Searching for a sense of purpose: The role of parents and effects on self-esteem among female adolescents

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Sense of purpose
Parent–child relationships
Self-esteem

Abstract

Achieving a sense of purpose during adolescence is a developmental asset; however, searching for that purpose may be a developmental stressor. Supportive parent–child relationships may help youth during this stressful experience. The present study included 207 female students in the sixth, eighth, and tenth grades from two competitive private schools. Searching for purpose negatively predicted self-esteem. Hierarchical linear regression examined moderating effects of parental trust and alienation on searching for purpose as a predictor of self-esteem. Parental alienation significantly moderated the association between search for purpose and girls’ self-esteem; conversely, parental trust did not moderate the association. Results suggest that parent–child relationships characterized by high levels of parental alienation may exacerbate the pernicious effects of search for purpose. Person-based analyses found four clusters corresponding to Foreclosed Purpose, Diffused Purpose, Uncommitted Purpose/Moratorium, and Achieved Purpose. We discuss implications for practice and research based on these results.

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Positive youth development (PYD) scholars have become increasingly interested in the benefits associated with youth developing a sense of purpose (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Damon, 2004). While the “purpose” construct has been defined in a number of ways, definitions tend to agree on the aspect of an overarching direction in life (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Having a sense of purpose has been associated with a number of key developmental outcomes in adolescence, such as higher self-esteem and academic achievement (Damon et al., 2003). In contrast, a lack of purpose can create unsettled feelings and serve as a stressor for adolescents. For example, adolescents who have low levels of purpose or who are still searching for purpose may experience higher rates of depression and anxiety (Damon, 2008; Keyes, 2011). According to PYD theory, social support can buffer the inimical effects of such developmental stressors (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). For youth, their relationship with their parents typically represents a formative, long-standing social support source with the potential to promote positive developmental trajectories (Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010; Steinberg, 2001). Despite the formative role of parents, little research has investigated whether and how parents might foster a sense of purpose in their children. The current study seeks to address this gap by examining the role parents play in adolescents’ experiences of searching for purpose and their developmental outcomes, specifically self-esteem.

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Purpose in adolescent development

The construct of “purpose” typically encompasses: 1) aim, as a quality indicating intention towards a long-term goal and 2) engagement, as an internal motivation to be active in pursuit of the personally meaningful aim (Bronk, 2008; Bronk et al., 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Moran, 2009). Damon et al. (2003) have also emphasized a third dimension to this construct – commitment, as a goal that seeks to contribute positively to society. However, this dimension is difficult to operationalize largely because whether one’s purpose contributes positively to society tends to require subjective judgment (Waddington, 2009). Thus, in the current study, we focus on the first two dimensions of purpose and based on converging theories of purpose, we consider an achieved sense of purpose one that simultaneously commits to a purpose and engages in an ongoing search for purpose (Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010; Waddington, 2009).

Sense of purpose, a PYD protective factor that conceptually integrates several PYD developmental assets, is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, hopefulness, goal directedness, educational aspirations, altruism, academic achievement, and mental and physical health (Bronk, 2008; Damon et al., 2003; Reilly, 2009). Moreover, self-esteem, a developmental outcome of purpose may also contribute to success in several other domains (e.g., physical health and academic achievement). For example, a high school student who, following her involvement on a number of service trips to Haiti, has determined that she will one day use her education to find ways for addressing global poverty may not only have higher levels of self-esteem, but also greater academic achievement compared to peers who do not have a sense of purpose. While commitment to a sense of purpose acts as a developmental asset facilitating positive outcomes, establishing a commitment to purpose may take years of discernment (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib & Finch, 2009). During this process, youth searching for their sense of purpose may experience negative outcomes such as lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, lower academic performance, and increased alcohol abuse (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Ghadirian, 1979). In light of the protective power of having a sense of purpose, it is important to understand how it develops and whether and how significant others can foster purpose in the lives of youth (Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Scholars have hypothesized that the development of one’s sense of purpose parallels Marcia’s (1966) identity development categories: foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, and achievement (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Steger et al., 2006). For example, a young person with a foreclosure purpose may adopt her parent’s ideas about her purpose without searching for her own unique purpose in life (low search, high commitment). Similarly, a diffuse purpose corresponds with low search and low commitment, a purpose in moratorium corresponds with high search and high commitment, and an achieved purpose corresponds with high search and high commitment (Burrow et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2006). That is, an achieved sense of purpose involves committing to a purpose while simultaneously maintaining an open-minded attitude through an ongoing search (Burrow et al., 2010; Waddington, 2009). The developmental stress of searching for purpose coupled with the instability of not yet committing to a purpose, may render the moratorium category of purpose development most stressful for youth.

It is important to note that the search for purpose alone may not necessarily cause developmental stress. It is the ongoing search for purpose without finding one that may be particularly unsettling. Moreover, in the absence of positive social support, the search for purpose may be prolonged and youth may come to fear that they will be abandoned and will fail to find their purpose (Keyes, 2011; Sveidqvist, Joubert, Greene, & Manion, 2003). In contrast, in the presence of positive social support, youth’s search for purpose may lead to positive results more quickly and serve as an opportunity for transformative growth. Engaging in the search for purpose while simultaneously engaging in identity formation (Marcia, 1966) involves adolescents taking a risk by engaging in the process of personal change and transformation while differentiating from parents (Keyes, 2011). In this way, the search for a sense of purpose may be a developmental stressor for youth because change is stressful, especially change that involves relational disconnections (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Sveidqvist et al., 2003). Yet, the search may potentially result in achieving a purpose. Unfortunately, little empirical work has explicitly examined the relational factors shaping youths’ experiences of searching for purpose; previous work has been theoretical or has utilized small samples or qualitative methods.

A goal of PYD research is to understand the mechanisms that not only decrease the magnitude of stress associated with searching for purpose, but also accelerate youths’ trajectory towards an achieved sense of purpose (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Mariano & Damon, 2008; Tarakeshwar, Khan, & Sikkema, 2006). While PYD theorists speculate about fostering purpose, PYD researchers still need to examine empirically the process of fostering purpose. Indeed, protective factors such as positive social support might shield youth from the negative effects of searching for purpose (Lerner et al., 2009). However, previous studies have not examined factors influencing how searching for a sense of purpose relates to adolescents’ self-esteem.

Given the long-term nature of developing a sense of purpose (Bronk et al., 2009), this paper focuses on the influence of parental relationships, arguably the most significant and long-standing source of support in an adolescent’s life (Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010). Overall, parent support plays an important role in adolescent development, and in shaping future career plans (Turner & Lapan, 2005). Thus, it stands to reason that positive parental relationships may alleviate the stress of searching for purpose and accelerate the achievement of commitment to purpose. Previous studies, however, have failed to examine this explicitly.

Parent–child relationship

Related research does demonstrate that supportive parent–child relationships buffer the effects of developmental stressors and contribute positively to youths’ self-esteem (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Sameroff, 2000). In particular, positive
parenting characteristics such as parental acceptance, parental support, parental empathy, parental bonding, and perceived closeness and connectedness work to foster youth self-esteem (Bean & Northrup, 2009; Boutelle, Eisenberg, Gregory, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Grotomol et al., 2010; Plunkett, Henry, Robinson, Behnke, & Falcon, 2007; Trumpeter, Watson, O'Leary, & Weathersington, 2008). Youth's perceptions of their relationships with their parents are significantly associated with parents' impact on youths' self-development (Plunkett et al., 2007). Moreover, PYD theory underscores the importance of the interactive effects between children and parents (Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010). Weak parent–child relationships, for example, contribute to lower self-esteem, which increases the likelihood of depressed mood in youth, further feeding into weak parent–child relationships (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009).

Parent–child communication—both form and content—is critically important for youth development. In particular, the way parents communicate with their children can impact the latter's emotional competency and self-esteem (Martin, Bohaneck, & Fivush, 2008; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007). For example, the clarity with which parents explain events and emotions has been linked with higher self-esteem in their children (Reese et al., 2007). Furthermore, parents and children collaboratively discussing and making meaning about experiences enhances self-esteem (Martin et al., 2008).

In addition to the form of parent communication, the messages conveyed within parental communication, whether accepting or alienating, profoundly impact youths' functioning and ideas about themselves (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Bean & Northrup, 2009). For example, overbearing, psychologically controlling, or authoritarian parents tend to have children with lower self-esteem (Martínez & Garcia, 2007; Plunkett et al., 2007) and with other internalized problems such as depression (Barber, 1996). While lower self-esteem children may frustrate parents and thus foster parental controlling attitudes, parental attitudes clearly influence children's self-esteem (Boutelle et al., 2009). Variables similar to sense of purpose have been considered in combination with parent–child relationship and self-esteem, including hope, values, and development of moral self (Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008; Martínez & Garcia, 2007; Reese et al., 2007). These related studies provide a rationale for examining parent–child relationships in the context of searching for purpose.

Current study

This study concentrates on a population of adolescent girls with similar demographic backgrounds: high-achieving adolescent females enrolled in highly selective, single-sex private schools. Admittance to each school involves a rigorous application and interview process. Because many of the girls in this population have similar protective factors given their shared socioeconomic backgrounds, differences in parent–child relationships may be more easily isolated and examined. Focusing on females exclusively may especially highlight the role of parent–child relationships as feminist scholars have posited that relationships with parents tend to have an ongoing formative role, especially for girls. For example, Liang and colleagues in their ongoing study of developmental mentoring found that even older adolescent girls, compared to their male counterparts, who desired increasing autonomy from their parents still longed for validation and approval from their parents in their ideas and decision-making (Liang, Brogan, Spencer, & Corral, 2007).

In sum, the current study examined the associations between searching for purpose and self-esteem and commitment to purpose and self-esteem. Moreover, we estimated moderator effects of parent–child relationships on the association between search for purpose and self-esteem. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that commitment to a sense of purpose would be positively associated with self-esteem, whereas search for that purpose would be negatively associated self-esteem. As an extension of previous theoretical and empirical work, we examined whether the association between sense of purpose and self-esteem varied as function of parent–child relationship characteristics. Specifically, we hypothesized that alienating parental relationships would exacerbate the deleterious effects of searching for purpose on youths' self-esteem. On the other hand, trusting parental relationships would buffer the consequences of searching for purpose and potentially even positively impact youths' self-esteem. Additionally, we conducted supplementary cluster analyses to examine youth's experiences based on the combined presence of search and commitment (e.g. high search combined with low commitment).

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of female sixth, eighth, and tenth graders from two selective single-sex private schools in affluent suburbs of metropolitan areas in the Midwest and Northeast, respectively. We analyzed quantitative data from the first time point of a larger longitudinal, mixed methods research study still in progress examining high achieving girls' experiences of stress. The two schools were similar with respect to socio-economic status and ethnicity. Approximately 71 percent of the Midwest school's and 59 percent of the Northeast school's student body agreed to participate in the study with slightly higher levels of participation among older grades. One hundred percent of those with parental consent completed the online survey.

A total of 207 female students confidentially completed the 45-min online questionnaire during an arranged time in the schools' computer labs. Eight-five percent self-identified as Caucasian, 7 percent as African American, 8 percent self-identified as another race, and the remaining 1 percent did not respond. Twenty-four percent of the sample was in the sixth grade, thirty-three percent was in eighth grade, and the remaining forty-three percent was in the tenth grade. The sample lived predominantly in suburban areas.
Measures

Sense of purpose

The Revised Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al., 2006) assesses search for purpose and commitment to purpose using self-report. This scale has shown reliability and predictive validity among adolescent samples (Burrow & Hill, 2011). Respondents completed 5 items corresponding to search and 15 items corresponding to commitment. Each item demonstrates extent of personal relevance on a 7-point Likert-scale (1 – Strongly disagree, 7 – Strongly agree). An example of search for purpose statements is “I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful.” An example of commitment to purpose statements is “I have a life purpose that says a lot about the kind of person I am.” Both the search scale (α = 0.84) and commitment scale (α = 0.88) demonstrated excellent reliability. Factor analyses indicated that purpose had similar factor structures across grades, although we are cautious about further interpreting these results due to very small sample sizes (i.e., participant to item ratios).

Self-esteem

Rosenberg’s (1965) 10-item measure of self-esteem provides self-report information about global attitudes of the self. The scale contains five positively worded and five negatively worded statements to which respondents select on a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree). Participants indicated the applicability of statements such as “I feel I have a number of good qualities” and “I feel I do not have much to be proud of.” In the study sample, the scale was internally consistent (α = 0.89).

Parent–child relationship

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenburg, 1987) is a self-report measure administered to youth with the aim of understanding their perceived relationships with parents and peers, focusing on emotional connections. The current study utilizes two dimensions of the scale – level of reciprocal trust and the degree of alienation – to represent how youths perceive their parents. In this study, the instrument included only the parent items. Respondents completed 10 items corresponding to trust and 8 items corresponding to alienation. Respondents rate the degree to which the given statement applies to them personally on 5-point Likert-scale (1 = Almost Always Never True, 5 = Almost Always True). Sample items for trust include "My parents trust my judgment." Sample items for alienation include “Talking over my problems with my parents makes me feel ashamed or foolish.” In current sample, the subscales of trust and alienation demonstrated excellent reliability (α = 0.89, α = 0.89), respectively.

Results

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 presents the correlations between the five primary measures: self-esteem, search for purpose, commitment to purpose, parental trust, and parental alienation. Mean scores from each scale were computed. All five variables significantly correlate with each other in the expected directions. As hypothesized, self-esteem was negatively associated with both search for purpose and parental alienation (r = −0.38 and −0.61, respectively, p < 0.001) and positively associated with both commitment to purpose and trust (r = 0.57 and 0.57, respectively, p < 0.001). Additionally, a commitment to purpose was positively associated with parental trust and negatively associated with parental alienation (r = 0.32 and −0.33, respectively, p < 0.001). Moreover, searching for purpose correlated positively with parental alienation (r = 0.24, p < 0.001) and negatively with parental trust (r = −0.19, p < 0.05). There was a negative association between searching for purpose and committing to purpose (r = −0.34, p < 0.001). There were no violations of the assumptions of normality evident among this dataset. For descriptive statistics of each measure, see Table 1.

Three separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to test for grade-level, race, and school differences among the five measures: self-esteem, search for purpose, commitment to purpose, parental trust, and parental alienation (Table 2). Because there were few participants from racial minority groups besides African American, race was collapsed into three groups: White, African American, and other. The other category included participants who identified as Native American, Hispanic/Latino(a), Asian, multiracial, and other. Results indicated that there were statistically significant mean differences in both

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Search</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Alienation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>3.77 (0.70)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>−0.38***</td>
<td>0.57***</td>
<td>0.57***</td>
<td>−0.61***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search (Purpose)</td>
<td>4.37 (1.25)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>−0.34***</td>
<td>−0.19*</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Purpose)</td>
<td>4.74 (0.92)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>−0.32***</td>
<td>0.32***</td>
<td>−0.33***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>4.11 (0.68)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>−0.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>2.39 (0.87)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.
parental trust and parental alienation among racial groups, although the assumption of Homogeneity of Variances was not met for parental trust. White students had higher levels of parental trust than did African American students. The mean parental alienation score for other minority students fell in between, and was not significantly different from, those for White and African American. For parental alienation, White students had the lowest levels, followed by African American, and then other racial minority experienced the greatest levels of parental alienation. Additionally, ANOVAs showed significant differences among the three grade levels (sixth, eighth, and tenth) for three variables: self-esteem, search for purpose, and commitment to purpose. Tenth grade students had lower levels of self-esteem, lower levels of commitment to purpose, and higher levels of search for purpose than their sixth- and eighth-grader counterparts. No significant differences between the two schools were found for any of the five variables of interest.

Primary analysis

As hypothesized based on previous literature, an ordinary least squares regression indicates that commitment to purpose significantly predicts self-esteem ($R^2 = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, results of ordinary least squares regression show that search for purpose significantly predicts lower levels of self-esteem ($R^2 = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.001$).

Hierarchical regression analyses were used to test whether specific dimensions of parent–child relationships, trust (Model 1) and alienation (Model 2), moderated the association between searching for a sense of purpose and self-esteem. The scores for search for purpose, trust, and alienation were centered to reduce multicollinearity effects (Aiken & West, 1991). The school variable was not included in the regression analysis because the ANOVA indicated that there were no significant school differences. Additionally, because the majority of the sample was White, only dummy codes for the two minority race variables were included to control for race in the regression. Thus, White students were excluded from the regression, implying that the coefficients represent a comparison of African American vs. White, for example.

The independent variables in Model 1 were search for purpose and parental trust, and the independent variables in Model 2 were search for purpose and parental alienation. In both models, the covariates were entered in Step 1, the independent variables were entered in Step 2, and the interaction terms were entered in Step 3 (Table 3). Self-esteem was the dependent variable in both models. In Model 1, while the overall model explained a significant proportion of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.85$), both the change in $R$-squared between Step 2 and 3 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $p = 0.27$, $f^2 = 0.01$) and the interaction effect (search $\times$ trust) ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.27$) were not statistically significant. In Model 2, as hypothesized, the moderating effect of parental alienation was significant ($R^2 = 0.50$, $b = -0.08$, $p < 0.01$, $f^2 = 1.0$). Effect sizes were calculated from $R$-squared (Cohen, 1988; Soper, 2012).

We calculated simple slopes to visually depict the conditional relationship between searching for purpose and self-esteem at varying levels of alienation (Fig. 1). Among girls with high levels of parental alienation, increases in search for purpose were associated with significant decreases in self-esteem (slope $= -0.17$, $p < 0.001$). Among girls with low levels of parental alienation, self-esteem did not significantly decrease as search for purpose increased (slope $= -0.4$, $p = 0.33$).

Supplemental analysis

Because of the differences in the ANOVA results, indicating higher search for purpose among tenth graders, we examined whether our hypothesized relationships between parenting and purpose varied as a function of developmental status. For example, does parental alienation become more intense among older girls in influencing their higher levels of searching for purpose? To test this, we estimated three-way interactions between search for purpose, alienation, and student grade to examine whether the interaction between search for purpose and alienation varied as function of student grade. Similarly, we estimated three-way interactions between search for purpose, trust, and student grade. Results from these models did not indicate that the interaction between search for purpose and alienation differed for sixth-, eighth-, and tenth-grade girls, nor did the interaction between search for purpose and trust differ by student grade.

To further illustrate the results obtained from our variable-centered regression models, we also estimated person-based cluster models of youth commitment to purpose and search for purpose. Following recent work on PYD and youth purpose (Burrow, et al., 2010), as well as theoretical work on adolescent identity development (Marcia, 1966), we expected four

Table 2

ANOVAs examining differences in the primary variables as a function of demographic indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th></th>
<th>Race</th>
<th></th>
<th>School</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>$\eta^2$</td>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>$\eta^2$</td>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>$\eta^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>6.65**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search (Purpose)</td>
<td>15.33***</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Purpose)</td>
<td>4.10*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>4.55*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>3.42*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
distinct clusters of youth purpose to emerge that parallel identity categories described by Marcia (1966). In addition, we hypothesized that girls in the clusters with high levels of search and commitment (i.e., achieved sense of purpose category) would report higher levels of trust and lower levels of alienation in parental relationships. Moreover, girls categorized as having high levels of search for purpose with low levels of commitment (i.e., "moratorium" category) would demonstrate the lowest levels of trust and the highest levels of alienation, as well as lower levels of self-esteem. Hierarchical cluster analyses were computed using Ward’s method and squared Euclidean distance. Moreover, search and commitment subscales were transformed into $z$-scores prior to cluster analyses.

The agglomeration schedule suggested that solutions with three-, four-, five-, and six-clusters should be explored. Three-, five-, and six-cluster solutions were not suitable because reliability checks with the alternative clustering methods yielded dramatically different results and for some solutions (e.g., five- and six-cluster solutions) significant differences across the clusters in levels of search and commitment to purpose were not obtained. That is, the additional clusters added very little to the interpretation and compromised parsimony. A four-cluster solution provided the best theoretical fit, with clusters paralleling identity development categories and those obtained by Burrow et al. (2010). Foreclosed purpose (high commitment, low search), Diffused (low commitment, low search), Moratorium/Uncommitted purpose (low commitment, high search), and Achieved purpose (high commitment, high search) clusters were identified by their $z$-scores on search and commitment to purpose subscale. More specifically, the Achieved Purpose cluster had the highest scores on the commitment to purpose subscale and above average scores on the search for purpose subscale. Girls grouped in the Foreclosed cluster reported above average scores in commitment and the lowest scores on the search for purpose subscale. Girls in the Moratorium/Uncommitted cluster reported the highest scores on search for purpose, and the lowest scores on commitment to purpose. Finally, girls who were in the Diffused cluster demonstrated below average scores on both search for and commitment to purpose. The sample sizes within the four clusters were adequate (Table 4) and results from a $K$-means cluster analysis generally confirmed a four-cluster solution as well. An ANOVA was conducted to examine significant differences on search and

### Table 3
Regression models for the moderating effects of parental trust and parental alienation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$R(SE)$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$R(SE)$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 1: Moderating effect of parental trust</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.42 (0.12)**</td>
<td>0.46***</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.19 (0.10)†</td>
<td>0.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>0.33 (0.11)**</td>
<td>0.21 (0.09)*</td>
<td>0.21 (0.09)*</td>
<td>0.44 (0.15)**</td>
<td>0.44 (0.15)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.18 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.42 (0.15)*</td>
<td>0.42 (0.15)*</td>
<td>0.42 (0.15)*</td>
<td>0.42 (0.15)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>-0.42 (0.18)*</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for Purpose</td>
<td>-0.14 (0.03)***</td>
<td>-0.14 (0.03)***</td>
<td>-0.14 (0.03)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.54 (0.06)***</td>
<td>0.54 (0.06)***</td>
<td>0.54 (0.06)***</td>
<td>0.54 (0.06)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search × Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 2: Moderating effect of parental alienation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.42 (0.12)**</td>
<td>0.48***</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
<td>0.32 (0.10)**</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>0.33 (0.11)**</td>
<td>0.22 (0.09)*</td>
<td>0.22 (0.09)*</td>
<td>0.39 (0.14)**</td>
<td>0.39 (0.14)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.18 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.34 (0.14)*</td>
<td>0.34 (0.14)*</td>
<td>0.34 (0.14)*</td>
<td>0.34 (0.14)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>-0.42 (0.18)</td>
<td>-0.19 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.19 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.19 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.19 (0.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for Purpose</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.03)***</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.03)***</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.03)***</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.03)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>-0.45 (0.04)***</td>
<td>-0.44 (0.04)***</td>
<td>-0.44 (0.04)***</td>
<td>-0.44 (0.04)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search × Alienation</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.10. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

![Fig. 1.](image-url) Differentiating the moderation effect of low, average, and high alienation through simple slopes. Low Search is equal to the minimum score and High Search represents the highest score on Search for Purpose. Low alienation (1 SD below the mean): simple slope = −0.04, standard error = 0.04. Mean alienation: simple slope = −0.11, standard error = 0.03. High alienation (1 SD above the mean): simple slope = −0.17, standard error = 0.04.
commitment to purpose (Table 4). Results further confirmed cluster membership with significant differences evident in every post-hoc comparison. Not surprisingly, girls in the Achieved cluster had the highest levels of commitment to purpose; conversely, the Moratorium/Uncommitted cluster had the highest levels of search for purpose.

To examine differences in parenting and self-esteem across the purpose clusters, an ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated significant differences in parent–child relationship quality and self-esteem across the purpose clusters. More specifically, post-hoc tests revealed that girls in the Moratorium/Uncommitted cluster reported significantly higher levels of parental alienation compared to their counterparts in the Diffused and Foreclosed clusters (p < 0.001) and marginally higher levels of parental alienation compared to their counterparts in the Achieved cluster (p < 0.10). Similarly, girls in the Moratorium/Uncommitted cluster reported significantly lower levels of parental trust compared to their counterparts in the Diffused and Foreclosed clusters (p < 0.001). Finally, girls in the Moratorium/Uncommitted cluster reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem compared to their counterparts in all other clusters (p < 0.001) and girls in the Foreclosed cluster reported higher levels of self-esteem compared to their counterparts in the Moratorium/Uncommitted and Diffused clusters. There were no significant differences in self-esteem between the Foreclosed and Achieved clusters. To understand the developmental aspect of sense of purpose, we looked at which grade levels were represented within each of the four categories (Table 5). Results suggest that the majority of girls begin their search for purpose in earnest in late adolescence, as the 10th graders had the largest proportion of Moratorium/Uncommitted individuals (Table 6).

**Discussion**

In order to establish a sense of purpose, adolescents must engage in the search for purpose. The process of searching for purpose, while potentially a transformative growth experience, may be daunting, stressful, and isolating for some adolescents (Keyes, 2011). Fear of isolation and disconnection from parents and peers appear to contribute to the stress of searching for purpose in adolescence (Dalton & Crosby, 2010; Keyes, 2011; Svedqvist et al., 2003). The findings from the present study are consistent with previous research in that the commitment to purpose was positively associated with self-esteem. Searching for purpose, however, was negatively associated with self-esteem. Also, the current study extends the research on searching for purpose by examining moderation models. Finally, cluster analyses demonstrated how experiences searching for purpose varied with the presence of a committed purpose.

**Why is searching for purpose negatively associated with self-esteem?**

The results described thus far suggest that while committing to purpose is associated with a positive sense of self, the process of searching for purpose can be disorienting or difficult. Although it might seem that searching for purpose should be a positive experience given the potential for this process to lead to finding and committing to a purpose (Keyes, 2011), in the current sample, searching for purpose appears to be negatively associated with self-esteem, consistent with previous theoretical work. The pernicious effects associated with searching for purpose may be exacerbated by relational factors, namely youths’ perceptions of parental relationships. More precisely, parent–child relationships characterized by alienation exacerbated the deleterious effects of search for purpose on girls’ self-esteem. However, positive aspects of parent–child relationships, such as parental trust, did not serve as a buffer. Taken together, our results suggest that girls’ perceived parent–child alienation may negatively impact how searching for purpose relates to their self-esteem.

These results may be explained in part as an artifact of this population’s social context. The adolescent girls in this study’s sample largely hail from economically and educationally privileged backgrounds. They were high achieving youth from...
primarily affluent neighborhoods with the resources to attend a highly selective private school. In some ways, such a protective environment and its associated privileges and resources may create a sense of relative stability and certainty for these girls (Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010). In this context, searching for a sense of purpose may represent a significant first exposure to uncertainty and instability.

It is also interesting to note that even when parents are “engaged” enough to spend resources on sending their children to selective private schools in affluent suburbs, they may still be perceived as “alienating” by their children. Having the means and desire to send middle- and high-school students to selective private schools may not reflect the same type of alienation experienced by youth without such privileges. Yet, these indicators of parental support or engagement do not preclude the psychological sense of alienation that comes from feeling that one is disconnected, misunderstood, or lacking validation by one’s parents. One interesting finding is that positive parent–child relationship quality correlates with higher levels of searching for purpose while negative parent–child relationship quality correlates with lower levels of searching for purpose. This may be because youth who perceive their parents positively may adopt their parents’ ideas about purpose in life and, thus, represent a foreclosed status. As youth differentiate from parents and begin searching for their own purpose, youth may perceive their parents as more alienating. Not only may they fear rejection from their parents, but also parents may – out of a desire to protect their children – attempt to reign in the youth’s search and thus alienate their child. Our findings suggest that parents may do well to encourage their children’s search for purpose and help them bear the accompanied stress by serving as trusting and non-judgmental support sources.

Building on previous theory and research, the current study examined whether parent–child relationships moderated the association between searching for purpose and self-esteem. Parental alienation significantly moderated the negative association between searching for purpose and self-esteem. That is, girls who experienced average to high levels of parental alienation displayed decreases in self-esteem as levels of search for purpose increase. Parental trust, however, did not significantly ameliorate the negative association between searching for purpose and self-esteem.

A few factors may explain the significant interaction effect between searching for purpose and parental alienation. First, searching for a purpose involves personal change and openness to this change. In the best-case scenario, this openness may lead to validation from others. At the same time, this openness may render adolescents’ vulnerable to criticism and even isolation when their search for purpose does not align with others’ expectations. Indeed, alienation may be particularly harmful to girls’ self-esteem given the importance of parental validation and approval in adolescence among girls (Liang et al., 2007). Thus, it stands to reason that parental alienation may further destabilize adolescents already in a state of flux and uncertainty due to their search for purpose (Adams, 1985; Meeus & Dekovic, 1995). Secondly, successfully finding or committing to a sense of purpose involves collaboration with and confirmation from others in order to understand one’s self in relation to the larger world. Thus, adolescents who perceive their parents as alienating as they search for purpose may lack a sounding board or source of collaborative dialogue compared to those adolescents who perceive close relationships with their parents (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Damon, 2008).

Interestingly, the hypothesis that parental trust would positively buffer the negative association between search for purpose and youth self-esteem was not substantiated. This finding might be explained in that parental trust may be necessary but not sufficient to buffer the negative association between search for purpose and self-esteem. Adolescents may feel they can trust their parents but still not feel close or connected enough to them to enlist their active support in their search for purpose. This may be especially true when their search for purpose takes them in directions that are not in alignment with their parents’ own sense of purpose or expectations for them. Thus, it may be that in order to feel safe and confident while searching for purpose, adolescents may need support from multiple sources such as peers and teachers in addition to parents.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

The current study builds on previous research by focusing on the process of searching for a sense of purpose. This study is consistent with previous work that suggests that searching for purpose may play a stressful role in adolescent girls’ development of self-concept and self-esteem (Marcia, 1966), and provides empirical evidence that parental alienation exacerbates this “stressor.” These results further underscore the importance and complexity of exploring ways to foster positive youth development, especially a sense of purpose. Sampling a group of similar students with few risk factors allowed us to concentrate on the developmental process of searching for purpose. By examining both parental trust and parental alienation, this study attempted to find interaction effects impacting self-esteem both positively and negatively. Study findings may inform interventions for improving parent–child relationships and enhancing parental roles in their daughter’s development of purpose.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Foreclosed purpose</th>
<th>Diffused purpose</th>
<th>Uncommitted/Moratorium</th>
<th>Achieved purpose</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nevertheless, interpretations of findings must be considered in the context of several limitations to this study. First, because the study is correlational, directions of causality are unclear. For example, search for purpose might lead to low self-esteem or low self-esteem might foster increased levels of search. Longitudinal analyses are needed to clarify causality. Moreover, the data are self-report. While this may be viewed as a limitation, it may also be considered a strength given that the current study’s intent was to examine girls’ own experiences of their parental relationships and because past research indicates that adolescents’ reports of parenting tend to be more accurate than parents’ reports (Gonzales, Cauce, & Mason, 1995). Additionally, while this study focuses on parental relationships, it is conceivable that other sources or types of social support might play a significant buffering role in the search for purpose. For example, peer support or mentoring relationships may be highly relevant for adolescent girls (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, Williams, 2002; Liang et al., 2002; Spencer & Liang, 2009). Finally, future research should examine whether the process of searching for purpose is a necessary precursor to committing to a purpose, and whether the stress of this search process may be developmentally necessary in some way. These questions represent areas for further exploration in the PYD field that may help elucidate the transition from search for purpose to commitment to purpose (Bowers et al., 2010; Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Moreover, further research should expand the generalizability of these findings. While it is useful to focus on a specific segment of the population of adolescents to understand the dynamic process of searching for purpose, this process may be different among different segments of adolescents. For example, the experience of searching for purpose may be different among adolescent males and the interactive effects of parental relationships may vary among boys as well. Additionally, further investigation into interaction effects that contribute to improved self-esteem among youth searching for purpose would not only enhance an understanding of resilience but also offer more practical and positive implications for parents and teachers. The current study demonstrates the negative implications of parental alienation, especially in the context of a youth’s search for purpose. Enhanced understanding of the connections between searching for purpose, youth social support, and achieving a sense of purpose could contribute to more comprehensive and integrative programs for fostering positive youth development.

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