

Finding the Good Life: How Positive Psychology Can Help College Students to Discover and Utilize their Personal Strengths and Virtues—An Interview with Matthew J. Bundick

Interview by Debora L. Liddell, Contributing Editor, University of Iowa¹

About Matthew J. Bundick

Matthew Bundick is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in educational psychology, specializing in adolescent development, at Stanford University's School of Education, and serves as a researcher in the Stanford Center on Adolescence. Prior to his doctoral studies, he took an undergraduate degree in psychology, and earned master's degrees in social/personality psychology and higher education. He worked for a number of years as an academic advisor and career counselor at the University of Pittsburgh. Following completion of his doctorate, Matthew will serve as a postdoctoral fellow in the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Transitions to Adulthood.

You've been involved in a number of studies related to positive psychology, personal virtues, and purpose. What can you tell us about your research?

My research focuses broadly on positive development and psychological well-being in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, with much of my current work concentrating on the structure, function, and development of purpose in life. Purpose is a complex construct that has been conceptualized in a number of different ways in the research literature (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003; Steger, 2009). Based on my work with my mentor Bill Damon and our colleagues in the Stanford Center on Adolescence, we posit that purpose refers to an abstract, identity-relevant life goal that is both personally meaningful as well as intended to benefit some aspect of the world beyond oneself. In its fullest sense, one's purpose acts as a moral beacon (Moran, in press), providing direction for one's life decisions and actions. In one of my ongoing studies, I am addressing the ways in which understanding one's purpose, feeling purposeful, believing in one's ability to achieve one's purpose, and acting purposefully come together to provide a deeper understanding of how purpose operates in young people's lives.

In particular, I am interested in how educational institutions, especially colleges and universities, might foster purpose. In one study I recently conducted with my colleague David Yeager, we found that young people who had career aspirations that were motivated by the desire to benefit the world in some way were more likely to see both their current schoolwork and their lives on the whole as more meaningful (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). These results suggest that

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educators might play a role in helping adolescents make the connections between such purposeful aspirations and the role their schooling plays toward achieving them.

In another ongoing study, I am testing whether a one-time “purpose intervention” might serve to enhance certain aspects of purpose. In this intervention study, a group of college students engaged in a one-on-one conversation with me or one of my colleagues in which they were asked to reflect deeply upon and discuss what is most important to them in their lives, what kinds of life goals they may have identified, in what ways they might be pursuing these life goals, and in what ways they believe their skills and talents might uniquely benefit the world. The preliminary data suggest that those who had engaged in this purposeful discussion—compared to those who had not—felt and acted more purposefully up to two years later. Though the intervention needs to be refined and in an ideal world would occur at many intervals rather than at just one time, I am encouraged that the results highlight the potential importance of providing adolescents and emerging adults with opportunities to reflect upon and discuss their purposeful intentions and pursuits in life.

How did you become interested in this topic and this line of research?

My interest in understanding how young people think about and develop a sense a purpose in their lives stems directly from my experience working with college students. Despite calls for a more transformative, liberal approach to higher education (e.g., Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007) and the desire of many students to discuss larger issues dealing with purpose and meaning (Astin, 2004), opportunities for these discussions are scarce in most higher education institutions. It seems we should be facilitating occasions to reflect upon what beyond earning a degree and landing a job students hope to accomplish with their lives, how they might derive meaning from their careers and other involvements, and in what ways they might contribute to the world through those endeavors. As an academic advisor and career counselor, I felt a certain responsibility to prompt students to think critically about these larger issues. I cannot say to what extent my efforts met with success (though anecdotally I can say that most students appreciated simply being asked about and having the opportunity to discuss such things); nonetheless, my experience in that setting provided the impetus for me to understand better the psychological and developmental underpinnings of purpose through my current academic pursuits.

What do you think your research findings say to researchers who are working on issues related to the development of character? What advice do you have for scholars working in this area?

Three things come to mind. First, we have found in our research on purpose that it is essential to ask the “why” question, which may be done most effectively via interview methodologies which permit deeper probing. Suppose we are interested in understanding college students’ career aspirations. Without asking *why* one aspires to a given career, we might inaccurately assume that something about the content of that career reflects one’s motivation behind that aspiration.

So you think that understanding what motivates us is important?

Absolutely. For example, we have found in our interviews that some young people aspire to become doctors not so much because they want to help people but instead because they desire power, prestige, and money; while others aspire to become Wall Street bankers not because their ultimate aim is to make money for personal gain but instead because they wish to provide as

much financial support as possible to their extended families living in impoverished neighborhoods or countries. Understanding what the different motivations are (toward the same end) is directly relevant to developing purpose.

Second, it is important for social science researchers to exercise great care in choosing measures that properly operationalize their conceptualizations of the constructs they intend to measure, especially when employing survey methodologies. In the literature related to purpose in life, there are some instruments that purport to measure meaning in life but focus primarily on the identification of a life purpose. There are other instruments which claim to measure purpose in life which only tap into a general sense of meaning. Similarly, in the resilience literature, despite similar labels, some measures assess the personality trait of resiliency, while others are intended to get at the resilience process. Perhaps the first step then is for researchers to be as clear as possible about their conceptualization of their construct of interest.

Third, though it is a well-worn sentiment, I think it is hard to understate the importance of employing mixed-methods when assessing complex psychological constructs, such as purpose and meaning. As I noted earlier, it is difficult to understand the full depth of one's purposeful aspirations and goal pursuits without having the opportunity to ask "why" (and follow-up "why") questions. At the same time, it is more efficient and perhaps more analytically practical to measure the degree to which one feels one's life is generally meaningful via a set of questionnaire items. In the absence of more than one assessment method, important information may get missed.

And what about our practitioner colleagues? What do your findings suggest to practitioners who are working with college students?

I am hopeful that my research prompts some interest among and perhaps provides some justification for student affairs practitioners to introduce the concept of purpose into conversations with their students. This research could be applicable to a variety of professionals on campus: academic advisors, career counselors, residential life professionals, community service coordinators, judicial affairs practitioners. When we can steer talented yet troubled students toward engagement in prosocial activities, they might come to understand how their skills can be more positively applied to making the world a better place. Moreover, I would argue that faculty can act as igniters of the sparks of purpose in their students (as perhaps best evinced by Randy Pausch in his "Last Lecture"; Pausch, 2007). Administrators can play vital roles in helping students to think about purpose by seeking to integrate academic and student affairs communities while building campus-wide cultures around essential liberal education outcomes that include purpose. Broadly speaking, I hope to add fuel to the argument that college not only can be but *should* be transformative in both the cognitive and non-cognitive realms, and that practitioners at all levels should play a role in helping young people reach their full potential.

Where does this work go from here?

I believe the research on purpose interventions has great potential—the intervention I used in my initial study was somewhat post-hoc in nature and requires development, such as possibly adding self-understanding (Damon & Hart, 1982), self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001), and hope enhancement (Snyder, 2000) components, and I would like to test it in a real-world setting such as a counseling office. I am also interested in the roles of purpose and meaning, along with perspective-taking and empathy, in understanding civic engagement and socially responsible pursuits in emerging adulthood.

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