure changes over time.

Index of Autonomous Functioning Scale

Autonomous functioning is the embodiment of autonomy that results in the belief that one is capable of living a self-endorsed life (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and was measured with the dispositional Index of Autonomous Functioning (Weinstein et al., 2012). After several analyses, the Index of Autonomous Functioning was demonstrated to have high validity and reliability, and researchers found a confirmatory factor analysis supported the index (Weinstein et al., 2012). The results indicated stability over time (consistency over a six-month period), and after multiple studies, researchers suggested a predictive nature between autonomous functioning and positive factors for well-being. The dispositional Index of Autonomous Functioning demonstrated internal consistency, and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .81. The scale was designed to measure traits like disposition autonomy, but authors indicated that the dimensions of autonomy can also be measured by using the subscales. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was .89 for the authorship/self-congruence subscale, .83 for interest-taking subscale, and .84 for susceptibility of control subscale.

12

Demographic Variables

Gender, volunteerism, and participation in a faith community were reported in order to better understand the relationship between these relevant college student demographics and purpose and autonomy. Gender was measured with an open-ended prompt (male, boy, man, M, or B were coded as male and female, girl, woman, W, F, or G were coded as female), no students reported non-binary gender. Students reported whether they engaged in volunteer work while attending college frequently, occasionally, or not at all. Finally, students reported if they participate in a faith community outside of the college once-a-week, two or three times a month, once-a-month, a few times a semester, or not at all.

Sample

This quantitative study used a convenience sample of college students at a small private evangelical liberal arts university located in the Midwest of the United States of America. Students were invited to participate because of their enrollment in a required first-year course. The study sample included 112 males, 227 females, and 17 students who did not provide information regarding their gender ($n=356$). Students were over the age of 18 and consented to participate. To collect the data, an online

survey was administered to participants. Independent *t*-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to better understand how demographic variables influence the likelihood that a student will function autonomously or meet the criteria for purpose. That data analysis involved inferential statistics using Pearson's correlation coefficient to investigate the relationships between purpose and autonomy. Pearson correlations were completed between the main variables (i.e., purpose and autonomous functioning). Further analysis was completed by conducting independent *t*-tests for gender and volunteerism demographic variables and each of the main variables. When a significant difference existed, additional analysis was conducted using independent *t*-tests and that variable's subscales. One-way ANOVA was conducted for faith community participation demographic variables.

Results and Discussion

Purpose and Autonomy

The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the Claremont Purpose Scale (.833), and for the Index of Autonomous Functioning scale (.731) demonstrated adequate internal reliability. The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient to investigate the relationship between purpose and autonomy. The positive correlation between autonomous functioning and the criteria met for purpose indicated that the more autonomous students were, the more likely they were to meet the criteria for purpose, $r(352) = .271, p < .001$. Likewise, the positive correlation suggests that as students report less autonomous functioning, they are less likely to meet the criteria for purpose.

Gender and Purpose

Independent *t*-tests were used to investigate the relationships between gender and the Claremont Purpose Scale. Levene's test revealed the homogeneity of variance was not violated ($p > .05$), and the results of the independent *t*-test did not reveal a significant difference between gender and the Claremont Purpose Scale, $t(335) = -1.081, p = .280, d = -.125$. Further, the Levene's test revealed the homogeneity of variance was only violated for the goal dimension ($p < .05$). In response, Welch's adjusted *t*-statistic was used to correct the violation and a significant statistical difference was found between gender and goal orientation, $t(197.464) = -2.258, p = .025, d = -.267$. Women were significantly more likely to meet more criteria for the goal orientation dimension of purpose. The independent *t*-tests did not support a significant difference between gender

and meaning, $t(337) = 1.15, p = .249, d = .133$. However, there was a significant difference between gender and beyond-the-self focus, $t(336) = -2.030, p = .043, d = -.235$. Women were also significantly more likely to meet more criteria for the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose.

Gender and Autonomous Functioning

Independent t -tests were also used to investigate the relationship between gender and autonomous functioning, and the Levene's test revealed no violations between gender and the Index of Autonomous Functioning or any of its subscales ($p > .05$). The independent t -tests showed a statistically significant difference in the likelihood that women were to score higher on the Index of Autonomous Functioning, $t(335) = -2.172, p = .031, d = -.252$. Although women were more likely to report autonomous functioning, they were not statistically more likely to meet the criteria for any of the subscales.

Volunteerism and Purpose

It was determined before the study was conducted that if a survey answer received fewer than a 10% respondent rate, that survey response item would be collapsed into the next closest group. Only 8.7% of students responded that they volunteered frequently, and therefore, their results were collapsed with the students who volunteered occasionally. An independent t -test was used to compare the criteria met for purpose by students who did not volunteer ($n = 149$) with the students who volunteered occasionally or frequently ($n = 206$). All t -tests were first tested for homogeneity of variance assumption, and Levene's test revealed there were no violations of homogeneity for any of the scales. There was no statistically significant difference ($p > .05$) identified between the two groups when the students responded to the criteria for purpose. However, students who volunteered occasionally or frequently were significantly more likely to meet more criteria for the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose.

Volunteerism and Autonomous Functioning

An independent t -test was also used to determine if there was a significant difference in the likelihood that students who volunteered frequently or occasionally would be more likely to score higher levels of autonomous functioning than the students who reported not volunteering. Levene's test indicated that no scales violated the homogeneity of variance assumption, and the independent t -test indicated that there were no significant differences between the students who volunteered frequently or occasionally and the students who did not volunteer in

their levels of autonomous functioning or any of the Index of Autonomous Functioning subscales.

Faith Community Participation and Purpose

Analysis of the data collected to understand the relationship between participation in a faith community and purpose indicated that the homogeneity of variance was not violated ($p = .063$) and a Q-Q Plot demonstrated that the results followed a normal and linear distribution pattern. A one-way ANOVA was conducted, which did reveal a significant difference, $F(3, 350) = 12.812, p < .001$. Tukey post hoc tests revealed that students who do not participate in a faith community outside of the institution ($M = 3.457, SD = .583$) were less likely to meet the criteria for purpose than students who participate in a faith community two or three times a month ($M = 3.617, SD = .512, p = .004, d = -.515$). Students who did not participate in a faith community were also significantly less likely to meet the criteria for purpose than students who participate weekly ($M = 3.904, SD = .433, p < .001, d = -.900$). There was also a significant difference between students who participate in a faith community a few times a semester ($M = 3.617, SD = .512$) and those who participate weekly ($p < .001, d = -.610$). There was not a significant difference between students who participate in a faith community two or three times a month and those that participate in a faith community weekly ($p = .122, d = -.353$). Students who participate in faith communities were statistically more likely to meet the criteria for purpose.

Upon discovery of the significant difference found in the criteria met for purpose between students who attend faith communities weekly and other students, additional analyses were completed. Levene's test found no violation of homogeneity of variance for goal orientation ($p = .150$) or meaning ($p = .181$). The one-way ANOVA for goal orientation found no significant difference, $F(3, 351) = 1.954, p = .121$, for students who attended faith communities at different frequencies. The one-way ANOVA for meaning found a significant difference between students who attended faith communities weekly and the likelihood that they would score higher on the meaning subscale, $F(3, 352) = 12.156, p < .001$. Tukey post hoc tests revealed that students who do participate in a faith community outside of the university on a weekly basis ($M = 3.733, SD = .718$) were more likely to meet the criteria for the meaning subscale of purpose than students who do not participate in a faith community ($M = 3.045, SD = .905, p < .001, d = -.866$), students who participate in a faith community a few times a semester ($M = 3.248, SD = .802, p < .001, d = -.641$), and

students who participate in a faith community a few times a month ($M = 3.365$, $SD = .868$, $p = .012$, $d = -.471$).

When investigating the relationship between the beyond-the-self-dimension of purpose and faith community participation, Levene's test for the homogeneity of variance assumption found a violation ($p = .001$). A one-way ANOVA was run with Welch's correction and a significant difference was found, $F(3, 179.449) = 8.435$, $p < .001$. Tukey post hoc tests revealed that students who do participate in a faith community outside of the university on a weekly basis ($M = 4.259$, $SD = .587$) were more likely to meet the criteria for the beyond-the-self subscale of purpose than students who do not participate in a faith community ($M = 3.792$, $SD = .778$, $p < .001$, $d = -.700$), and students who participate in a faith community a few times a semester ($M = 3.908$, $SD = .766$, $p = .001$, $d = -.522$). Post hoc tests on the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose also revealed a significant difference between students who participate in a faith community two or three times a month ($M = 4.118$, $SD = .577$) and students who do not participate in a faith community, $p = .018$, $d = -.479$.

Faith Community Participation and Autonomous Functioning

16

Upon finding that the homogeneity of variance was not significant ($p = .094$) and the results followed a normal and linear distribution pattern, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the relationship between frequency of participation in a faith community and autonomous functioning, which revealed a significant difference, $F(3, 350) = 3.363$, $p = .019$. The post hoc test revealed that students who attended a faith community weekly ($M = 3.570$, $SD = .480$) were statistically more likely to report higher levels of autonomous functioning than students who did not participate in a faith community ($M = 3.383$, $SD = .508$, $p = .033$, $d = -.382$).

Analyses were also conducted to understand the relationships between faith community participation and the subscales of the Index of Autonomous Functioning. Levene's test showed no violation of homogeneity of variance for authorship ($p = .708$), susceptibility of control ($p = .148$), or interest-seeking ($p = .053$). The one-way ANOVA for the authorship subscale revealed that students who attended faith communities weekly were more likely to report higher levels of authorship, $F(3, 352) = 4.480$, $p = .004$. The post hoc test results revealed that students who participate weekly in a faith community ($M = 4.079$, $SD = .488$) report higher levels of authorship than students who do not participate in a faith community

($M = 3.847$, $SD = .546$, $p = .016$, $d = -.454$). A one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference between the susceptibility of control subscale results and faith community participation, $F(3, 351) = .212$, $p = .888$. Finally, a one-way ANOVA investigating the relationship between interest-seeking and faith community participation did find a significant difference, $F(3, 351) = 2.837$, $p = .038$. The post hoc test revealed that students who participated weekly in a faith community ($M = 3.846$, $SD = .866$) were significantly more likely to report higher levels of interest-seeking than students who only attended faith communities a few times a semester ($M = 3.531$, $SD = .886$, $p = .043$, $d = -.360$).

Discussions and Implications for Practice

Purpose and Autonomous Functioning

As suspected, purpose and autonomous functioning were positively correlated. The correlation between purpose and autonomous functioning supports the suggestion of previous scholars that identity and purpose are related but separate dimensions of development (Bronk, 2014; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill et al., 2016; Mclean & Pratt, 2006), providing some indication that supporting the development of one of these aims could indirectly support the other.

Gender

While previous studies have provided inconsistent results regarding gender and developmental aims (García-Alandete, 2014), the current study provides some indication that women may develop purpose and autonomy sooner than men. In the current study, women were more likely to report autonomous functioning, which is not entirely surprising given the complex and interconnected variables that influence gender expectations during emerging adulthood (Goldin, et al., 2006; Kleinfeld, 2009; Schiffrin et al., 2019). Notably, women were also more likely to have a goal orientation and a beyond-the-self focus but not more likely to report a sense of meaning. This finding may provide some indication that women experience a disconnect between prosocial goals and a sense of meaning. Perhaps women could benefit from support making these connections. Relatedly, men may be delayed in their autonomous functioning and purpose development, specifically in the dimensions of goal orientation and beyond-the-self focus.

When it comes to purpose and autonomy, questions, reflections, and suggestions need to be tailored around a student's readiness. Men may need more time and attention given to purpose exploration and the

fostering of autonomy. Women may need less encouragement on cultivating autonomy and purpose and may need more attention given to how to connect their purpose to meaning.

Volunteerism

The current study's findings are important because they give insight into how volunteering may be influencing autonomy and purpose development. When analyzing volunteerism, the only relationship that was found to be significant was the likelihood that students who volunteered reported higher levels of a beyond-the-self focus than other students. While volunteering may be one way to increase exposure to the world's needs, it may not always be a satisfying or meaningful experience (Wray-Lake et al., 2019) or embarked upon with a sense of volition and could even lead toward resentment (Beehr et al., 2010). If volunteering is not enjoyable or engaged under duress, it may thwart autonomy (Wray-Lake et al., 2019).

Volunteering is not the only way for college students to engage prosocial goal orientations, and volunteering for the sake of volunteering is not useful for supporting purpose and autonomy development. The data do not provide evidence that students who volunteer are any more likely to have a clear understanding of a goal on their horizon that gives their life meaning. Further, students who volunteer are no more likely to report that they are living with a sense of volition. Consideration should be given to diversifying volunteer opportunities so students can choose something of interest, an autonomous act supportive of purpose exploration.

Faith Community Participation

The results of this study indicate that involvement with a faith community is associated with purpose, a beyond-the-self focus, meaningfulness, autonomous functioning, authorship, and interest-taking. The relationships between faith community participation and the concepts of meaning and prosocial focus have been established (Clydesdale, 2015; Mariano & Damon, 2008) and were expected. Religious organizations serve a supportive role in purpose development (Pfund & Miller-Perrin, 2019) and developing a prosocial focus (Moran et al., 2013).

The correlation between faith community participation and authorship and interest-taking is more curious. Faith communities can be supportive to adults as they explore their identity (King, 2008; Tirri & Quinn, 2010). Further, the current research indicates that faith communities are not barriers to autonomous functioning, authorship, or

interest-taking. In other words, participation with an in-group, such as a religious community, does not appear to inhibit a young person's ability to act with a sense of volition. Schools, specifically small Christian universities, should consider these communities as possible extensions of outside-of-the-classroom education. As potential student development partners, church leaders could be invited to developmental theory and practice trainings. Students are influenced in positive ways by their faith community experiences, and it would be prudent for schools to think about how they can maximize the student experience by helping shape how churches think about how college students develop autonomy and purpose.

Limitations

While the current study contributes to the literature on purpose and autonomous functioning as the first to closely investigate the relationships between these two constructs, certain limitations need to be considered when understanding these results. The first limitation is the student population. The participants in this study were students from a small private faith-based liberal arts institution in the Midwest region of the United States and may not be representative of the diversity represented within the population of emerging adults.

Another limitation of this study was how purpose and autonomous functioning were conceptualized. The literature sourced was assumed to have been predominantly authored by Western scholars where whiteness, as a social construct, has shaped perspectives around developmental aims. While disentangling the influence of dominant and privileged cultures can be challenging, this study needs to be taken within context as unconscious bias could be embedded in the current understandings of purpose and autonomy. This study may provide contributions to the literature on purpose and autonomy, and understanding the potential limitations on how purpose and autonomy were understood from potentially homogenous, and not diverse, perspectives is important.

Finally, the current study solely focused on the relationships between purpose and autonomous functioning. While this study provides information that could be valuable to educators, it does not provide insights regarding which variables may be having a supportive effect on the others.

Recommendations for Research

Among participants, only the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose correlated with volunteerism. Better understanding the relationships

between both purpose and autonomous functioning with prosocial goals outside of volunteering would be important. Research should also continue to investigate if there is a unique relationship between emerging adults and volunteerism and how this may change over time.

At the institution where this study took place, students who regularly attended faith communities reported higher levels of autonomous functioning. Future research may want to consider if a person's perceived autonomy equates with actual autonomy, specifically in relation to faith.

Future research should also focus on understanding how personal identities (e.g., gender, cultural, ethnic, ability, social class, religion) may influence purpose and autonomy development. Due to the gender discrepancies, special attention should be given to how gender socialization may be a factor affecting the development of autonomy and purpose in women.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to previous literature on development in young adults as it is the first to investigate the relationship between autonomous functioning and having a sense of purpose that includes a beyond-the-self focus. As suspected, students who reported higher levels of autonomous functioning were more likely to meet the criteria for purpose, a finding that aligns with developmental theory. Furthermore, this study provides useful insight into how gender may influence sense of purpose and autonomous functioning. Women reported higher scores on both scales but indicated they may need assistance with meaning-making when it comes to processing their purposes. Students who report higher levels of both autonomous functioning and criteria met for purpose were more involved with faith communities indicating the potential significance of these relationships. Conversely, volunteerism was only associated with a beyond-the-self focus providing pause to how volunteering should be promoted and encouraged in connection with purpose and autonomy development. Overall, the data in this study offer important findings that add to the previous literature on purpose and autonomous functioning.

References

- Beehr, T. A., LeGro, K., Porter, K., Bowling, N. A., & Swader, W. M. (2010). Required volunteers: Community volunteerism among students in college classes. *Teaching of Psychology, 37*(4), 276–280.

- Bigler, M. (2001). The divided self revisited: Effects of self-concept clarity and self-concept differentiation on psychological adjustment. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 20*(3), 396–415.
- Boyle, P. A., Barnes, L. L., Buchman, A. S., & Bennett, D. A. (2009). Purpose in life is associated with mortality among community-dwelling older persons. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 71*(5), 574–579.
- Bronk, K. C. (2014). *Purpose in life: A critical component of optimal youth development*. Springer.
- Bronk, K. C., & Baumsteiger, R. (2017). The role of purpose among emerging adults. In L. M. Padilla-Walker, & L. J. Nelson (Eds.), *Flourishing in emerging adulthood: Positive development during the third decade of life* (pp. 45–66). Oxford University Press.
- Bronk, K. C., & Dubon, V. X. (2015). Approaches to fostering purpose among adolescents in educational settings. *International Forum for Logotherapy, 38*(2), 86–93.
- Bronk, K. C., Hill, P. L., Lapsley, D. K., Talib, T. L., & Finch, H. (2009). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(6), 500–510.
- Bronk, K. C., Riches, B. R., & Mangan, S. A. (2018). Claremont purpose scale: A measure that assesses the three dimensions of purpose among adolescents. *Research in Human Development, 15*, 101–117.
- Burrow, A. L., & Hill, P. L. (2011). Purpose as a form of identity capital for positive youth adjustment. *Developmental Psychology, 47*(4), 1196–1203.
- Byron, K., & Miller-Perrin, C. (2009). The value of life purpose: Purpose as a mediator of faith and well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(1), 64–70.
- Claremont Graduate University, Adolescent Moral Development Lab. (2018). *The psychology of purpose*. Retrieved from <https://www.templeton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Psychology-of-Purpose-FINAL.pdf>
- Clydesdale, T. T. (2015). *The purposeful graduate: Why colleges must talk to students about vocation*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Damon, W. (2003). *Noble purpose: The joy of living a meaningful life*. Templeton Foundation Press.
- Damon, W. (2009). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. Free Press.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K., C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(3), 119–128.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). The general causality orientations scale: Self-determination in personality. *Journal of Research in Personality, 19*(2), 109–134.

- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227–268.
- DeWitz, S. J., Woolsey, M. L., & Walsh, W. B. (2009). College student retention: An exploration of the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and purpose in life among college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(1), 19–34.
- Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Ramirez, J. J., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2016). *The American freshman: Fifty-year trends, 1966–2015*. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Fahlman, S. A., Mercer, K. B., Gaskovski, P., Eastwood, A. E., & Eastwood, J. D. (2009). Does a lack of life meaning cause boredom? Results from psychometric, longitudinal, and experimental analyses. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 28*(3), 307–340.
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning* (Rev. ed.). Simon and Schuster.
- Fry, P. S. (1998). The development of personal meaning and wisdom in adolescence: A reexamination of moderating and consolidating factors and influences. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications* (pp. 91–110). Erlbaum.
- Gallup & Bates College. (2019). *Forging pathways to purposeful work: The role of higher education*. Retrieved from: <https://www.gallup.com/education/248222/gallup-bates-purposeful-work-2019.aspx>
- García-Alandete, J. (2014). Factor analysis of the Spanish version of the Purpose in Life test according to age and gender. *Pensamiento Psicológico, 12*(1), 83–98.
- Glanzer, P. L., Hill, J. P., & Johnson, B. R. (2017). Cultivating the successful quest for purpose on campus: What we learned from students. *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience, 22*(5), 21–28.
- Goldin, C., Katz, L. F., & Kuziemko, I. (2006). The homecoming of American college women: The reversal of the college gender gap. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 20*(4), 133–156.
- Hill, P. L., Burrow, A. L., & Bronk, K. C. (2016). Persevering with positivity and purpose: An examination of purpose commitment and positive affect as predictors of grit. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being, 17*(1), 257–269.
- Hill, P. L., Burrow, A. L., & Sumner, R. (2013). Addressing important questions in the field of adolescent purpose. *Child Development Perspectives, 7*(4), 232–236.

- Hill, P. L., Sin, N. L., Turiano, N. A., Burrow, A. L., & Almeida, D. M. (2018). Sense of purpose moderates the associations between daily stressors and daily well-being. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 52(8), 724–729.
- Hill, P. L., & Turiano, N. A. (2014). Purpose in life as a predictor of mortality across adulthood. *Psychological Science*, 25(7), 1482–1486.
- Kleinfeld, J. (2009). No map to manhood: Male and female mindsets behind the college gender gap. *Gender Issues*, 26(3), 171–182.
- Krause, N. (2009). Meaning in life and mortality. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 64B(4), 517–527.
- Mariano, J. M., & Damon, W. (2008). The role of spirituality and religious faith in supporting purpose in adolescence. In R. M. Lerner, R. W. Roeser & E. Phelps (Eds.), *Positive youth development and spirituality: From theory to research* (pp. 210–230). Templeton Foundation Press.
- Mcknight, P. E., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health and well-being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology*, 13(3), 242–251.
- Mclean, K. C., & Pratt, M. W. (2006). Life's little (and big) lessons: Identity statuses and meaning-making in the turning point narratives of emerging adults. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(4), 714–722.
- Mercurio, Z. (2017, May 25). How college kills purpose. *HuffPost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-college-kills-purpose_b_10013944
- Moran, S. (2009). Purpose: Giftedness in intrapersonal intelligence. *High Ability Studies*, 20(2), 143–159.
- Moran, S., Bundick, M. J., Malin, H., & Reilly, T. S. (2013). How supportive of their specific purposes do youth believe their family and friends are? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 28(3), 348–377.
- Pfund, G. N., & Miller-Perrin, C. (2019). Interaction and harmony in faith communities: Predicting life purpose, loneliness, and well-being among college students. *Journal of College and Character*, 20(3), 234–253.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potential: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 141.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Self-regulation and the problem of human autonomy: Does psychology need choice, self-determination, and will? *Journal of Personality*, 74(6), 1557–1586.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Publications.

- Ryff, C. D., Singer, B. H., & Diener, E. (2004). Positive health: Connecting well-being with biology. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 359(1449), 1383–1394.
- Schiffirin, H. H., Erchull, M. J., Sendrick, E., Yost, J. C., Power, V., & Saldanha, E. R. (2019). The effects of maternal and paternal helicopter parenting on the self-determination and well-being of emerging adults. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(12), 3346–3359.
- Tirri, K., & Quinn, B. (2010). Exploring the role of religion and spirituality in the development of purpose: Case studies of purposeful youth. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 32(3), 201–214.
- Van Dyke, C. J., & Elias, M. J. (2007). How forgiveness, purpose, and religiosity are related to the mental health and well-being of youth: A review of the literature. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 10(4), 395–415.
- Weinstein, N., Przybylski, A. K., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Index of autonomous functioning scale: Development of a scale of human autonomy. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 46(4), 397–413.
- Wray-Lake, L., DeHaan, C. R., Shubert, J., & Ryan, R. M. (2019). Examining links from civic engagement to daily well-being from a self-determination theory perspective. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14(2), 166–177.
- Zika, S., & Chamberlain, K. (1992). On the relation between meaning in life and psychological well-being. *British Journal of Psychology*, 83(1), 133.