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EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Purpose and Character Development in Early Adolescence

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Abstract Character development in adolescence is of growing interest among psychology researchers and educators, yet there is little consensus about how character should be defined and studied among developmental scientists. In particular, there is no fully developed framework for investigating the developmental relationships among different character strengths. This study examines the developmental relations between purpose and three other key character strengths that emerge during early adolescence: gratitude, compassion, and grit. We analyzed survey ($n = 1005$, 50.1% female, 24.1% Caucasian, 43.6% African American, 18.9% Hispanic, 11.9% Asian American) and interview ($n = 98$) data from a longitudinal study of character development among middle school students from the United States. Data were collected over the course of 2 years, with surveys conducted four times at 6-month intervals and interviews conducted twice at 12-month intervals. Data analyses showed small but significant correlations between purpose and each of the other three character strengths under investigation. Interview data revealed patterns in ways that adolescents acted on their purposeful aspirations; and interview analyses identified qualitative differences in expressions of gratitude and compassion between adolescents who were fully purposeful and those who were not. The findings suggest that character development can be better understood by investigating the multidirectional developmental relationships among different character strengths.

Keywords Character development · Character strengths · Adolescence · Purpose

Introduction

The study of human character has taken place across several scholarly disciplines, and it has employed a wide variety of conceptual frameworks and defining terms. At the present time, there is a growing interest in character development in the psychological sciences and education, but there is a lack of consensus about terminology that is used to define and analyze elements of character. In this article, we introduce a new investigation into character development during its formative phases at the beginning of adolescence. In order to clarify our choice of terminology for this study, we start by setting the terms that we use in the context of some classic analyses of character in philosophy and psychology.

Philosophers have long written about the nature and developmental origins of human character. For Aristotle, a person's character was the collection of "virtues" (or "strengths," the Latin root for "virtues") that give a person's way of behaving in the world its identifying cast or "mold." In this use, virtues are behavioral habits with positive values for an individual's personal and social adaptation. The term virtues is synonymous with the term "character strengths," which is the wording that we adopt for our use in the present investigation.

Aristotle described good character as a state of harmony among feeling, thought, and action: good people act in accord with rational thought and feel good when they do (Aristotle 1999). But this is an ideal state, rarely if ever achieved in totality and approximated only by those who have attained the most mature states of character

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development. For most people during most of development, character is far from unitary. Feelings, thoughts, and actions related to virtues may be frequently misaligned; and the virtues (or "character strengths") themselves may develop at an uneven pace, with some maturing while others grow slowly or not at all. Thus at every phase of development an individual has a distinct profile of virtues ("character strengths"), some of which may be more mature, stable, and functional than others.

Individual and developmental variations in character are of great interest to psychologists and other social scientists, as well as educators and practitioners. A science of character requires examining the distinct elements that make up character as it develops over time. Developmental scientists seeking to understand how people develop character can begin by recognizing the unity of thought, feeling, and behavior as a desired developmental outcome, but to understand the developmental dynamics of character, the specific components that make up individuals' character profiles at all periods of their lives must be examined in themselves.

"Positive" psychologists Peterson and Seligman (2004) set a course for observing and assessing specific components of character when they proposed a classification model of twenty-four "character strengths" (the wording that they like us, chose). Their model treats character not as a unity but as a multiplicity composed of distinct character strengths that develop somewhat independently of one another. A person's character, in this sense, is described by the person's most-developed strengths, called "signature strengths" in the Peterson/Seligman model.

Since the Peterson/Seligman character model was introduced, there has been debate about the unified vs. plural nature of character. Whereas Peterson and Seligman argued that people can flourish by developing their unique "signature strengths" to the neglect of other strengths, others have maintained that such an imbalanced development of virtues causes weak character and reduces well-being (Allen 2015; Fowers 2008). These arguments suggest that, in contrast to the original Peterson/Seligman formulation, character strengths may interact in the formation of one's character in ways that we do not fully understand.

Peterson and Seligman's character strengths classification framework provides a starting point for a new science of character development. As we advance this science, the most pressing task is to figure out how to draw conceptual distinctions between individual character strengths such that any one may be assessed independently of others, and the developmental trajectory of each can be traced. We should also attend to the developmental relationship among the different strengths, how they nudge each other as they develop, and how they interact at different stages of development.

To study how character strengths emerge and develop, both individually and in relation to each other during the formative early adolescent years, we have been working with collaborators at the University of Pennsylvania (Angela Duckworth. P.I.) in a longitudinal study of character development in early adolescence. For our lab at Stanford, this study grew out of our interest in the character strength of purpose and its development. In our lab, we have studied purpose, its developmental correlates and precursors, the forms it takes at different periods of development, the domains of life where youth find purpose, and the factors that foster purpose as it develops in adolescence and adulthood (*see* https://coa.stanford.edu/publications). With our engagement in the broader character development project, we have had a chance to expand our study of purpose to include other character strengths, including gratitude, grit, and compassion. Purpose overlaps in important ways with each of these other strengths, yet each of the strengths has its own distinct functions in forming a person's character.

In this article we examine the relationship between purpose and other character strengths during adolescence. We first describe purpose, grit, gratitude, and compassion as they have been framed by recent theory and research. We then use data from our collaborative character study to examine purpose as it emerges in adolescence and how it correlates with the gratitude, compassion, and grit at this period of life.

Purpose as a Character Strength in Adolescence

Purpose is a long-term, forward-looking intention to accomplish aims that are meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. Purpose is a relatively new construct in developmental research, especially with respect to the study of character development: it has been shown to be an indicator of thriving and optimal development (Bronk 2012), but until now purpose has not been described in terms of its role in a person's character or studied in relation to other character strengths.

In Peterson and Seligman's classification of character strengths, purpose is subsumed under the strength of transcendent spirituality. In this formulation, purpose is seen as a character strength because it provides a feeling of connectedness to something larger than the self. But we believe that this is too limited a view of purpose, which for many people has secular rather than spiritual manifestations. In addition, as our work has shown, purpose is not limited to feelings of transcendence and connectedness (Damon 2008). Further, it has components similar to those of other character strengths, including moral strengths such as gratitude and compassion, as well as strengths that support goal achievement, such as grit (Duckworth et al. 2007).

Defining purpose

Purpose is a life aim, a goal that provides direction and drives action. Finding and acting on a purpose gives life meaning, because (1) it connects the self with something larger than the self, and (2) it is actively and consistently pursued over a sustained period of time. We have defined purpose as "a stable and generalizable intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and contributes to the world beyond the self" (Damon et al. 2003, p. 121). When people ask the question "What is my purpose in life?" they are seeking a guiding direction that they can pursue into their future, to their destiny.

Purpose and moral character

People with purpose have developed stable values that are central to their sense of self, and they are driven by those values to act on them. Importantly, purpose is a desire to contribute to the world beyond the self, for example by striving to improve the lives of others or create something that has a beneficial impact on the world. Purpose is a character strength because it is an aspiration to contribute something beyond the self along with a commitment to act on that aspiration. People with purpose look to what the world needs and how they can meet that need, connecting in meaningful ways with something larger than the self, such as family, the good of society, God, or justice.

In adolescence, purpose provides an organizing frame for behavior, goal-setting, and identity formation (Damon 2008). Young people with full purpose have been shown to follow through on long-term goals, engage in socially responsible behavior, show agency in identifying and acting on issues that concern them, and have an impact in the world. Purpose contributes to formation of a good character because it motivates young people to be the best they can be, not in a competitive sense, but in the sense of driving to always better themselves so that they can make a meaningful contribution to the world.

Purpose and well-being

Purpose contributes to an individual's psychological well-being and flourishing (e.g., Frankl 1959; Keyes et al. 2002). Well-being has been described by psychologists: as (1) a subjective feeling of happiness and enjoyment of life, and (2) the more meaningful process of "fulfilling one's virtuous potential and living as one was inherently intended to live," (Deci and Ryan 2008, p. 2). Purpose is associated with the second form of well-being, called eudaimonia (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryff and Singer 2008), but is not strongly correlated with the first form, which is also described as hedonism or happiness (Keyes et al. 2002). In numerous studies, sense of purpose has correlated with specific aspects of well-being such as life satisfaction, positive affect, and hopefulness (Burrow et al. 2010; Burrow et al. 2014; Ryff and Keyes 1995), and has proven repeatedly to be a core component of psychological well-being (Ryff and Keyes 1995). Purpose is also an indicator of thriving, which is defined as a developmental process that involves positive and healthy relationships and contributions to society (Bundick et al. 2010; Lerner et al. 2002).

Purpose in adolescence supports positive development in a number of areas. At school, having a purpose for learning supports academic performance and self-regulation (Yeager et al. 2014). Young people with purposeful career goals find schoolwork engaging and meaningful, unlike those without purpose (Yeager and Bundick 2009). Purpose promotes healthy identity formation (Bronk 2011) and mediates the relationship between identity and well-being during adolescence (Burrow and Hill 2011). When young people shape their identities with strongly-held values and commitments to things larger than themselves, they can build robust identities and clear senses of direction as they construct their future lives (Damon 2008).

Prevalence of purpose in adolescence

In an interview study of 270 young people ages 11–21, about 25% were engaged in pursuing a purpose (Moran 2009). Within this group, there were significant developmental age differences. Among the oldest (college-aged) participants in the study, 42% had purpose, whereas only 16% of the 11–12 year olds had purpose. Another 10% of the total adolescent sample had a potentially purposeful beyond-the-self goal, but were not acting on it. About 40% of the total sample had no indicators of purpose, meaning that they had no beyond-the-self goals or pressing concerns, and were not engaged in any exploratory beyond-the-self activity. Young people in this study found purpose in diverse domains, such as the arts, helping others, community service, invention and discovery, spirituality, and family (*see also*, for similar findings, Bronk 2012; Malin 2015; Malin et al. 2015; Moran 2010; Tirri and Quinn 2010).

Factors supporting purpose development in adolescence

Early purpose can emerge in late childhood or adolescence. Purpose starts in different ways, such as an empathic response to another's suffering, or from participation in an activity that matches the young person's interests to a problem in the world (Bronk 2012; Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014). Often, purpose begins with a negative experience in an individual's family or community, such as an aunt's

cancer diagnosis, an immigrant neighbor's deportation, or a news report about a local environmental disaster (e.g., Malin et al. 2015). An emotional response or meaningful experience develops into purpose when young people have opportunities to act on their concerns, and reflect on the social and moral values they are internalizing as they respond to things that upset or energize them. As identity formation takes center stage during early and mid-adolescence, young people build on nascent purposes by looking to the future and exploring roles they might take in society that will strengthen their commitment and extend the scope of their contribution (Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014).

Social and environmental factors (family, peers, and mentors, and institutions that young people engage with, such as church groups, school, and community centers) play important roles in purpose development. Parents support their children's purpose by modeling prosocial activity and encouraging their children's prosocial interests (Moran et al. 2013). Adolescents with purpose often have parents who provide encouragement and material support for their prosocial activities, such as transportation to volunteer jobs and books for learning about a purpose-related interest. Friends and peers also provide some support for purpose. Institutions (such as school, church, and community organizations) support the development of purpose by providing opportunities for adolescents to engage in meaningful sustained activity in pursuit of beyond-the-self concerns and interests. The most supportive opportunities are those that integrate multiple types of support for prosocial goal pursuit, such as social, informational, and material support (Moran et al. 2013).

Purpose in Relation to Other Character Strengths

To build on this growing body of knowledge about purpose and its development, we collaborated with Angela Duckworth and her research team on a longitudinal study of several character strengths as they develop in early adolescence. Our goal was to understand how character strengths can be measured, how they develop in early adolescence, how they relate to each other in this early period of development, how they relate to well-being and other outcomes at this age, and what this means for developmental science and educational practice. In this article, we focus on the character strengths of gratitude, compassion, and grit, examining their empirical relations to purpose. We shall discuss the associations each has with purpose as well as important ways in which purpose is distinct from these three key character strengths. Of course there are other key character strengths (*see* Peterson and Seligman 2004) that also have important and interesting developmental relations with purpose; but examining those relations must await a further study, since the present investigation is necessarily limited in its scope.

Gratitude

Gratitude is, in part, "a feeling that occurs in interpersonal exchanges when one person acknowledges receiving a valuable benefit from another," (Emmons 2012, p. 50). But the character strength of "dispositional" gratitude goes beyond mere interpersonal exchange to a spiritual "appreciation that one has lived by the grace of others," (p. 51). Unlike reciprocal interpersonal gratitude alone, dispositional gratitude is not merely situational but rather an enduring way of experiencing life in general (Emmons 2012; Peterson and Seligman 2004). Some people express dispositional gratitude to God through religious practices such as prayer whereas others experience it as a connection to nature or the universe; and for others it is simply feeling grateful for life.

Gratitude is thought to motivate prosocial behavior in that it reflects concern for others, and this is seen even in gratitude arising from mundane, situational exchange (McCullough et al. 2001). However, as a character strength, it is dispositional gratitude that most benefits people. Those with dispositional gratitude invoke positive emotions in response to the gifts of life, rather than responding with negative emotions such as resentment or guilt (Emmons 2012). A grateful person seeks to add positive to positive, for example by responding to a kindness with even more kindness. For those who experience dispositional gratitude, this means living day to day with a giving attitude towards gifts and the blessings of life. People with dispositional gratitude are thus inclined to have positive interactions with others, well-adjusted social relationships, and a positive impact on the world they are part of. Moreover, grateful people identify and respond to generosity, goodwill, and benevolence, thereby encouraging these traits in others (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

The developmental groundwork for gratitude is likely found in the empathy that emerges in late childhood, and more specifically in the ability to recognize both the impact of one's actions on another as well as the cost another endures to provide a gift or do a kind act. In early adolescence, gratitude both promotes and is strengthened by the development of prosocial orientation in a reciprocal relationship (Froh et al. 2010).

Gratitude and Purpose Like gratitude, purpose can reflect moral emotions such as empathy and sympathy. Both gratitude and purpose are other-oriented and both have numerous positive impacts beyond the self, such as prosocial behavior and strong connections with others. Purpose, like gratitude, may be considered a transcendental strength

that engages one in relations larger than the self; and both are sometimes described as residing in the spiritual or as service to a higher power. But there is a subtle difference in the ways that gratitude and purpose reflect a connectedness to something beyond the self: purpose is acting in service to something larger than the self, whereas gratitude is recognizing and acknowledging the benevolence of a power outside of the self. Although gratitude includes expressive behaviors, it largely lacks the agentic action shown by someone with purpose. Purpose is future-oriented, goal-directed, and requires planning, unlike gratitude, which in its pure form is more characterized by spontaneous benevolence motivated by a perpetual state of heart and mind.

Compassion

Compassion is an interpersonal character strength that enables one to confront the distress of others in a prosocial manner; it is a benevolent response to the human experience of pain and sorrow (Sprecher and Fehr 2005). There is general consensus among researchers that compassion is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that comprises of the following four psychological components: (1) an awareness of suffering (cognitive component), (2) sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering (affective component), (3) a wish to see the relief of that suffering (intentional component), and (4) a responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering (motivational component) (Jazaieri et al. 2012, p. 23). Researchers and scholars on compassion have categorically stressed that while compassion arise from sympathetic concern for others, compassion is not merely empathy or sympathy (Jinpa 2015; Ricard 2015 and Klimecki et al. 2013). Instead, compassion is a more empowered state than the affective response because of one's focus on the needs and sufferings of others and motivation to relieve these. When one is compassionate, one takes an interest in the welfare of others, desires to relieve the struggles of others and acts on one's concerns to benefit others.

Since Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of *compassion*, along with kindness, generosity, nurturance, care, and altruistic love, as an interpersonal character strength, research in compassion has increased in the past decade. Studies are largely centered on identifying the intra-personal and inter-personal benefits of being compassionate (e.g., Crocker and Canevello 2008; Layous et al. 2012; Pace et al. 2012); the malleable and cultivatable nature of compassion (e.g., Condon et al. 2013; Klimecki et al. 2012; Weng et al. 2013), as well as the efficacy of compassion cultivation programs (e.g., Leiberg et al. 2011; Jazaieri et al. 2012; Flook et al. 2010). Thus far, there are relatively few studies on the development of compassion.

Compassion and Purpose The underlying commonalities between compassion and purpose are the other-regarding orientation and sympathetic concern that motivate good action.

Other-regarding orientation. Compassion is often equated to altruism as it has an other- orientation that motivates one to act (e.g., Post 2005; Jazaieri et al. 2012; and Ricard 2015). Similarly, purpose has an other-regarding orientation as a driver setting higher order life goals and acting to fulfill them. This other-regarding orientation compels one to fulfill these goals and make meaningful beyond-the-self contributions.

Sympathetic concern. Previous research has provided evidence that empathy, the affective response when we witness someone in need, does not necessarily bring about prosocial or compassionate behavior (e.g., Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Batson 1987; Hoffman 2000). In this sense, it may be that compassion is a developmental step from empathy, which stirs young people's concern about suffering others, to purpose, which requires setting long term goals to make a difference in the lives of others and acting on those goals. However, purpose is different from compassion in that it elevates the other-orientation to a life goal and that drives a person through life, gives life meaning, and motivates behavior to achieve the intended purpose.

Grit

Grit has been defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al. 2007, p. 1087; *see also* Vallerand et al. 2003). Gritty people are driven by a distant goal to persist through hardships, challenges, failures, and drudgery. They might be pursuing mastery of a particular skill, such as swimming or violin; striving to win a national chess competition or beat others for a coveted spot on a team; struggling against the odds to graduate from high school; or fighting a disease that few have beat. Grit is applied to these higher order goals that, when achieved, give a sense of having succeeded in life. As such, it is differentiated from similar constructs such as resilience and self-control, which imply persistence in day-to-day efforts (Duckworth and Gross 2014). People high in grit are single-minded and tenacious in their focus on a particular goal.

Grit is seen in the tenacity people exercise in the face of hardship or challenge, in the fight they put up as they struggle against the odds to win, finish a difficult job, succeed in life, or survive. Unlike gratitude and compassion, grit is not necessary to interpersonal character. As a character strength, it promotes personal achievement and success. During adolescence, early forms of grit can keep young people focused on their future goals, preventing them from drifting off course, but does not necessarily have a prosocial or beyond-the-self orientation.

Grit and Purpose There is considerable overlap between purpose and grit. Both revolve around commitments to higher-order, long-term goals. Because both grit and purpose are defined in terms of higher order goals, passion, and commitment, it could be argued that one is necessary for the other—that people need grit to achieve purpose, and that purpose can play a pivotal role in sustaining grit.

But there are important distinctions between purpose and grit that must be explored for scientific understanding of each. Grit is an achievement strength, used to overcome obstacles and accomplish important personal goals. Purpose is a moral strength, applied in pursuit of making a positive difference in the world and, ultimately, having a meaningful life. Grit is the capacity to endure challenges in pursuit of endpoints that enable personal success, mastery, or survival, such as winning a competition, beating cancer, or graduating college in the face of of family hardship. Although purpose requires sustained commitment to something larger than the self, it does not always involve difficult personal challenges or hardships. Although grit can be used for prosocial and other moral purposes, it does not always involve a beyond-the self orientation.

Present Study

The goal of this study was to qualitatively describe how early adolescents show purpose—in what aspects of life and through what types of actions do they pursue purpose? We further sought to describe the relationship that purpose has to other character strengths (gratitude, compassion, and grit) at this early stage of development, to better understand whether they share a developmental trajectory and how they might differ early in development. Moreover, we wanted to explore the possible developmental interactions among the character strengths. For example, does compassion promote purpose development? Does purpose support grit? Our analysis cannot fully answer these developmental questions, but sets the course for further research by qualitatively exploring these questions: What does purpose look like in early adolescence? How is purpose similar to, and different from, other related character strengths? And, how does purpose interact with other character strengths in early adolescence?

Method

Participants

Study participants were eighth graders from nine public, charter, and private middle schools in different regions of the United States (77.0% Pennsylvania, 10.3% California, 2.3% Idaho, 10.3% Texas), that were selected for ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. The first wave of data collection occurred in fall of their eighth grade year, when 1366 students completed the survey, and of those 98 participated in a follow up interview during the same semester. The same students were invited to complete the survey again in spring of their eighth grade year (wave 2), and the survey and interview again in fall of ninth grade (wave 3, survey $n = 1005$, interview $n = 84$). This analysis uses wave 3 survey data (50.1% female, 24.1% Caucasian, 43.6% African American, 18.9% Hispanic, 11.9% Asian American, 1.2% Multi-racial/Other), and interview data from both wave 1 (53.3% female, 22.4% Caucasian, 46.9% African American, 11.2% Latino, 15.3% Asian American, 4.1% Multi-racial/Other) and wave 3 (52.4% female, 23.8% Caucasian, 45.2% African American, 10.7% Latino, 16.7% Asian American, 3.6% Multi-racial/Other).

Data Collection Measures and Procedures

Data were collected through surveys and interviews in which participants were asked about purpose, gratitude, compassion, and grit. Surveys were conducted in computer labs at school during class time, and took on average 25–35 minutes to complete. All eighth graders at selected schools were invited to participate in the survey, and parents were given the opportunity to opt their child out of participation. Over 90% of invited students completed the wave 1 survey. Interviewees were selected by school personnel, who were given the criteria of selecting students for a balance of gender, ethnicity, and school performance that reflected the school population. Interviews were conducted at the interviewee's school, in a private office or classroom, and took approximately 45–60 min.

Survey Measures

Purpose

We developed a new scale to measure adolescent purpose based on prior interview-based research (Damon 2008; Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014; Moran 2009). The Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale (Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014) first asks respondents to select their three most important life goals from a list of ten (*see* Appendix for the full measure). The ten goals include five that are beyond-the-self oriented and five that are self-oriented. For each beyond-the-self goal selected, respondents completed a scale of six items to measure commitment to and engagement in pursuing that goal. Items were on 5-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The commitment and

engagement scales were reliable for each beyond-the-self goal (α = .71–.79). The purpose score for respondents who selected one beyond-the-self goal is the scale mean for that goal. Those who selected more than one beyond-the-self goal will have two or three scale mean scores. Their purpose score is the highest of their scale mean scores. Respondents who did not rank a beyond-the-self item in their top three goals receive a purpose score of '1'.

Gratitude

We measured gratitude with a five-item scale that was derived from the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (Froh et al. 2011) and adapted to included items about expression of gratitude (e.g., "I expressed my appreciation by saying thank you," "I did something nice for someone else as a way of saying thank you." α = .74). Items were on a five-point frequency scale to indicate how often they did the activity in the item during the past month (never to always).

Compassion

Compassion was measured with a six-item scale (e.g., "How often do you worry about the well-being of humankind?" "How often do you care about people (you do not know) when they seem to be in need?" α = .87). Items were on a five-point scale (never to always, not at all willing to very willing). The compassion scale was based on the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Hwang et al. 2008), and adapted to be more youth-accessible. For example, the words compassion and strangers in the original items were replaced.

Grit

The grit scale used for this study was a brief version adapted for use with adolescents. The scale had five items (e.g., "I finished what I started," "I tried very hard even after I failed." α = .76) that were measured on a five-point frequency scale indicating how often they did the activity during the past month (never to always). The brief grit scale was adapted from the Grit-S Scale (Duckworth and Quinn 2009).

Interview Protocol To learn about participants' potential purpose in life, the interview protocol asked them to discuss what is most important in their lives, why, and what they do about it or plan to do about it in the future. The purpose portion of the interview was adapted from the Youth Purpose Interview Protocol (*see* Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014). Respondents at both wave 1 and wave 3 were asked about grit (things they work to get better at and what they do to improve, strategies used to achieve goals that demonstrate grit), and gratitude (what they are thankful for and what they do to express their gratitude), and at wave 3 they were also asked about compassion (whether they feel compassion and how they act on it). The interview was semi-structured, allowing the interviewer latitude to probe more deeply into the meaning of participant responses.

Analysis

We analyzed the wave 3 (fall of ninth grade) survey data for an overview of the correlations among the character strengths examined in this article (purpose, gratitude, grit, and compassion), and used the interviews to conduct case study analysis of the interviewees who showed purpose.

Interview coding and analysis

To identify purpose in the interviews, research team members used the Youth Purpose Interview Codebook (Malin, et al. 2008) to code for (1) Important, driving goals, (2) Beyond-the-self motivation for important goals, and (3) Action taken to accomplish important goals. Interviewees who had an important and driving goal that was beyond-the-self motivated and whose actions to accomplish the goal were substantial and sustained were determined to have purpose (*see* Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014 for full description of purpose coding and form determination). Two trained coders coded 10% of the interviews to check reliability and attained Cohen's Kappa scores of .56 (action), .77 (beyond-the-self motivation), and 1.00 (important goal), indicating good to excellent reliability (Fleiss 1981). The code with the lowest Kappa (action) had an agreement rate of 80%. The remaining 90% of interviews were then coded by one coder.

Gratitude, grit, and compassion were coded to identify the relationship that each had to purpose. We focused our analysis on the aspects of each character strength (gratitude, compassion, grit) that could potentially overlap with purpose, making comparisons of each of these aspects (codes) to see if patterns emerged differently among interviewees who were fully purposeful compared to those who were not (Corbin and Strauss 2015). To explore the relationship between gratitude and purpose, we used codes for gratitude content, including dispositional gratitude for blessings, existence, and good life conditions (Cohen's Kappa = .90). To explore the relationship between grit and purpose, we checked for grit strategies (Cohen's Kappa = .80–1.00) being used to pursue purpose goals, as well as text indicating whether or not the interviewee experienced challenges or difficulty in pursuing purpose goals. To explore the relationship between compassion and purpose, we

Table 1 Interview codes for purpose, gratitude, compassion, and grit

Code	Definition
Purpose	
Important goal	A goal or intention that interviewee ranked among most important things in life.
Goal action	Activity aimed at fulfilling important goal.
Beyond-the-self reason	Reason for activity or goal that is to contribute to or impact the world beyond the self.
Gratitude	
Transcendent gratitude	Feels gratitude for good life conditions, blessings, or existence.
Relational gratitude	Feels gratitude for relationships or the support of others.
Material gratitude	Feels gratitude for receiving material items or gifts.
Reciprocal gratitude	Expresses gratitude to reciprocate for something received.
Instrumental gratitude	Expresses gratitude to achieve self-oriented goal or avoid consequences.
Impact other gratitude	Expresses gratitude to have positive impact on other or acknowledge contribution of other person.
Compassion	
Concern for others	Describes concern for suffering others when asked what should be changed in the world or when describing important goals.
Universal compassion	Describes generalized desire and willingness to help others who are suffering.
Conditional compassion	Describes desire to help suffering others under certain conditions.
Grit	
Allots time to goal	Describes spending significant time to practice or otherwise work toward achieving a goal.
Pushes beyond failure	Continues pursuing a goal despite challenges or setbacks.
Challenges self	Seeks challenges in working toward a goal in order to improve skills.
Deliberate practice	Articulates method of practice to master an activity or achieve a goal.
Taps expert resources	Seeks advice from experts in pursuing a goal.
Makes use of feedback	Solicits and uses feedback from others in pursuing a goal.

coded for "concern for others" in relation to purpose goals (Cohen's Kappa = 1.00) and looked for patterns in the ways that fully purposeful interviewees described their desire and willingness to help suffering others compared to those who had precursory purpose or no purpose. Table 1 shows the codes used in this analysis.

To explore the relationship and interaction between purpose and the other character strengths, we developed six case studies: two interviewees with full purpose, two interviewees with purposeful aspirations that they were not acting on, and two interviewees who showed no indicators of purpose. In each of these cases we looked at how they talked about gratitude, compassion, and grit both separate from and in relation to their purpose goals.

Results

Survey Results

To analyze the relationship between each of the character strengths, we conducted a partial correlation using the mean scores for purpose, gratitude, compassion, and grit, controlling for the school that participants attended. Table 2 shows the correlations, mean scores and standard deviations for each variable. All of the character strengths were significantly correlated ($p < .001$).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of and correlations among character strength variables

	Purpose	Compassion	Grit	Gratitude
Purpose	–			
Compassion	.279	–		
Grit	.224	.321	–	
Gratitude	.243	.411	.533	–
Mean	3.50	3.63	3.85	4.24
SD	(1.21)	(.77)	(.62)	(.56)

Note. Correlations are controlled for school attended. All correlations are significant at the .001 level

Interview Results

The next section describes findings from the interview analysis. First, we discuss the domains in which

Table 3 Primary purpose goal categories and content for fully purposeful interviewees in wave 1

ID	Primary purpose category	Purpose content
10	Create	Be a writer who influences and helps others
11	Create	Be an author and dancer to inspire others and support family
12	Family	Be an engineer to support parents
13	Family	Be an athlete to respect family and make them proud
14	Family	Be an athlete to support parents and make them proud
15	Family	Make family proud and have a strong relationship with them
16	Family	Provide support for dad
17	Family	Be a boxer to provide support for family
18	Help Others	Be a doctor to support mother and help others
19	Help Others	Help others through writing and giving money to charity
20	Help Others	Respect and take care of others including bullying prevention
21	Help Others	Anti-bullying advocacy and support
22	Invent	Use engineering to invent helpful devices
23	Invent	Use technology for innovation
24	Invent	Design more reliable cars
25	Invent	Invent cars with less emissions
26	Religion	Serve God and lead church youth group to inspire others
27	Social Issues	Raise awareness of sexism
28	Social Issues	Inspire and educate others about social and environmental issues
29	Social Issues	Be vegetarian and advocate for animal rights
30	Social Issues	Solve environmental and political problems

interviewees were most likely to find purpose and the paths of action that most often led them to fulfill their purposeful intentions. Then we describe the relationship seen between purpose and the other character strengths examined in this analysis, using sample cases to demonstrate the patterns seen in those who were fully purposeful compared to those who were not.

Prevalence and domains of purpose

Of the 98 participants interviewed at wave 1 (eighth grade), 21 were found to be fully purposeful, meaning that they were actively pursuing an intention to contribute to the world beyond the self. Table 3 shows the wave 1 category of purpose for each interviewee that was fully purposeful. These categories of purpose were largely reflected in the domains of life where interviewees were most likely to find purpose: family, community, and future career goals.

Family Family was the largest domain of purpose among the interviewees, with eight (8% of the interview sample, 38% of the 21 purposeful interviewees) showing full purpose by striving to provide for their family in the future or make family proud through their accomplishments. Most interviewees said that family was among the top three important things in their life, and described the significance of the support their family provided to them, including encouragement to succeed, financial support, educational opportunities, and unconditional care. Many non-purposeful interviewees aspired to support their families in the future, but had no plan for how to do so other than to work hard in school, and were therefore not yet fully finding purpose in supporting family.

Community Early adolescence is a time when empathic emotions are gaining strength and young people are increasingly able to see opportunity in their school and community to act on those feelings. Among our interviewees, it was common to hear concern for others who are helpless or struggling, especially those who they could see or interact with in their communities, such as homeless people and victims of bullying. Forty of the 98 young people we interviewed at wave 1 expressed concern for others and a desire to help in some way, with the most common concerns being homelessness and hunger, bullying, animals, and problems experienced in developing countries (usually the interviewee's home country). Although these empathic concerns were heard frequently in the interviews, it was far less common for interviewees to report doing something about them and few ($n = 5$) were acting on their concerns at a purposeful level. Most said that they were limited in what they could do because of their young age. Those who took action did so in minimal ways,

by speaking up to a bully at school, donating food, or visiting a homeless shelter.

Future career Because of their age, interviewees were, for the most part, not yet thinking seriously about their future career path, and fewer were doing anything to work toward a specific career. Most interviewees described academic achievement as important and as a necessary step toward a future career, but were not yet exploring or planning career paths. However, some interviewees were focused on career goals that would allow them to pursue a purpose in life, and were already making progress toward those goals. Some purposeful interviewees ($n = 5$) sought careers for solving specific problems in the world, such as by developing lower-emission cars, inventing better prosthetic devices, or curing diseases. Others ($n = 4$) were working toward specific careers that they felt would enable them to support their family in the future, and a few others ($n = 3$) were pursuing creative careers in order to inspire or help others.

Engaging in purpose activity

The purposeful interviewees met our criteria for purpose in part because they were not just dreaming about, but actually doing something to accomplish a purposeful goal. Those who expressed beyond-the-self concerns or goals but were not acting on them were not fully purposeful. Many interviewees who described beyond-the-self concerns, such as helping the homeless, supporting their parents, or fixing environmental problems said they were too young to do anything about them. Others were exploring avenues of engagement, but described minimal activity such as visiting a homeless shelter one time. Fully purposeful interviewees found ways to actively pursue their beyond-the-self goals that were not limited by their age. While these young people were creative in finding ways to act on their prosocial goals, there were three notable paths to purposeful engagement among them: (1) access to inexpensive technology, (2) extracurricular youth programs, and (3) writing.

Technology Widespread and relatively easy internet access has opened new possibilities for young people to engage in prosocial and meaningful activity with far-ranging impact. Some of our interviewees described using social media to advocate for youth issues or engage with others who share their prosocial concerns. Abby said that she uses Twitter to support other teens who face bullying at school or are struggling with suicidal thoughts. Caleb used youtube and Instagram to connect with a group of like-minded young people who sought to educate others about social and environmental issues: "we spread knowledge … about the world,… about what's happening, GMOs, chem trails. We just teach each other as we grow on." Some used easy-access technology other than the internet to pursue their interest in engineering. Two purposeful interviewees described a history of taking apart or fixing household electronics and toys, and creating devices out of common materials like batteries and cardboard. Others pursued their interest in engineering by working on the family car.

Organized activity A more traditional avenue for purpose activity was found in youth organizations. Some purposeful interviewees were involved in organizations that gave them opportunities to discover, explore, and develop interests. Of note, while several interviewees shared the common experience of finding purpose in organized activities, they were diverse in how they found purpose through participation in these organizations, showing that individual young people bring their personal values to the activity to develop their unique purpose. For some, organizations provided a traditional route to purpose, giving them the opportunity to develop an interest into a meaningful aspiration. Jackson had a deep interest in designing cars, planning to 1 day invent a more reliable car. He enjoyed sketching cars and dreaming up new designs, but was able to more fully pursue his goal when he joined a community youth group, which offered the opportunity to build and repair go-carts. For some interviewees, organized programs provided an opportunity to actively work toward the ubiquitous goal of supporting family. Tyler fully pursued his distant future goal of supporting his family by participating in an engineering program for students. Although not excited by engineering itself, he saw it as a path to a gainful career that would enable him to provide for his parents. Brianna found a less traditional path to purpose through her participation in sports at the Boys & Girls Club. Her greatest concern was sexism, and though she enjoyed playing sports for fun, she found meaning in choosing sports that were considered "boys only" sports at the Club.

Writing The third prevalent way that interviewees engaged in purpose activity was through writing. Although expressive activities are a common source of purpose for older adolescents, younger adolescents like our interviewees are less likely to be beyond-the-self oriented in their artistic pursuits, and therefore not yet finding purpose in them (Malin 2015). True to that previous finding, there was little artistic purpose among our sample, yet several described creative writing as a meaningful form of self-expression and as a way to connect with, inspire, or impact others. Brianna, who participated in boys' sports to fight sexism, also used class writing assignments to express her ideas about sexism in popular media. Another girl wrote plays, partly to explore thoughts and feelings about her family, but also saw a prosocial goal to her writing. "I've always wanted to use my

writing to speak up and support the people in the world that have less than me."

Connecting values with interests to develop purpose In these and other ways that purposeful youth worked toward their purposeful aims, we could see them striving to make connections between their burgeoning values—family, community, fairness, innovation—and their interests. Several interviewees who believed strongly in the importance of innovation for improving society connected that belief to their existing love for cars and other technologies, and sought ways to act on that belief by designing cars or inventing new devices. Other purposeful interviewees described both strong respect and concern for family, and a passion for sports. Some of these connected their family values to their sports activity by striving to excel in order to make their parents proud, and get a college sports scholarship or have a sports career to help with family finances. These young people showed how young people can find purpose by connecting their interests and favorite activities with the values and beliefs that are taking on increasing importance at this stage of life.

Purpose and other character strengths in early adolescence

To describe the relationship between purpose and other character strengths that we saw in our sample, we developed case studies of six interviewees. For these case studies, we used the interviews from wave 3, because those interviews included more questions related to the topics of this analysis. The six cases were selected because they represented one of three groups according to the purpose coding of their interviews: fully purposeful (coded for all indicators of purpose), precursory purpose (some but not all indicators of purpose), and no purpose (no indicators of purpose). Abby and Caleb were selected as examples of fully purposeful interviewees—Abby was the anti-bullying advocate introduced above, and Caleb found purpose in working with technology to eventually create apps and devices that would help others. Devin and Kayla were selected as examples of the group that showed precursory signs of purpose, both aspiring to help others who are less fortunate but not driven to act on that goal in any significant way. David and Jordan were selected as examples of the group that showed no indicators of purpose in their interviews.

Full purpose in relation to gratitude, and compassion Among all of the interviewees, the most purposeful were more likely than their non-purposeful peers to experience dispositional gratitude. Some expressed their dispositional gratitude abstractly, in terms of blessings or feeling grateful for life, whereas others described an ongoing appreciation for the simple things, such as Caleb, who said, "I feel thankful and grateful everyday 'cause I have water, I have clothes, I have food, I have a shelter, I have a school, and I have everything I need. So yeah, I feel grateful every day…. 'Cause I know that around the world, there's some people that are unlucky and really don't have everything."

Compassion, like gratitude, was described in universal or self-transcendent terms by the most purposeful interviewees. Abby, for example, said, "Not everyone is as fortunate as me and if you have the chance to help somebody I believe that you should take it…. I try to be compassionate towards everyone, if I see somebody in need of help," and Caleb said, "We should just help each other 'cause we're humans. We depend on each other."

Subthreshold purpose in relation to gratitude and compassion Devin and Kayla, as cases of those who aspired to purposeful goals but were not yet acting on them, were also grateful and compassionate, but described their gratitude and compassion in conditional terms rather than transcendent or universal. Devin said his purpose was to "to make a difference and help and improve the lives of others," but felt there was "nothing that I can really do now…because I'm still just a kid." He saw that truly making a difference was a distant possibility, and so instead of fully committing to his goal, he did small local acts, such as attending a volunteer day at a homeless shelter with his youth group, helping out at the local pet store, and picking up litter along his street. Similarly, he described his sense of gratitude in terms of the most proximal relationships, and therefore did not show the transcendent level of gratitude expressed by Caleb. Asked to describe recent experiences of gratitude, he recalled thoughts he had on Thanksgiving: "I really felt thankful to have a mom like her, 'cause she's fun…. I started thinking about family, and how important it is to me, and I started thinking, who would I be without them?" When asked about compassion, Devin continued to think in terms of proximal relationships, describing compassion as the forgiveness he feels for family and friends who have wronged him. Proximal prosocial thinking is typical at this age, and an important step for those who are seeking purpose by improving lives of others. Local and small-scale actions in response to these concerns may not reach the level of fulfilling purpose, but they can put a young person on the path to later purpose.

Like Devin, Kayla wanted to help improve the lives of others, but her motivation was conditional. When asked why she wanted to help others, she said, "Because I wouldn't really want for me to be less fortunate and no one to help me out." Her motivations for gratitude and compassion were similarly qualified. When asked why she tries to be compassionate, she said, "Because putting yourself in their shoes,… you would want the help, too." Her sense of gratitude was strong and she said that she feels

grateful "all the time." However, she qualified her gratitude by saying that she tries to be grateful "because it helps me feel better about myself." Devin and Kayla both expressed a strong desire to make a difference in the lives of others, but as yet were not motivated to substantially pursue that goal. Their unfulfilled purpose, compared to Caleb and Abby, appeared consistent with their attitudes about gratitude and compassion, in both cases conditional on factors that suggest they may be less developed in each of these moral character strengths.

Non-purpose in relation to gratitude and compassion Just under half of the interviewees ($n = 46$) had neither full purpose nor a strong goal or desire to contribute beyond the self. Some, like David and Jordan, had goals and interests, but showed no beyond-the-self concerns. David loved playing football, dreamed of making a lot of money, and aspired to be the best at everything he does. When asked what he is grateful for, he said, "That I got good friends that keep me out of trouble," and he did not like to feel gratitude more than was necessary: "I don't like all that feeling stuff. So, enough is good enough for me." Jordan, a musician who likes music because "it's pretty fun," was similarly low in gratitude. When asked what he felt grateful for, Jordan only thought of specific instances, such as when his friend let him borrow his drumsticks for practice, and acknowledged that he is not as grateful as he should be: "My dad does a lot for me every day, and I'm not grateful for everything he does." The absence of purpose and gratitude was mirrored in their lack of compassion. As Jordan said when asked if he tries to be compassionate, "Sometimes I try and do it. Other times, I just pass it off as nothing. I just ignore the odd feeling to help the person."

Grit and purpose Unlike the moral or self-transcendent character strengths we asked interviewees to talk about, no patterns emerged in the relationship between their purpose and their demonstrations of grit. The most purposeful young people described above—Caleb and Abby—were not particularly gritty, and expressed ideas about grit that showed very different interactions with purpose. Caleb found purpose working with technology and learning new skills to pursue his high tech goals, but when asked about challenges he faced in working on those new skills, he said it was not challenging, he did not struggle, and he did not dedicate tireless hours to practice. Abby chose an easy path to pursue her anti-bullying advocacy goals by using Twitter. It was effective and took very little time. She considered other options for doing her anti-bullying work, such as starting an organization at school, but said it would be too time consuming. In contrast to the argument that grit matters because success comes from pushing through challenges, learning from mistakes, and intensive or deliberate practice, young adolescents like Abby and Caleb pursued purpose by engaging in activities that were accessible and presented little difficulty.

Discussion

Although character has been a topic of interest for developmental scientists for some time, we know little about how vital character strengths, such as purpose, develop in the earliest stages. The study of early character development is emerging (e.g., Bowers et al. 2010; Froh et al. 2011), but more research is needed to learn not only how individual character strengths develop and which factors contribute to their development, but also how distinct character strengths develop in relationship to one another in the broader picture of an individual's whole character development. In this article, we described purpose as a moral strength that encompasses future-directedness, long-term goal commitment, connection to something larger than the self, and action in service of the greater good. We examined cases of early-adolescent purpose and precursory purpose, to see where purposeful intentions begin and how young people act on those intentions. We then looked at young adolescents' discussions of purpose, gratitude, compassion, and grit, to identify any patterns in how they think about and exercise these different but related character strengths.

In our case studies, we found young adolescents driven by love, respect, and worry for their families; by concern for people suffering at their schools and in their communities; by outrage at injustice; and by problems in the environment and society that they wanted to fix. Most were not acting on these drives, but imagined them as something to pursue in the future. A few, however, found opportunity to act on these concerns and values to develop full purpose, by connecting them to their ongoing favorite hobbies, or by engaging in activities that are most easily accessed by young adolescents: simple technology, youth organizations, and writing.

Gratitude, compassion, and purpose were significantly but not highly correlated among our survey respondents, indicating that they had some relationship but were not all of one unified moral piece in our early adolescent sample. That finding corresponds to our conceptual framing of purpose as it differs from these other moral strengths, specifically that purpose is more future-oriented and agentic than gratitude and compassion. Findings from our interview cases provide some insight into the developmental relationship among these three moral strengths by pointing to qualitative differences in gratitude and compassion between those with full purpose and those who are not yet realizing their purposeful aspirations. We found that young people who have purposeful aspirations, but are not yet acting on

them, may experience other-oriented character strengths conditionally, perhaps on their way to a more fully developed form.

Grit, an achievement strength, showed no relevance to purpose pursuit among our interview cases, although it had a significant but small correlation with purpose in our survey sample. It may be that the same people who endorse goal commitment are also likely to endorse prosocial goals, but when examined more thoroughly, the types of goals that young adolescents apply grit to are not the same as the goals that give them purpose. These exploratory findings are not conclusive, but indicate that at this early stage, the goal commitment implied by grit and the goal commitment implied by purpose are not one and the same. Grit is an inner resource for goal commitment that develops without regard for the moral content of the goal pursued, and conversely, purpose is an inner drive that may be acted on without need for gritty perseverance.

The low but significant correlation among the different character strengths we analyzed indicates that they are related but do not have a predictable developmental relationship. We know from previous research that purpose does not develop according to a linear trajectory, but takes shape and evolves according to life experiences and opportunities, and how the individual responds to those experiences (Damon 2008; Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014). Our findings in the present study reinforce the idea that purpose, and the other character strengths we examined, develop according to both the readiness of the individual and the circumstances of life that afford opportunities for them to develop. Moreover, we argue that the developmental relationship among these character strengths is multidirectional. For example, a young person can have grit that supports later purpose development, or a purposeful goal that encourages the subsequent development of grit. One character strength does not inherently precede the other developmentally, as we saw for example above, in the study of gratitude in early adolescence that showed a reciprocal developmental relationship between gratitude and the prosocial orientation that is inherent to purpose (Froh et al. 2010). Therefore, the development of each character strength must be conducted independently, as well as integrated to see how they support (or hinder) each other.

The analysis reported here is an introduction to our ongoing study of character development in early adolescence, and is intended to serve as a conceptual foundation for future research on purpose as a character strength and its relationship to other strengths as they develop. Specifically, our findings uncover potential qualitative differences in the development of moral strengths (gratitude and compassion) between those who have purpose, those who show signs of emerging purpose, and those who are not yet showing any indicators of purpose. When considered along with previous research, which shows that purpose develops in the dynamic relationship between person and context described by Lerner and Callina (2014), our findings suggest that the dynamic relationship of individuals with their contexts results in a multidirectional developmental relationship among different character strengths. However, while this study demonstrated the distinct-yet-related nature of certain character strengths, its limited scope did not allow for a more thorough investigation of how different character strengths might interact over the course of development, or how the relationships among them might change as they develop.

Some research has shown the bidirectional relationship between related character strengths, such as Froh et al. (2010) study showing that gratitude and prosocial motivation enhance each other over time in a mutually causal relationship over the developmental course. Although we did not examine causal relationships, our findings also suggested a relationship between gratitude and prosocial motivation, including the implication that unfulfilled prosocial motivation may correspond to conditional rather than fully dispositional or transcendental gratitude. Further research should examine how gratitude in its fullest form interacts with, is supported by, and promotes purpose as it develops.

Our findings suggest the need for further research on the relationship between purpose and other goal-achievement character strengths such as grit. Although purpose and grit are conceptually similar in that both involve commitment to higher-order goals, and there was a significant correlation between grit and purpose in our survey sample, our qualitative findings suggest that young adolescents do not seek purpose through activities that require grit, and instead might find paths to purpose that minimize challenge and effort. Previous work on grit showed that the effort component of grit is correlated with enjoyment of meaningful and engaging pursuits (Von Culin et al. 2014). Likewise, research with adult moral exemplars found that they pursue their moral purpose even when it is challenging or entails great sacrifice (Colby and Damon 1992). However, both of these studies were conducted with adults and it may be that adolescents are not as eager to seek meaning and purpose in things that require effort or personal sacrifice. Further research should explore how grit and purpose interact over the course of development from adolescence into adulthood.

In our ongoing study of youth purpose, we have worked toward developing a measure of purpose that can capture the multiple qualitative dimensions of purpose we see in our purpose interviews, while still being efficient and functional for use in research and practice. The purpose measure used in this study is important progress on this journey and it will soon be available as a validated assessment of purpose for

diverse applications. It can be used to investigate change in purpose over time; the relationship between purpose and other outcomes, such as well-being, academic achievement, and civic engagement; and the factors that support young people in developing purpose. Additional research is needed to confirm the usability of this and other purpose measures for research and applied settings, for learning how purpose develops in adolescence and across the lifespan, and for capturing the the qualitative nature of purpose and its role in a person's character.

Conclusion

As the science of character development matures and increasingly is called upon to inform educational practice and assessment, there is need for a coherent conceptual and empirical foundation for investigation of the different strengths that make up a person's character. While these character strengths are understood to be discrete, and research is needed that explains their distinct qualities, developmental trajectories, and unique contributions to the whole of a person's character, we cannot advance character science until the research can also coherently integrate the study of distinct strengths. The science of character development requires that we understand how character strengths interact with each other in the course of development and how each functions as part of, and is impacted by, the developmental system that produces one's character and connects it with the world. Peterson and Seligman proposed a new model for the study of character as a constellation of character strengths. Our goal with this article was to build from their starting point by laying a conceptual foundation for the study of purpose as a character strength, and to set a course for empirical investigation of purpose as it develops integrated with other strengths to create the whole character with which a person interacts with the world.

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Author Contributions HM participated in conceiving and designing the study, collected, coded, and interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript; IL participated in collecting and interpreting the data and drafting of the manuscript; WD conceived and designed the study and drafted the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Ethical Approval This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Stanford University and University of Pennsylvania.

Informed Consent All eligible students and their parents received an information letter about the study and given the opportunity to decline participation by returning an opt-out form. Students who participated in the study read and agreed to an assent form prior to completing the survey and also prior to participating in the interview. Assent was obtained at each wave of data collection.

Appendix

Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale (Malin et al. 2014, Prosocial Youth Purpose Scale, Unpublished survey; Malin et al. 2014)

1. Think about the things you want to accomplish in your life. From the items listed below, choose up to three that come closest to describing the goals that are most important to you.

- Be physically strong or athletic
- Improve the lives of others
- Live an adventurous life
- Serve God or a higher power
- Provide support for my family
- Create, invent, or discover things that will make a difference in the world
- Live a life full of fun
- Have a high paying career
- Contribute to solving a problem in the environment or society
- Have good friends

The next questions ask about some of the goals for your life that you ranked as most important. Fill in the blank with items selected above. Complete the scale separately for each item.

(5-point scale: "strongly disagree—strongly agree")

1. I have a plan for how I will…….
2. In my free time, I am usually doing something to …….
3. I feel that it is my mission in life to …….
4. Every week, I do things to work on my goal to …….
5. When I'm an adult, one of my most important goals will still be to …….
6. The main reason I want to ……. is so I can be someone who makes a positive contribution to the world.

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