Journal of Adolescent Research

A Grounded Theory of the Development of Noble Youth Purpose

Kendall Cotton Bronk

The online version of this article can be found at:

Additional services and information for *Journal of Adolescent Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jar.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://jar.sagepub.com/content/27/1/78.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Dec 12, 2011

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jul 29, 2011

What is This?

A Grounded Theory of the Development of Noble Youth Purpose

Kendall Cotton Bronk[1]

Abstract

Having a noble purpose in life is an important component of positive youth development; however, little is known about how noble purposes develop over time. Therefore, using three waves of interviews over a 5-year period with 9 adolescents (*N* = 9) who demonstrated intense commitments to various noble purposes, the present study developed a grounded theory of the development of noble purpose, including a focus on how commitment was initiated, sustained, increased, and changed over time. Results revealed the exemplars made commitments early in life. With the exception of triggering experiences, which immediately intensified their level of commitment, commitment generally grew slowly but steadily in response to positive feedback. Mentors and like-minded peers played an important role in supporting noble purposes over time, and access to new resources led exemplars to expand their focus. Implications for supporting the development of noble purposes are addressed.

Keywords

adolescent, emerging adult, purpose in life, positive youth development, meaning, exemplar, moral development

[1]Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

Corresponding Author:
Kendall Cotton Bronk, Department of Educational Psychology, Ball State University, 2000 West University Avenue, Muncie, IN 47306, USA
Email: kcbronk@bsu.edu

Ideals are like stars: you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the ocean desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny.

Carl Schurz

The Positive Role of a Noble Purpose in Life

A growing body of theoretical and empirical research suggests that a noble purpose in life is associated with optimal human development. For example, psychological researchers have identified a noble purpose as a developmental asset (Benson, 2006), an important component of human flourishing (Seligman, 2002) and a key factor in thriving (Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2009). Other research finds that purpose correlates to a variety of positive psychology outcomes, including happiness (French & Joseph, 1999), resiliency (Benard, 1991; Masten & Reed, 2002), subjective well-being (Seligman, 2002), psychological well-being (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), positive affect (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), and life satisfaction (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2010).

Similarly, a lack of purpose or meaning appears to contribute to poor mental health. Research concludes that youth (Shek, 1993) and adults (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1967; Kish & Moody, 1989) who lack a purpose in life report poorer psychological health and higher levels of psychological distress (Debats, 1998).

Noble purpose has emerged as an important factor in positive human functioning, and as such recent research on the topic has increased dramatically. Because of the central role noble purpose plays in positive youth functioning, it is important to understand the way it is sustained over time so parents, teachers, and other adults concerned about the welfare of young people can more effectively foster a noble sense of purpose in the lives of all young people.

Definitional Matters

While definitions of purpose in life have varied in the past, there appears to be a consensus growing among researchers that a purpose represents *a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self* (Damon, 2008; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). This definition includes three important dimensions. First, a purpose in life represents

the *target* that an individual is working toward in his or her life. It is an intention to progress toward a personally meaningful ultimate aim (Emmons, 1999). It may sound obvious that a purpose is personally meaningful, but the emphasis on self-meaning underscores the fact that the pursuit of purpose is voluntary and self-motivated. The individual—rather than peers, parents, or others—functions as the driving force behind the intention. Because purpose can play a central role in guiding an individual's overarching aims, the construct represents a key component of identity (Erikson, 1968; Damon, 2008), and since late adolescence represents the stage of life during which individuals are most actively and intensely involved in constructing a coherent sense of identity (Cote & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1968), purpose is assumed to play a particularly salient role in adolescent and emerging adult development. The development of purpose, while related to identity, describes a distinct process. Identity refers to the development of *who* one is, while purpose refers to the development of *what* one hopes to accomplish in his or her life. While all youth undergo identity development, only about 20% develop a purpose in life (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009).

Second, personal meaningfulness is evidenced by *active engagement* on the part of the individual. Individuals commit time, energy, knowledge, and resources to achieving their purposes in life. In this way, a purpose in life has a behavioral manifestation. Active engagement differentiates pursing a purpose in life from merely contemplating a personally meaningful aim. This dimension of the definition is based on research on adolescents' and emerging adults' motivation to engage in extracurricular activities (Bobek, Zaff, Li, & Lerner, 2009) and service-oriented activities (Fischman, Schutte, Solomon, & Lam, 2001).

Finally, purpose features a central desire to act in the world beyond one self or in pursuit of a larger cause. Action beyond the self distinguishes purpose from the related construct of meaning. A purpose in life shares with meaning an intention to see one's life as guided by an overarching aim (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009); however, it is distinct from meaning in that a primary motivation for purpose is to affect causes or individuals beyond the self. In other words, while seeking fame and fortune may imbue one's life with meaning, doing so does not provide a source of purpose.

Because action in the broader world can be prosocial, antisocial, or neutral in nature, a purpose in life can take any of these forms. However, the present study is primarily concerned with noble or at least neutral purposes. While it can be difficult to differentiate moral from immoral aims, it is not impossible. Philosophers and psychologists have generated tests that can be employed to make these distinctions (see Bronk, Menon, & Damon,

2004a for a fuller discussion of these different approaches). An examination of clearly antisocial purposes, while worthwhile, is beyond the scope of the present study.

Development of Purpose

Despite the strong claims made by researchers about the role of noble purpose in positive functioning, a substantial body of research on the topic has only recently emerged. These studies have focused primarily on its forms and prevalence among different segments of the population (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010) and its concomitant relation to individual traits (Bronk, 2008; Bronk et al., 2009). Studies have also explored the daily experience of noble purpose (Burrows, 2010) and meaning (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008), but questions regarding the developmental experience of cultivating a noble purpose during adolescence have remained largely unanswered. Longer term studies of the development and sustainment of noble purposes are needed as knowledge around how these purposes are encountered and maintained over time could help youth practitioners more effectively support their development among all youth. Given the positive associations with noble purposes, this is an important aim. Furthermore, given the enduring nature of the noble purpose construct, researchers have called for longitudinal examinations of it (Damon, 2008).

The present study was designed to develop a theory of how noble purposes are developed and sustained over time. Specifically, this study sought to gain an understanding of the ways in which young people discover, maintain, and alter their noble purposes through the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood. In order to accomplish this, a detailed examination of the long-term, lived experience of noble purpose was needed, so the present study relied on longitudinal, case study–style interviews conducted with noble purpose exemplars.

The decision to rely on noble purpose exemplars was a methodological one. Exemplars, or young people who demonstrate particularly intense commitments to noble purposes, were included because viewing a construct in its most intense form is often the clearest way of seeing what that construct looks like in practice (Colby & Damon, 1992). Echoing this advantage to exemplar research, Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1962) noted in *Nicomachean Ethics*, "We approach the subject of practical wisdom by studying the persons to whom we attribute it" (6.5 1140a25). Similarly, Maslow (1971) argued that if we want to learn about ultimate human potential, we should study highly functional and enlightened individuals. In other words, in order to understand

how noble purpose functions, it makes sense to study the lives of individuals who exemplify it.

Method

Sample

To address these issues, the present study relied on data from three waves of in-depth, case study style interviews conducted with 9 adolescent purpose exemplars (*N* = 9). At Time 1, participants were between 12 and 23 years of age (*M* age = 19.11; *SD* = 3.37). Interviews were conducted approximately 2.5 years later and again 2 years later. Participants were White (67%), African American (11%), Asian (11%), and Hispanic (11%) and were equally divided among rural (33%), suburban (33%), and urban (33%) hometowns in the United States and Canada. All youth were in high school, college, or working at the time of the interviews.

A case study–style, exemplar methodology was appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, the purpose construct is a multifaceted one, consisting of identity, engagement, and motivational components. This methodology allowed researchers to gather highly detailed data, which were required to understand the development of such a multifaceted construct. Second, highly purposeful youth, rather than young people with a less intense but perhaps more typical form of purpose, were included because examining a construct in its most intense form can be a useful way of discerning what a construct looks like in practice. Furthermore, it seems likely that the development of purpose is similar regardless of the intensity of purpose. In this way, findings gleaned from a sample of purpose exemplars should apply to less intensely purposeful youth as well (see Colby & Damon, 1992).

Nomination criteria used to qualify exemplars were derived primarily from the definition of purpose (Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003) as well as from the literature on purpose and consisted of the following; adolescent purpose exemplars

1. demonstrate enduring commitments to long-term aims;
2. are actively engaged in working toward their long-term aims and have plans for continuing to do so in the future;
3. maintain long-term aims that are personally meaningful;
4. are committed to these aims in large part because pursuing them allows the youth to positively affect the broader world, including groups of people, causes, artistic endeavors, etc.

These criteria were shared with expert nominators, including youth practitioners in a variety of fields (e.g., high school teachers, music teachers, youth ministers, etc.), who used the criteria to identify appropriate exemplars.

The exemplars' noble purposes varied widely. Slightly more than half the group was dedicated to a social cause (e.g., raising money to build wells in Africa, supporting cancer research, curbing gun violence, promoting adolescent health, and preserving the environment.) The other four youth were devoted to making progress toward other aims (e.g., creating jazz music, promoting conservative political ideals, sharing the important news of the day, and serving God). Table 1 features the exemplars' ages, purposeful interests, and pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a semistructured, case study–style interview protocol, the purpose exemplars were interviewed for approximately 3 hours every 2 years over the course of a 5-year period. The Youth Purpose Interview protocol (Bronk, Menon, & Damon, 2004b), which asked participants about the things that mattered most to them, was administered at Time 1. Data from Times 2 and 3 were collected using the Revised Youth Purpose Interview protocol (Andrews et al., 2006), which asked young people what had changed regarding their commitment to, reasons behind, and involvement in the things that mattered most to them since Time 1. Participants reflected on their reasons for becoming and staying involved in their various areas of interest. Youth gave their assent and, when appropriate, parents consented to having their children participate.

The grounded theory method, initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later elaborated upon by Strauss and Corbin (1998), provided a framework for the present study. This methodology is useful for inductively deriving, rather than testing, rich theoretical understandings directly from the data. As such, findings presented in this study should be viewed in light of that aim.

Means of carrying out grounded theory research vary. The present study employed the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965), which is an inductive method of discovery. The constant comparison method represents a process of continually redesigning the research in light of emerging codes, concepts, and relationships among the variables. As such, analysis began as soon as the first interviews were conducted and transcribed. Members of the research team read through transcripts noting themes and patterns that emerged first within participants and later across participants. In this way, the

Table 1. Participants Ages and Purposes

Age at T1	Noble purposes	Pseudonym
12	Raising money to build wells to provide clean drinking water to people in Third World countries	Well builder
15	Curbing gun-related and stopping arms proliferation	Gun control advocate
15	Influence political issues through journalism	Journalist
16	Cleaning up and preserving the environment	Environmentalist
17	Promoting adolescent health	Adolescent health advocate
18	Supporting and participating in cancer research	Cancer researcher
18	Living according to and spreading the word of God	Religious exemplar
18	Creating and promoting jazz music	Jazz musician
23	Encouraging support for conservative political ideals	Conservative politician

study utilized both idiographic and nomothetic approaches (Allport, 1962). These trends and patterns served as the basis for code generation. Emerging codes were applied to each transcript, and elaborations, refinements, and omissions were made as needed in order to ensure that the codes accurately described the data. Codes were then grouped into concepts based on the stage of development each described. Finally, concepts were linked to one another to develop a coherent theory of the development of purpose over time. Table 2 outlines the way in which codes were collapsed into broader concepts and linked with one another to develop a grounded theory of the development of noble purpose.

Results

Commitment emerged as the organizing structure in the development of noble purpose. As such, this theory identifies several major processes that link the development of noble purpose over time, including initiating commitment, sustaining commitment, escalating commitment, and evolving commitment. Patterns in terms of actions and events relevant to each of these processes were evident across participants. Unless otherwise noted,

Table 2. Codes and Concepts

Codes	Concepts
Initial commitments were minor, influenced by ecological factors, and inspired by early experience.	Initiating commitment
Commitments were sustained by passion, a match between skills and social needs, personal meaningfulness, and the ability to overcome challenges by approaching obstacles as opportunities, focusing on progress already made, learning from mistakes, believing that a solution was possible, and enacting new solutions to old problems.	Sustaining commitment
Commitments escalated as a result of positive feedback early on and support from like-minded peers and mentors later on.	Escalating commitment
Commitments evolved as exemplars discovered new ways of pursuing their interests, their focus expanded, they gained access to new opportunities and resources, and they experienced triggering events.	Evolving commitment

each of the following themes emerged in at least six of the nine participant interviews.

Initiating Commitment

Level of involvement. In terms of initiating commitment, three themes emerged across the sample. First, contrary to what might have been expected, the youth purpose exemplars did not initially jump wholeheartedly into their efforts. Though the exemplars eventually became intensely involved in their various areas of interest, their initial level of involvement was not particularly intense. For example, in reflecting on her first foray into cancer research, the cancer researcher said, "When I was I guess about five, my first experience with the American Cancer Society was . . . selling daffodils at the mall . . . The

program was Daffodil Days. It's a spring fundraiser." According to the American Cancer Society web site (2010) "millions" volunteer for programs such as Daffodil Days every year. As such, this young woman's early involvement was neither particularly intense nor noteworthy. Similarly, the religious exemplar said she first became involved in serving God through attending Sunday school. "My family is Christian. My parents and everything, so we'd been going to church . . . since I was ten. . . . Ever since then I've felt this drawing. I just felt a real connection." Likewise, the jazz musician started playing piano by taking lessons from a neighbor.

> I got into music when I was nine because my next door neighbor, N . . . had a piano and he taught me how to play Pink Panther and Greensleeves and stuff like that. My parents would always support my interests . . . so they offered piano lessons with the woman down the street. So I said "well, okay."

Despite their disparate interests, each of the exemplars described their initial commitments, to what would eventually become their noble purposes in life, as relatively minor in nature.

Ecological factors. Second, what the exemplars chose to commit to was influenced by ecological factors. In other words, it was no accident that the exemplars were drawn to the interests they were; their commitments were influenced by the culture and environment in which they lived. For instance, when we asked the environmentalist why she was interested in the environment rather than in some other cause or issue, she said,

> I guess because I live out here, really. Everything that is out here is what we use. We live off of our own water under our own land. . . . I think that's a big part of why environmental work is such a big deal, because I live out in the country. I live in the environment.

Hometown characteristics similarly influenced the cancer researcher's choice of purposes. "I'm from West Virginia where lung cancer, I think we're like 49th or 47th in the nation. It's a huge problem in the state. It's everywhere." Had the cancer researcher or the environmentalist grown up in different places, it is unlikely they would have made the commitments they did.

Resources and opportunities available in the exemplars' hometowns further shaped their choice of noble purpose. The well builder, for example, learned about the need for clean drinking water at school.

Really how I got started was in my Grade 1 classroom. . . . I went to a Catholic school, so each time around Lent, we would raise money for a charity of some sort. And that year we were saving money for developing countries. [The teacher said we needed to raise $70 to build a well.] She explained to us that people were dying because they didn't have clean water. And that just got through to me in a way.

Ecological factors in the young people's hometowns played a major role in determining the young people's noble purposes in life.

Inspiring narratives. In addition to the role of ecological factors, inspiring narratives also influenced the exemplars' initial involvement. For example, the cancer researcher vividly recalled meeting someone with cancer as she began her work with the Daffodil Days fundraising program and that encounter spurred her interest in further cancer fundraising efforts. In the same way, the conservative politician cited a love of freedom and patriotism as a central reason for his initial support of conservative political ideals. In two separate interviews, he told the following story regarding his initial interest in conservative ideals:

That pride in country developed early on. . . . The first time I went to Kiev, which was still part of the Soviet Union . . . I was wearing their warm-ups; they were, we traded, my dad made me trade my warm-ups, I was wearing their warm-ups, and so, you know, it says CCCP on the back, and whatever, and I was with a translator, and I was with other Russians and somebody asked if I was an American, like, "Is that one an American?" "Yeah, how'd you know?" And they said, "well, he walks like he's free. . . . [Americans] walk like they're free." . . . [This] was just amazing.

This youth believed that a conservative political orientation better supported freedom than a liberal one. A smaller government, he argued, allowed people to be freer. "The [Republican] party's ideals of individual responsibility, limited government, freedom—I think that the best government's a limited government, so in the political philosophy that's where I am."

For some of the exemplars, stories that inspired them were more negative in nature. For instance, the gun control advocate was motivated to pursue legal changes to gun laws based on a series of shootings that occurred near his house.

We had the Ennis Cosby shooting a block from our old elementary school. And we had the North Hollywood shootout where two bank

robbers took big military style assault riffles and shot 1,800 bullets in 45 minutes. That was right in our neighborhood, a couple of blocks down the road. Every time you drive past the bank you can't not think about it. And also when the school shootings started to happen, with Columbine, Jonesboro AK, Springfield OR, and you really realize that you couldn't be safe.

The story of these shootings served as a source of inspiration to act. Similarly the health advocate saw a commercial that inspired her initial engagement.

When I was 7, I saw this horrible TV advertisement showing this cancerous black lung, and it really spoke to me and I think it just shocked me that kids my age would start smoking and what that would do to them. So, I wrote this letter to the Texas Department of Health and started doing undercover sting buys when I was 10.

Life narratives, McAdams (1987) has argued, play an important role in defining who we are. In other words, important life stories reveal much about one's sense of self. Therefore, exemplars' purposeful narratives, whether positive or negative in nature, suggest their noble purposes are central to their developing sense of identity (Damon, 2008).

In sum, purposeful youth were initially inspired to become active in a relatively minor way, and their initial involvements were influenced both by inspiring stories and by opportunities and resources readily available to them.

Sustaining Commitment

Passion. Though the exemplars' initial level of engagement was minor, it grew and was sustained over a long period of time. Perhaps not surprisingly, we discovered that the exemplars thoroughly enjoyed being involved in pursuit of their aims, and they cited this as a central reason for remaining active. Finding that the exemplars thrived on engagement was expected. In fact, enjoyment is clearly related to, if not inherent in, our nomination criteria, which required that exemplars derive a sense of personal meaning from their purpose. However, we note this finding here because it clearly helped sustain the young people's commitment over time, and that was not a requirement of our nomination criteria. The journalist explained engagement in this way:

There is just this feeling that I get that, whether how much sleep or whatnot—and it's been there since, since I was like 11 years old. . . . It's like this feeling you get. You're really energized. It's just like opening your eyes and waking up. And, you know, every time I get that feeling, every time I work on [sharing news with others]. So it's that feeling that keeps—I think that's passion. . . . And that's the thing that continues to keep me going. Every time I talk about these issues, that's what really excites me.

The other exemplars, including the cancer researcher, talked about their commitment to their noble purposes in similar terms.

A couple of weeks ago I was at the Foundation until like 3 a.m. on a Friday night. And like Friday night is when, you know, people are out whatever having fun, but because I just like I loved it so much that I didn't care about anything else that was going—I mean, no, I shouldn't say anything. Other things were secondary because I really, really felt like this is what I want to be doing, and I know like to some extent how this is really going to be a great thing and how I care about this work that I'm doing, and that made me stay there until 3 a.m.. And so I feel like when you have a genuine passion for what you do and you genuinely care about like why you're doing it, you put so much more into it.

Clearly deriving pleasure from engagement was a central reason for continuing to be engaged over time.

Personal talents fill social needs. Many young people find activities they enjoy, but the unique thing about the exemplars was their ability to use their talents and interests to fill personally valued social needs. Damon (2008) notes that using one's natural skills to serve social aims is the essence of noble purpose and, in the case of the exemplars, this process played an important role in helping to sustain efforts over time. When the environmentalist was asked how she was able to stay committed to her work, she said pursuing environmental work helped her:

[Find] my place in the world. . . . To have found where I feel like I'm doing something for the place that I live, which is my world. Feeling like this is where I'm supposed to be, this is the job I'm supposed to be performing, and I'm benefiting these people . . . in the work I do. I'm helping someone else because of the abilities that I have. . . . There are things that I have to offer to this world.

Similarly, the journalist talked about how his purpose allowed him to use his talents in a useful way.

> [I recently read a New York Times article about] a concealed weapon law that's allowed hundreds of criminals who have confessed or pled no contest to felonies getting firearms. I can't help but feel that I've got ideas and I've got resources where I can help solve some of these problems, so why wouldn't I try?

Like the environmentalist and the journalist, each of the exemplars expressed a desire to fill a social need coupled with a belief that he or she possessed some special skill or ability required to do so, and this belief helped sustain the young people's commitments over time.

Action preceded meaning. Finding a way of putting their skills and talents to use to help fill social needs allowed the exemplars to derive meaning from their efforts. In other words, action preceded meaningfulness. It could have been the case that exemplars got involved in a particular effort because that effort was meaningful to them. But that was only the case for one of the exemplars: the well builder. Learning about the need for clean drinking water "got through" to him. However, even he said that as he got more involved in working on this effort, it took on greater meaning for him. For the rest of the exemplars, meaning was the result of, rather than the cause of action. As discussed above, their initial involvement tended to be minor in nature. However, once they became involved, the exemplars found that their talents made them particularly well suited to the work they were doing, and knowing that they were able to help address an important social need helped them derive meaning from their involvement. The environmentalist recognized this: "The environment is something that I've grown to love. . . . The environment is something that more came out of me, something that I took in and put my passions to because it was something I could connect with." In other words, she developed a "passion" for environmental work as a result of working on behalf of it. For each of the exemplars, like the environmentalist, a sense of meaning grew, almost organically, through involvement.

For other youth, such as the cancer researcher, meaning grew as a result of activity, because being engaged put them in contact with the people they were helping.

> When I heard about doing volunteer work for the American Cancer Society, nothing at that age hit me. . . . It was, "go sell daffodils at the mall to people." . . . It was fun. But when I started doing that I saw, I

just happened to directly see why I'm doing this. I just happened to meet [a cancer survivor].

This was the same for the jazz musician. He did not begin playing music because of what it allowed him to do for others, but through his playing he found that his music impacted others, and that made the pursuit more meaningful to him.

I guess my hope is that [my music] will excite other people. If I do something musically and I get really excited about it, it's going to give me motivation, and I'll feel like I'm doing something productive for myself. My hope is that other people will feel the same way.

Clearly for the jazz musician, and the other exemplars as well, finding a sense of meaning in what they were doing helped sustain their efforts over time.

Dealing with challenges. As expected, the exemplars encountered a variety of challenges in the course of pursuing their noble purposes. They learned to approach these obstacles with a positive attitude and to devise strategies that helped them overcome the challenges and persist.

Approaching challenges as opportunities emerged as an effective strategy for dealing with obstacles. Rather than giving up when challenges arose, the exemplars persevered. In fact, consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (1997), the exemplars professed an affinity for challenges in general and for dealing with the challenges in connection to their areas of interest in particular. For example, the environmentalist noted challenge as a central reason for sustaining her noble purpose: "I really enjoy being challenged . . . and for me, environmental science is a challenge." Similarly, the gun control advocate cited a love of challenge as a reason for staying committed to his efforts.

Even the council members who had supported [our motion to outlaw certain ammunition in city limits] in committee didn't vote for it on the floor. And council members who actually called our house and told us that they were going to support us decided to change [their votes at the last minute]. And we believe it was because M was working in the back room. But it was a challenge, and a lot of fun!

Like mastery-oriented learners (Dweck, 1999), the exemplars demonstrated a tendency to embrace challenges, which served to keep them on task despite inevitable obstacles.

Another strategy the exemplars used to deal with challenges was to make a concerted effort to remain focused on the progress they were able to achieve and on *why* they were doing what they were doing. For example, the cancer researcher said, when setbacks occurred she tried to, "appreciate, number one, what already has been done, and keep remembering why you're doing what you're doing." Similarly, the gun control advocate said, "You really do get frustrated and you want to throw in the towel. Why am I doing this, or whatever? But then when you really start to see who you're benefiting and the people who have suffered from the result of inaction, it really starts to hit home." In other words, this exemplar, like the cancer researcher and other exemplars, recognized what he had been able to accomplish, but at the same time realized there was more to do and focused on the important reasons for persevering.

Yet another strategy for dealing with challenges included a deep-rooted confidence that a solution could be found. This confidence allowed the exemplars to learn from their mistakes and keep progressing toward their ultimate aims. A strong sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1977) was a necessary prerequisite to learning from mistakes; because the young people believed they were capable of finding and enacting a solution, they persisted in their search for a way around the obstacle and accepted learning from mistakes as a natural path to eventual success. To most people, trying to find a way to provide clean drinking water to the millions of people who need it would seem like an overwhelming challenge. But, the well builder noted that his naïveté worked to his advantage in this regard. He started raising funds to provide clean drinking water to people in third world countries at a very young age.

> Well, when I was younger, especially when I was 6, I thought that the solution to this problem [would be easy to find, and then] that problem was solved. But now I realize that the problem is really, really complex. But I'm still glad that I was naïve because maybe none of this would have happened if I wasn't.

Believing that a solution was possible allowed the well builder to get started.

For other exemplars, a belief in their own ability to overcome their shortcomings was central to sustaining their engagement. When the environmentalist's efforts to launch an Earth Day event failed, she did not give up and decide that sponsoring such an event was beyond her means. Instead, she remained confident that with more funds the event could get underway the following year.

Last year with Enviro-Fair, our big Earth Day event, not having the funds, and then with not having the funds we didn't have enough presenters. So it was sort of like, well, we really need our Earth Day type idea, but we couldn't do it because it wasn't available for us to do it. So, you have to learn from them, though. So, it was well, maybe we should start now for next year's [Earth Day event] or we need to, I guess, go ahead and start working on the funds. Start talking to people about anybody who wants to sponsor us, that kind of thing. So it's definitely been, they're learning experiences, really, more than anything.

The environmentalist's comments point to a strong belief that in the future she could overcome the problems she had encountered in the past. Likewise, the cancer researcher cited a belief that she could overcome her shortcomings and be successful. She started college with a belief that nonprofit ventures alone could support health care research, and that an understanding of economics was tangential to this effort. However, as her college career got underway, she realized that economics and related financial issues were central to the study of health care management.

Finally, in my senior year of college, I had this revelation, like oops! Not only is [economics] not unimportant, but it's really important, and I think a lot of that actually is—I'm sure part of it is personally starting to understand the world more, understand how politics works, how the root of so many social problems is really based in all these economic issues.

This young woman had dropped an economics course in her first year of college believing it was difficult and irrelevant, but as she came to see economic issues as central to the study of health care, she acknowledged her mistake and reenrolled. She would not have been able to remedy this error, however, had she not believed she was capable of passing this difficult course. Interestingly, two years later we found her pursuing not only a medical degree but also a graduate degree in business. While many young people may have been discouraged to discover that an area of study in which they did not excel and in which they did not have much interest was central to an issue they cared about, this young woman was not. Instead, she, like the other exemplars, remained convinced that she could overcome her academic shortcomings to gain the skills needed to pursue her noble purpose. In doing so, she also demonstrated a sense of efficacy that spurred her commitment.

Finally, the last strategy that emerged for effectively dealing with challenges was a willingness to enact novel solutions to old problems. Each of the exemplars, in one way or another, acted as a trailblazer. Demonstrating this, the health advocate said,

> I just don't know what [my future job] will look like yet. I mean, I have grand visions of—there's something called the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in England, which is the ideal job for me. So starting something like that with the U.S. government would be very cool. But that still seems much more abstract, obviously. . . . I'm definitely doing one of the more risky things. . . . I'm totally in uncharted territory.

In addition to creating their own professional spaces, the exemplars talked about the importance of devising creative solutions to existing obstacles. For example, the gun control advocate became deeply frustrated that he could not get the city council candidates to discuss the issue of gun control. It was a divisive issue in his hometown and all the candidates, regardless of their stance, preferred to ignore it. In order to push the issue, this teenager, who was too young to run himself, convinced his mother to run for office. The goal was not that she win the position, but rather that her presence in the race—and specifically in the debates—would force the other candidates to discuss their positions on the issue. The innovative solution worked. Similarly, when the well builder discovered that raising money to build a well cost much more than he could earn through doing chores around the house, he came up with a novel fundraising strategy. He recruited youth to help.

> We gave them the money saying "here's this to drill a well." And they told me, "You know R, it's going to cost a lot more than $70 to build a well. Seventy dollars will only buy the hand pump to go on top. It will cost $2,000 to drill the well." So when they told me that, I just said I would do more chores. Then when I got to around $1,000 I realized that I couldn't do this by vacuuming. So I started to do speeches and presentations [to the children at my school and later at the other elementary schools in my hometown].

Deriving pleasure and meaning from engagement along with a wide range of strategies for dealing with setbacks, including embracing challenges, focusing on prosocial motivators, maintaining confidence in an eventual resolution, and enacting novel solutions, all functioned to help the exemplars remain committed over time.

Escalating Commitment

The exemplars' commitment did not just continue over time; it escalated. While involvement tended to increase and decrease depending on the other things going on in the exemplars' lives, on the whole, levels of commitment rose over the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood. This finding is supported by research on purpose among more typical samples of adolescents and emerging adults as well (Bronk, 2010; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). Commitment grew in response to positive feedback and as a result of relationships with like-minded peers and mentors.

Positive feedback. Positive feedback played an important role, especially early on, in increasing the young people's commitments (Moran, 2009), though what constituted positive feedback varied by exemplar. For example, the gun control advocate noted,

> Once we started going [to city council meetings] and realized that people were listening and that we could actually make some kind of change, I think that drove us even more because we knew that we could be successful and we don't have to be adults. We don't have to be the age of our parents or we don't have to be in high school to be successful. So I think for us that was a big push because we realized we could do something that people would take notice of and it would make a difference.

In this case, the ability to have an impact served as positive feedback. For the jazz musician, positive feedback took the form of public recognition.

> I didn't know anybody else who played jazz piano and took it as seriously as I did. . . . I got a lot of recognition. A lot of people appreciated me and a lot of people—I identified with it. "Oh, who's that guy?" "Oh, that's Pascal. He plays jazz piano." I didn't get "oh, that's Pascal, he's good at math."

Similarly, for the health advocate recognition served as an important source of positive feedback.

> I've probably stayed [committed] as a result of seeing what I'm able to do . . . The commitment was there, especially when you had strong reception from other people. When we were first starting out, we had people that were congratulating you and things like that.

Positive feedback, in a variety of forms, served as an important source of motivation that spurred commitment, especially early on.

Like-minded peers. Over time, relationships became more important in supporting the growth of the exemplars' commitments. Whether intentional or serendipitous, each of the exemplars managed to find a network of like-minded peers, and having access to such a group helped grow their commitments over time. The exemplars' long-term commitments would not have been as noteworthy had they consistently acted in supportive communities. However, in each case the youth encountered communities that did not share—and in many cases even opposed—their interests. Adolescence is typically marked by a desire to fit in, but that was not the case with these youth. They acted even when it was not the popular course of action. For example, the health advocate said, "There wasn't a lot of support in my high school among the peers for the things that [I was] doing." The jazz musician had a similar experience. He spent considerable time pursuing his musical interests, but most of his friends did not share his passion and often chastised him for spending time on his music rather than with them.

> It was really hard in high school because . . . I had some really solid friends that aren't musicians. . . . A lot of people are, I think, overshadowed by my music [and] . . . have trouble realizing that, oh I can't go out, I can't go bowling with you because I have to practice. People think, "oh, he obviously doesn't like me because he's staying home to practice, that's boring."

Like the jazz musician and the health advocate, the conservative politician also remained dedicated despite not only a lack of support but also an open hostility toward his beliefs. His commitment to promoting conservative politics on one of the most liberal college campuses in the nation was noteworthy. Similarly, the environmentalist promoted an environmental message in a conservative town, where she was often teased for her activities. "We're the tree huggers at school. We're the only environmental people who stand out really, I guess. So we get called tree hugger all the time."

One way the young people's commitment grew, despite a lack of broad popular support, was through access to supportive communities of like-minded peers (Bronk, 2008; Damon, 2008). The health advocate, for instance, sought out a group of youth who shared her concerns.

I think a lot of [my commitment's growth over time] has to do with finding other young people, like with the tobacco movement, getting to the national scene. In 1998 I helped start the National Truth Campaign, but with 99 other youth from around the country. . . . There was a larger movement of people out there who also had the same belief.

The health advocate talked about how her belief in the importance of curbing smoking among youth grew as a result of the time she spent with this group. Similarly, the conservative politician also sought out a like-minded group. Once on the liberal UC Berkeley campus, he discovered a small cadre of similarly minded Republicans and quickly bonded with the group.

I went to Berkeley and it just sort of happened. And there were other people starting a [Republican] club at Berkeley and then really getting it going. They were really passionate about it. And then I liked them and so I jumped on board with them.

This group encouraged and supported the conservative politician's bid for a college office, thereby increasing his commitment to his ideals.

For other exemplars, a ready-made community of youth with similar interests did not exist or was not available. These youth, then, had to create such a network. For example, because his friends at school did not share his interests, the jazz musician created a new friendship network.

I didn't come [to high school] at lunch time because I was only at school for two classes. I'd go to San Francisco for this big band solo every week and I'd go to Monterey sometimes . . . so I managed to become really solid friends with my bass player.

Over time, his growing group of musical associates eclipsed his other friendship networks. When it came time to decide where to go to college, having a network of like-minded peers made it easier for him to increase his commitment to music by attending a musical college. And, when he arrived at school, he found that his network of like-minded peers had grown so large that he already knew half of his freshman class. Whether through encountering a ready-made group or through creating a group, having access to like-minded peers helped increase the exemplars' level of commitment over time.

Mentors. Mentors also fostered an increased level of commitment over time. Becoming intensely engaged in a new area required help from a more highly skilled or more deeply knowledgeable individual. Not surprisingly then, each of the exemplars identified at least one more experienced individual who served as an important source of guidance, support, and counsel. The exemplars tended to have long-term, close-knit relationships with their mentors. For example, the conservative politician talked about a high school history teacher who inspired his interest in politics. During his college years, the exemplar and this teacher remained close and spoke often. In speaking about his mentor, the conservative politician said,

> He was very passionate about [politics] and he really wanted to change lives too. . . . He believed in me like no one. It still just boggles my mind the way he believed in me. At his funeral, I gave a eulogy. . . . I gave the eulogy on how this guy, this man, affected my life and he was like a father to me in a lot of ways.

In this case, the conservative politician's mentor was a personal friend who introduced him to the world of politics. This individual served as his mentor much longer than he served as his teacher. Most of the other exemplars had similar experiences. For example, the health advocate was involved in a variety of antismoking efforts. With each of these activities, she established a relationship with an adult who served as an important mentor, but when she moved on to a new activity, her relationship with that particular mentor did not end. Instead, that individual continued to serve as a source of advice and guidance, and over time her pool of mentors grew providing her with a vast source of counsel regarding her area of interest. Reflecting on the importance of mentor relationships in helping to support and grow her commitment, the health advocate said,

> That nonparental role is really valuable. [They're] not just mentors, but friends. I mean, I'm going to be in the wedding of one of my first mentors, and we just happen to be great friends. . . . She's one of the directors of the local partnerships units of the American Cancer Society. She's probably been my biggest mentor and ally over the years.

Receiving positive feedback helped the youths' commitments take root. Once that happened, however, it was the supportive relationships with like-minded peers and mentors that served to increase their commitments over the long term.

Evolving Commitment

The adolescent and emerging adulthood life stages are characterized by a series of transitions: from elementary school to middle school, to high school, to tertiary education, and eventually into the work force. At each of these junctures the youth purpose exemplars, like other youth their age, met new people, encountered new experiences, and accessed new resources. Each of these transitions offered opportunities for their commitments to evolve.

Changing means. One of the ways in which the exemplars' commitments evolved included finding new ways of achieving the same aim. Purpose is, by definition, one's ultimate aim, and that aim did not change with time or in spite of transitions. However, the means the exemplars used to make progress toward their ultimate aims did change. For example, the religious exemplar's ultimate aim was to serve God, but that meant different things at different stages of her life. During adolescence, she felt she served God best by obeying her parents and studying the Bible. In emerging adulthood, service to God meant studying hard to prepare for a career that she felt called by God to perform.

> Right now I feel like [school] is the key to get me to where I need to be in life. I mean, my ultimate goal, I think when we talked about this last time, was serving God, and doing what he wants me to do is what I really, really wanted to do. I felt like that would be a doctor. So this is definitely the key to get there. I feel like right now, that's the long-term goal. The short-term goal right is graduating with good grades.

The religious exemplar felt that her means of serving God necessarily changed over time. Similarly, the gun control advocate maintained a commitment to curbing violence, but similarly, his means of working toward that aim changed. During adolescence he promoted safety by trying to outlaw the sale of ammunition in his hometown, but in college promoting safety meant advocating for international nonproliferation laws.

> I will always be working on this issue of gun control, dealing with the issue of violence, no matter what I do. And it doesn't necessarily have to be through my organization. . . . I have been inspired to pursue a course in public service; I just don't know which direction that's going to take me or what that's going to look like. . . . Whichever way I feel I can make the biggest difference on the issue I care about, that's the course I'm going to take.

The gun control advocate, like the other exemplars, recognized that the means he used to achieve his ultimate aim changed over time. "There's no question that I want to address these security challenges. It's just about the avenue that I'd want to pursue to do that."

Expanding focus. Another way the exemplars' commitments evolved was in terms of their specific focus. While their ultimate aims remained the same, their particular focuses consistently expanded. For example, the environmentalist started out with a concern for a local environmental problem, but five years later her concerns had broadened. In her teens she founded an oil recycling program cleverly named Don't be Crude. By the time she was in her 20s she said,

> When it was Don't be Crude, it was all about one thing. It was about oil recycling. It was about making a difference in the place that I lived. . . . Now when I look at the environment there's so many things. . . . Oil will always be my big passion because it was my debut thing. . . . . That will always be a big thing for me because it's something I started out with and it's what I know the most about. But, at the same time, there's so many different things that come with the environmental world: recycling, composting, little things that people don't realize.

Oil recycling initially engaged this youth, but once active her focus on environmental issues expanded. Similarly, the health advocate insightfully reflected on the evolution of her own commitment over time.

> I think the consistent thing that links everything together is the concept of participation, but I've understood it in very different ways over time. So the first, when I was doing tobacco work, was about more young people need to be involved in this movement. . . . And then the next iteration at [my own nonprofit] was saying, "Hey, the issue doesn't really matter. Young people should be involved in any decision that affects their lives." . . . That's what led me to the organizational change approach. . . . It's more about organizational change and cultures and institutions that hold power and don't really want to distribute it to young people. . . . From there it isn't a far jump to see where I've gotten involved in good governance, . . . participatory policy making. That's just a broader strand of the same idea.

As with the other exemplars, each of these changes in focus coincided with a transition. Antismoking activities occupied the health advocate's time

while she was in elementary and middle school, but with the transition to high school she became more keenly aware of the limited role youth play in policy decisions. Therefore, she founded an organization designed to include youth voices in policy discussions that impact youth. Following a series of college classes, however, her thinking evolved again and she began to focus on organizational change more broadly. Finally, during her international graduate experience, her interests broadened still more to include a focus on "good governance." Many of the exemplars' commitments evolved in lock step with transitions tied to the adolescent and emerging adult life stages.

Accessing new resources and opportunities. Transitions are typically accompanied by access to new resources, and having access to new resources influenced the ways in which the exemplars' commitments grew over time. For example, after a few years the well builder had raised literally millions of dollars to build hundreds of wells and other water projects in third world countries. Not surprisingly, the media and others took notice of this youth's impressive achievements, and the youth began to receive invitations to serve as a motivational speaker. His commitment to providing clean drinking water did not diminish, but he realized that he was now in a position to encourage other people to reflect on the ways they could use their talents and skills to help others. His nonprofit organization adopted a new, three-pronged approach to its efforts: building wells, educating people on basic sanitation, and motivating others to use their personal talents and skills to make a difference in the world. "The third [goal], I think this is actually the most important, is motivation. Just motivating people, no matter who they are or where they come from, just make a difference in the world in their own way."

As a general rule, the exemplars' commitments expanded as the individuals gained access to new opportunities. However, the religious exemplar serves as an important negative case. Her interests did not expand over the course of late adolescence and emerging adulthood, in part anyway, due to her failure to take advantage of new resources and opportunities. In high school the religious exemplar lived in an environment that supported and encouraged her religious commitment, but when she moved away for college, she was no longer immersed in such an environment. Presumably a religious community existed at the large state university she attended, but she did not reach out to it, and not taking advantage of the resources at her college stymied the development of her religious commitment.

> There's a part of me that thinks maybe if my boyfriend [who is not particularly religious] moves away [then] my focus will switch back to God mainly, and I'll start going to church more and being more

involved with church functions and church people and stuff. Right now [my boyfriend's friends] are my friends and I'm hanging out with them. None of his friends are really Christian, church type people.

Later in the same interview she noted that her relationship with God was "stalled." It had not grown because she had not found a community that supported or fostered it.

My pastor, ever since he met me he knew there was something different about me. Everyone that I've known from home they'd always be like, "There's something special about you." . . . Just being around that environment. It's really important who you listen to.

The fact that the religious exemplar did not take advantage of the resources available in her new environment hampered the growth of noble purpose. Though this is a negative case, it further supports the main finding: accessing new resources led to evolutions in commitment, and the failure to access new resources was associated with a lack of evolution in commitment.

Triggering experiences. Finally, the last way the exemplars' commitments evolved was through triggering experiences, or significant events in their lives. In most cases, these experiences were intertwined with mentor relationships. For the conservative politician, his commitment to conservative political ideals intensified dramatically when his mentor helped him secure a job with a conservative think tank. Likewise, the cancer researcher's commitment to health issues intensified and shifted when her mentor made her aware of pending legislative changes that would have taken money awarded to the state to treat lung cancer and allotted the money to the state's general fund to support road construction. The cancer researcher mobilized her friends to fight this change, and she won. Along these same lines, the jazz musician's commitment to his music deepened and evolved each time he encountered a new teacher and mentor.

R, the trumpet player, teaches at [the local community college], played in [a well-known] band. He taught us how to improvise. He taught us the theory. He picked us up and threw us. He really helped our development. Without him I don't think we would have—see, we had the enthusiasm but we didn't have the direction and he gave us the direction that allowed us to excel.

For the religious exemplar, an experience associated with a mentor relationship served as a triggering event and deepened her commitment early

on as well. When asked why she wanted to become a doctor and serve low-income patients, she explained,

> Because I want to, well, it was prophesized over me when I was younger, when I turned 15, at my quinceañera. . . . It's like a 15th birthday celebration for Hispanic, in Hispanic cultures. It's like a coming of age thing in the Hispanic culture. . . . [My pastor prophesized that] God was going to use me there. . . . I was like, "wow, this is weird! I was thinking that. . . . He prophesized to exactly what I was thinking."

In sum, with one exception the exemplars' commitments evolved and expanded over time. Triggering experiences and access to new resources played key roles in these changes.

Discussion

This study yielded a grounded theory of youth purpose. Accordingly, results revealed that the young purpose exemplars initially made relatively minor commitments, based on the opportunities available to them. Deriving pleasure and a deep sense of meaningfulness from engagement in their noble purposes coupled with the ability to devise useful strategies for overcoming challenges (e.g., thriving on challenge, focusing on prosocial motivators, remaining confident in an eventual solution, and using novel tactics to solve old problems) helped the exemplars sustain their commitments. Over time, commitments grew. Initially growth was due in large part to positive feedback, but later on growth was fostered by supportive networks of like-minded peers and mentors. Finally, commitments evolved. While the ultimate aims remained the same, the means of achieving those aims often changed. The particular focus of the exemplars' activities shifted as they accessed new resources and encountered triggering experiences.

Viewed in the broader context of adolescent and emerging adult development, it is clear that a noble purpose in life plays an important role in healthy identity development. Who the exemplars hoped to become was largely influenced by what they hoped to accomplish in their lives. In other words, for the purpose exemplars, their sense of self was intricately intertwined with their sense of purpose. Of course this is not the case for most youth; research finds only about 20% of young people possess a noble purpose in life (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). However this finding suggests an interesting possible model for purpose development. Just as moral exemplars have been found to have a sense of self that is closely

aligned with their moral concerns (Blasi, 1984; Colby & Damon, 1992), it may well be the case that a strong sense of noble purpose is the result of a close alignment of one's sense of self and one's ultimate aims in life. Empirical tests of this are needed.

While this study sheds new insight into the development and maintenance of noble purpose over time, it is not without its limitations. For example, the noble purpose exemplars reflected on the development of their commitments, and memory can be flawed. Ideally, the study would have featured individuals who were in the midst of actually discovering a noble purpose for their lives and followed these individuals over time. However, given the relatively rare nature of noble purpose (e.g., only 20% of youth demonstrate a clear purpose in life; Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009) and the even rarer nature of noble purpose exemplars, this constraint could not realistically have been avoided as it would have been impossible to predict which interests would turn into noble purposes and which youth would become noble purpose exemplars. It is also important to keep in mind that the qualitative methods used in this study serve as a tool for theory development, rather than testing, and this leads to limitations with regard to the generalizability of the findings. We can be certain that this theory describes the development and maintenance of purpose for *some* young people, but we cannot predict how prevalent this pattern is among *all* purposeful youth. That said, it seems likely to expect that the process of developing and sustaining a noble purpose is similar regardless of the relative intensity of that noble purpose.

Limitations not withstanding, several important implications can be drawn from this emerging portrait of noble purpose. First, context matters. All of these young people were influenced by the culture in which they grew up and the concerns and opportunities afforded by their hometowns. Had they grown up in different places, they likely would not have made the commitments they did. Context also played an important role in determining how commitments were sustained over time. When environments featured supportive networks, noble purposes appeared to grow, and when they did not, commitments stalled. As adults concerned about the welfare of young people, it is important to keep this in mind. While like-minded peers and mentors in this study did not provide the motivation for purpose, they did support the youths' search for noble purposes and they helped make youth aware of opportunities for furthering their involvement. This finding underscores the need for adults to remain vigilant of youths' budding, noble interests and to support and even "fan the flames" (Damon, 2008) whenever feasible.

Second, results suggest that the exemplars' involvement increased during the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood. A similar trend has

emerged in studies of more typical forms of noble purpose (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). We further argue that this trend seems likely to continue throughout adulthood. As these young people enter early adulthood strongly committed to their noble purposes, they are likely to make decisions regarding careers, hobbies, places to live, and perhaps even spouses with this commitment in mind. These choices, while they can change, are likely to set the young adult on a trajectory that offers less room for movement. In other words, emerging adults with a strong noble purpose in life are likely to become adults whose lives are built around their noble purposes. Of course, empirical research is needed to confirm this, but if it does hold up, then it would underscore the importance of intervening during childhood and adolescence, rather than later in the lifespan, to support the development of noble purpose (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Finch, & Talib, 2010).

Third, according to the exemplars, they would not have discovered noble purposes in the areas they did had they not been involved in those areas early on, often as children. As parents, teachers, and other adults interested in fostering noble purpose among youth then, it is important to expose young people to a wide variety of activities. It is impossible to predict which activities, if any, are likely to inspire a lifelong commitment, but without exposure, noble purpose seems doubtful. This suggestion is further supported by the finding that action preceded meaningfulness. Youth may not be overly excited about an activity early on, but through the course of their involvement they may discover a talent or skill that makes them particularly well qualified to fulfill a personally valued social need. When that occurs, it seems plausible that noble purpose will develop. This hypothesis is supported by a significant body of service-learning research that concludes that even obligatory "volunteer work" can produce positive developmental outcomes (e.g., see Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Boss, 1994; Miron, Moely, McFarland, & Mercer, 2002; Raman & Pashupati, 2002).

Finally, a substantial body of research suggests that noble purpose contributes to positive youth development (e.g., see Benson, 2006; Bundick et al., 2009; Seligman, 2002, for a fuller discussion of the relationship between noble purposes and optimal development), but few researchers have attempted to explain the mechanism through which this occurs. Those who have, generally point to the motivational pull of noble purposes. Forming a prosocial commitment, they argue, draws young people along in a positive direction. In other words, a noble purpose in life serves as a beacon guiding youth through the potentially turbulent waters of the adolescent and emerging adult stages of life (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). While this certainly seems likely, it does not appear to be the whole story. Results of the present study find that having

access to supportive networks, which typically include both mentors and like-minded peers, was key to an increase in commitments over time. In the case of the exemplars, the young people appeared to gain not only practical information from these individuals but also a sense of being supported and valued. Together mentors and like-minded peers composed positive developmental contexts that likely supported not only the development of noble purpose but also the healthy development of these young people.

References

Allport, G. (1962). The general and the unique in psychological science. *Journal of Personality, 30*, 405-422.

American Cancer Society. (2010). *Volunteer information*. Retrieved from http:www.cancer.org

Andrews, M. C., Bundick, M. J., Jones, A., Bronk, K. C., Mariano, J. L., & Damon, W. (2006). *Youth purpose interview, version 2006*. Unpublished manuscript.

Aristotle. (1962). *Nichomachean ethics* (M. Ostwald, Trans.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Original work published 350 B.C.E.)

Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). *How service learning affects students*. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory.* New York: General Learning Press.

Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school and community*. San Francisco, CA: Western Regional Center for Drug Free Schools and Communities. Far West Laboratory.

Benson, P. L. (2006). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Blasi, A. (1984). Moral identity: Its role in moral functioning. In W.M. Kurtines & J.L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Morality, moral behavior, and moral development* (pp. 129 -139). New York, NY: Wiley.

Bobek, D. L., Zaff, J., Li, Y., & Lerner, R. M. (2009). Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of civic action: Towards an integrated measure of civic engagement. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 30*, 615-627.

Boss, J. A. (1994). The effect of community service work on the moral development of college ethics students. *Journal of Moral Education, 23*, 183-198.

Bronk, K. C. (2008). Humility among adolescent purpose exemplars. *Journal of Research on Character Education, 6*(1), 35-51.

Bronk, K. C., Finch, W. H., & Talib, T. (2010). The prevalence of a purpose in life among high ability adolescents. *High Ability Studies, 21*(2), 133-145.

Bronk, K. C., Hill, P., Lapsley, D. K., Finch, H., & Talib, T. (2010). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*, 500-510.

Bronk, K. C., Menon, J. L., & Damon, W. (2004a). *Youth purpose: Conclusions from a working conference of leading scholars*. West Conshohocken, PA: John Templeton Foundation Press.

Bronk, K. C., Menon, J., & Damon, W. (2004b). *Youth purpose interview*. Unpublished manuscript.

Bundick, M. J., Yeager, D. Y., King, P., & Damon, W. (2009). Thriving across the life span. In W. F. Overton & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of lifespan human development*. New York, NY: Wiley.

Burrows, A. L. (2010, March). *The role of purpose in youths' daily lives*. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Philadelphia, PA.

Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Cote, J. E., & Levine, C. G. (2002). *Identity formation, agency, and culture: A social psychological synthesis*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. (1967). An experimental study in exisninetialism: The psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of noogenic neurosis. In V. E. Frankl (Ed.), *Psychotherapy and exisninetialism* (pp. 183-197). New York, NY: Washington Square Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping children find their calling in life*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(3), 119-128.

Debats, D. L. (1998). Measurement of personal meaning: The psychometric properties of the life regard index. In P. T. P. Wong & P. S. Fry (Eds.), *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications* (pp. 237-259). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.

Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.

Emmons, R. A. (1999). *The psychology of ultimate concerns: Motivation and spirituality in personality*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, NY: Norton.

Fischman, W., Schutte, D., Solomon, B., & Lam, G. W. (2001). The development of an enduring commitment to service work. In M. Michaelson & J. Nakamura (Eds.), *Supportive frameworks for youth engagement* (pp. 33-44). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

French, S., & Joseph, S. (1999). Religiosity and it's association with happiness, purpose in life, and self-actualization. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture, 2*(2), 117-120.

Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems, 12*, 436-445.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* New York: Aldine Publishing Company.

Keyes, C. L. M., Shmotkin, D., & Ryff, C. D. (2002). Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*, 1007-1022.

King, L. A., Hicks, J. A., & Krull, J., & Del Gaiso, A. K. (2006). Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90*, 179-196.

Kish, G. B., & Moody, D. R. (1989). Psychopathology and life purposes. *International Forum for Logotherapy, 12*(1), 40-45.

Maslow, A. (1971). *The farther reaches of human nature*. New York, NY: The Viking Press.

Masten, A. S., & Reed, M. G. J. (2002). Resilience in development. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 74-88). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

McAdams, D. P. (1987). A life-story model of identity. *Perspectives in Personality, 2*, 15-50.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). Generativity in midlife. In M. Lachman (Ed.), *Handbook of midlife development* (pp. 395-443). New York, NY: Wiley.

Miron, D., Moely, B. E., McFarland, M., & Mercer, S. (2002). Changes in college students' attitudes and intentions for civic involvement as a function of service-learning experiences. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 8*(2), 15-26.

Moran, S. (2009). Purpose: Giftedness in intrapersonal intelligence. *High Ability Studies, 20*, 143-159.

Raman, P., & Pashupati, K. (2002). Turning good citizens into even better ones: The impact of program characteristics and motivations on service learning outcomes. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, 10*, 187-206.

Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*, 719-727.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Shek, D. T. (1993). The Chinese purpose-in-life test and psychological well-being in Chinese college students. *International Forum for Logotherapy, 16*(1), 35-42.

Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., & Oishi, S. (2008). Being good by doing good: Daily eudaimonic activity and well-being. *Journal of Research in Personality, 42*(1), 22-42.

Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Meaning in life across the lifespan: Levels and correlates of meaning in life from adolescence to older adulthood. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(1), 43-52.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Bio

Kendall Cotton Bronk is assistant professor of educational psychology at Ball State University. She earned her doctorate and completed a 2-year postdoc at Stanford University under the guidance of William Damon. Her research interests center on the intersection of moral development and positive youth development, and for the past 10 years she has explored these issues through the lens of youth purpose.