

# Transitions to Older Adulthood: Exploring Midlife Women's Narratives Regarding Purpose in Life

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## Abstract

Purpose in life has been shown to affect important outcomes related to healthy aging. However, quantitative studies have consistently found lower purpose in life among older adults. A qualitative inquiry into purpose in life may offer insights into why there appears to be a decline in later life, and for whom. This study investigated two waves of life narratives from late midlife women to explore how they expressed meaning and purpose regarding their life paths. White and Black women ( $N = 16$ ) with higher and lower purpose in life were sampled based on a prior quantitative study (Ko, Hooker, Geldhof, & McAdams, 2016). Using a grounded theory approach and a life course perspective lens, we analyzed two waves of life stories over five years to understand how participants experienced their purposes in life over time. Three common themes emerged including the centrality of family relationships, the negotiation of work, and the pursuit of agency. Those with higher and lower purpose in life scores varied in how they defined and enacted purpose in life based on prior and current life experiences. Being proactive in directing one's life course was shown to differentiate those with higher versus lower purpose in life. In transitions into older adulthood, having a proactive approach to the world may be salient for a purposeful aging process.

**Keywords:** Purpose in life, midlife, gender, life story, grounded theory, life course perspective

## Introduction

Through daily actions, individuals construct and refine the meaning of their lives in relation to their social contexts over time (Baumeister, 1991; McAdams, 2012; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Pursuing meaning and purpose in life protects individuals from negative outcomes and promotes successful adaptation in late life (Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017; Reker & Wong, 2012). To date, most quantitative studies show that young and midlife adults tend to report higher levels of purpose in life than older adults (Pinquart, 2002; the Midlife in the United States [MIDUS] Studies; Woods et al., 2016). Moreover, older men tend to report higher purpose in life

with a slower decline rate than older women (Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017). These robust findings highlight the need to explore how midlife women, in particular, express and experience meaning in their lives over time as they transition into older adulthood.

To address the lack of qualitative inquiry into how midlife women develop and describe their life paths related to purpose and meaning (Hedberg, Brulin, & Alex, 2009; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Zhu, Lomas, Burke, & Ivztan, 2017), we analyzed the life stories of 16 midlife Black and White American women, who showed extreme scores (higher versus lower) on Ryff's (1989b) Purpose in Life Subscale (PIL) from our phase

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1 study (see Ko, Hooker, Geldhof, & McAdams, 2016). By applying a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), we sought to unpack why some women expressed stronger purpose in their lives when compared to other women in the sample across two points in time spanning five years in late midlife.

### **Theoretical Definition and Correlates of Purpose in Life**

Purpose in life has been discussed as a sub-construct within meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991) and the two concepts have been examined interchangeably in the literature. Recently, positive psychological research calls for distinguishing these two constructs (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Zhu, et al., 2017). Importantly, meaning in life relates to questions such as why I am here. In contrast, purpose in life prompts individuals to answer questions about how to achieve a sense of purpose through goals and actions (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). We utilized the theoretical definition of purpose as “having goals, intentions, a sense of directedness, all of which contribute to feelings of meaningfulness and integration about the various parts of one’s life” (Ryff, 1989a, p. 43–44) and “a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009, p. 242). Individuals may have various life goals that may be consistent or distinct (Baumeister, 1991; Emmons, 1999; Reker & Wong, 2012). Through the process of achieving these goals consistently and with effort, adults gain a sense of purpose in life (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Consistent with this theoretical approach, adults who show strong sense of agency and proactively pursue own life goals may achieve a higher sense of purpose in life than those who passively pursue goals in reaction to life events.

Research has shown the significant associations between sense of purpose in life with having better health, economic resources, marital status, self-competence, and work satisfaction as well as having roles related to families and volunteers (Bronk, 2014; Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017; Krause, 2008; Piquart, 2002). Most of what we know in terms of what may contribute to adults’ meaning and purpose in life is based on studies conceptualizing purpose being part of meaning in life. Although it may vary to a certain extent by the age of individuals as well as cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds, several researchers (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Reker & Wong, 2012) have noted that relationships with family and friends may be particularly

important for deriving a sense of meaning in life. However, these relationships may not serve as the basis for the life aims we set (e.g., McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff, 1989a) as we try to distinguish purpose from meaning in life. For instance, experiences with one’s romantic partner may be central to one’s life overall, but one may define purpose in life completely unrelated to that romantic experience.

Generativity has been theorized as the major developmental goal in middle adulthood—caring for younger and older generations and contributing to society as a whole while reflecting on personal mortality (Erikson, 1963; Lachman, 2004; McAdams, 2012; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). As such, generativity may serve as a developmental motivation for midlife adults’ search and formation of purpose in life. Indeed, our prior study results showed generativity was associated with higher PIL (Ko et al., 2016). Moreover, using the same longitudinal data, Jones and McAdams (2013) found significant racial and gender differences on becoming generative through earlier socializing experiences in various contexts, including family, mentorship, education systems and institutional influences. In their study, generativity was correlated with family influences more for women than for men. Although Blacks on average showed higher generativity than Whites, socioeconomic status (SES), but not the contextual experiences included in the study, significantly predicted the variation in generativity for the Black participants. That is, Blacks with higher SES tended to report more generativity than those with lower SES. The authors speculated that certain levels of financial stability or resources might be needed for the studied positive socializing influences to enhance one’s generativity. To understand the interplay between generativity and purpose in life among Black and White Americans, one must consider their lifelong social and historical contexts.

### **Understanding the Development of Purpose in Life**

Little theory has been proposed to explain how individuals discover and develop purpose in life. By theorizing purpose in life development with a person-centric approach, rather than variable-centric, Kashdan and McKnight (2009) proposed that people develop purpose in life through a combination of three pathways: 1) proactive development describes one’s effortful, intentional, and self-reflective trial-and-error process of search and refining one’s purpose; 2) reactive development refers to re-evaluating one’s life priorities

after transformative life events whether happening to oneself (directly) or through others (indirectly); and 3) social learning development suggests one forms purpose in life through modeling behaviors and associated emotions of significant others. Limited empirical studies have been conducted to support this theory, except for a qualitative study with thirteen young adult career changers who reported high purpose in life (Zhu, et al., 2017). The results supported Kashdan and McKnight's purpose development theory that the participants demonstrated elements of the three pathways in their purpose reconstruction process. Moreover, the authors emphasized considering purpose as a dynamic process that can change in response to life circumstances.

One approach to empirically understanding the development of purpose is using a life course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder & George, 2016). An understanding of late midlife women's life stories over time must include a focus on the multiple influences of individual biological, social, and psychological developmental changes, family interactions and transitions over time, and the broader sociohistorical context that influences their family roles, work, and values. For the current late midlife Baby Boomers, the sociohistorical contexts have influenced age-graded and gender-graded development of health and well-being trajectories differently than prior generations (Moen & Spencer, 2006). During their upbringing, Baby Boomers experienced the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights protests, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the Women's Movement in the 1960s. They tend to follow gendered scripts, in which most men worked continuously from school completion to retirement whereas most women pursued educational and employment opportunities while still performing major family caregiver roles (Moen & Spencer, 2006). This perspective promotes a deeper understanding of how social location shapes lives over time and how it may variously influence the construction of one's purpose in life. For instance, the experience of common transitions for most women such as becoming a partner, a mother, or a grandmother, may be distinctly different as reflected by cultural traditions, gender role expectations, and economic resources, perhaps more so for those women who do not experience these transitions on time or at all. As such, when searching for purpose in life in midlife, women may vary in how they balance multiple roles associated with their life course experiences (Lachman, 2004). In general, women are more likely to experience segmented employment, education, and community engagement due to family

obligations compared to men (Baker, Buchanan, Mingo, Roker, & Brown, 2015; Moen & Spencer, 2006).

Through life narratives, late midlife women's life course trajectories may be made visible highlighting key life course events and turning points that have shaped perceptions of purpose in life. As this study focused on personal narratives over time, we acknowledge that through the process of constructing and revising life stories, individuals create meaning, purpose, and a sense of continuity in life coherent with their identities and cultural contexts (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; McAdams, 2012). By employing a life course perspective, we were attentive to the ways that earlier life experiences for our participants may have influenced their perceptions and experiences of purpose in late midlife.

### Current Study

In the phase one study, growth mixture modeling was applied to examine the five-year purpose in life trajectory (PIL) among all of the participants from the Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood (Ko et al., 2016). Most of the participants showed higher-stable purpose in life, especially for African Americans compared to White Americans, while a smaller proportion showed lower-stable purpose in life. Building on such previous findings, we engaged in a qualitative analysis to unpack the construction of purpose in life by comparing and contrasting the life narrative of a subsample from the same longitudinal sample. Due to the concerns of intersectionality and the larger proportion of women in the overall sample (Baker et al., 2015; Cole, 2009; Moen & Spencer, 2006), as well as women's steeper declines in PIL (Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017), we focused on 16 late midlife White and Black women in this study. Specifically, we sought to understand how women with higher versus relatively lower PIL experienced purpose in life over a five-year period in relation to their life course experiences.

### Method

#### Participants

We used existing data from the Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood (FLSA), an ongoing study of aging among midlife Baby Boomer cohort (born between 1951 and 1955). Beginning in 2008, 163 adults, aged 55 to 58, living in a Midwest metropolitan area, were recruited annually to complete an online survey of demographic and psychosocial measurements, followed by a 2- to 3-hour in-person life story interview (Time 1 and Time 5). Each interview included seven sections: Life Chapters, Key Scenes in the Life Story, Future Scripts, Challenges,

Personal Ideologies, Life Themes, and Reflections (see McAdams, 2008). The interviews were conducted by three researchers, digitally recorded, and transcribed. Several studies have described the full sample (e.g., Jones & McAdams, 2013; Ko et al., 2016).

### **Purposive Subsampling Procedure**

The two waves of life stories (2008-2009; 2013-2014) used for the current study represent the second phase of a multi-method project: Sixteen women were purposively subsampled to represent individuals with higher and relatively lower PIL scores identified in the phase one study (see Ko et al., 2016). Ryff's 7-item 6-point Likert-type *Purpose in Life Subscale* (1989b) was used to measure purpose in life (e.g., "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life."). Derived by theoretical synthesis of psychological well-being, Ryff's *Purpose in Life Subscale* (and the full scale) has been widely used (e.g., in the Midlife in the United States [MIDUS] Study and the Health and Retirement Study [HRS]) and validated in many studies (Bronk, 2014; Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017). Due to the larger numbers of women (64%) in the overall sample and the desire to maintain both White and Black participants in the qualitative sample, we focused on a subsample of equal representation of White and Black women. Among the 93 female participants who completed both Time 1 and Time 5 surveys, we randomly selected eight female participants from the top 20% of PIL scores ( $n = 22$ ;  $\text{Mean}_{\text{PIL}} = 4.66$  out of 5) and eight from the lower 20% of PIL scores ( $n = 15$ ;  $\text{Mean}_{\text{PIL}} = 2.97$  out of 5), proportionally by race/ethnicity, by utilizing the RANDOM function in Excel. For the PIL lower 20%, since there were only two Black women in the lower 20%, they were selected purposively. Six White women were then randomly selected. Accordingly, for the PIL top 20%, six Black women and two White women were randomly selected to balance the total number of Black and White women in the subsample. The final sample for this study included eight Black women and eight White women with a total of 31 life stories (one participant remaining in the study at Time 5 did not complete the second life story interview). Pseudonyms were used for all participants (see Table 1 for their demographic characteristics). As a mnemonic to assist the reader in understanding and interpretation, pseudonyms beginning with the letter *H* (e.g., Helen) refer to those with *higher* PIL scores, and pseudonyms beginning with the letter *L* (e.g., Laura) represent those with relatively *lower* PIL scores. For a similar methodology focusing on narrative comparison of

extreme groups, see McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997).

### **Data Analysis**

Unlike other studies explicitly asking individuals to define purpose in life (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996), the present analysis, guided by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014), focused on the rich life narratives provided by the women. The life course perspective sensitized the authors to explore how life course trajectories, social location, social contexts, and temporal as well as historical influences shaped narratives, and whether these patterns were distinct between the higher and lower PIL women.

Because this was a study based on a dissertation, the first author was the primary researcher to develop the coding system based on the literature and discussions with the second and third authors. For the first phase of the analysis, all authors read multiple transcripts to get a sense of how deeply constructs in the interview protocol were covered. The first author repeatedly read all transcripts, listened to the recordings of the interviews, and created individual life story overviews to understand the overall context of their lives. For example, participants reflected on their geographic moves since childhood, current and past family status and living situations, current and past careers (if retired), the ebb and flow of relationships, life challenges, and future plans. In the second phase, the first three authors worked on developing the coding system. The first author conducted open coding on two participants' life stories (Time 1 and Time 5 together) and discussed with two of the co-authors about the transcripts and the initial coding together to make sure the codes consistently reflected the life stories. Reliability was employed by first coding a sample of interviews separately and then later reconciling individual approaches to the coding process. They focused on one set (T1 and T5) of data to read, tentatively code, and discuss together, making further changes as needed to the coding system. Additional codes were developed, refined, or collapsed throughout the process and before continuing the next rounds of coding. After final codes were identified and used on all transcripts, the findings and notes regarding analytical ideas were shared and discussed. Codes included purpose in life (when participants explicitly described their purpose in life), life goals, life accomplishment, life regrets, important past experiences, transitions, timing, generative behaviors, parental role reflection, racial/ethnic identity, productive paid labor, reproductive labor, resilience, gender roles, the role of others,

spirituality, health, agency, and conscientiousness. Emergent themes were further identified guided by the theoretical purpose in life definitions (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff, 1989a). As part of an ongoing process, the interconnections between the themes continued to be discussed and how purpose in life might emerge for the participants over the life course were discussed with an attempt to synthesize the two waves of life stories. A qualitative data management software program, ATLAS.ti (Version 7.5.6), was used to organize the data, codes, and researchers' notes to facilitate the iterative analytical process.

### Results

Among the 16 participants, nine women explicitly discussed their purpose in life during interviews. From

their life story narratives, three overarching themes emerged with subthemes (see Table 2). First, whether partnered or not, participants focused intensively on the *centrality of relationships*, identifying roles as mothers, wives, daughters, or caregivers to others as providing a context for establishing purpose in life. Second, paid *work* offered opportunities for achieving goals and expressing purpose in life through actions, while others worked to create economic stability during instability. Finally, identification as a proactive *agent* in one's own life path over time shed light as to differentiations in PIL scores within the sample. We report the importance of each theme as it related to the meaning participants derived from their life journeys as well as whether these themes appeared to highlight the differences among participants regarding their perceived purposes in life.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the subsample participants

Name (pseudonym)	Age (Time 1)	Race	Marital status (T1–T5)	Adult children	Employment status	Religious affiliation
Laura	55	WA	married	1	Healthcare	Jewish
Lany	55	WA	married	2	Retired as a sensory panelist in the spring of 2007; part-time library assistant at T2	None
Leah	56	WA	divorced	0	Education, retired in the summer of 2007; substitute teacher one year later	Jewish
Lulu <sup>a</sup>	N/A	WA	divorced	1	Registered nurse	Catholic
Lucy	55	AA	never married	2	Legal	Lutheran (converted to Baptist at T5)
Lydia	55	WA	married	2	Management, retired at T2	Christian
Lisa	55	WA	married	2	Office	Catholic
Lili	58	AA	never married	0	Healthcare	Christian
Hanna	56	WA	married (divorced at T4)	2	Healthcare	Unitarian
Harriet	56	WA	married	0	Education; retired in the fall of 2007	Methodist
Heather	57	AA	divorced	1 <sup>b</sup>	Management	Pentecostal
Haley	55	AA	never married	0	Sales	Baptist
Helen	58	AA	divorced	6 <sup>c</sup>	Education	Buddhist
Holly	57	AA	divorced	3	Business	Baptist
Hester	57	AA	married (divorced at T4)	1	Arts	none
Helena	58	AA	never married	1	Unemployed	Baptist

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Lulu's actual age at Time 1 was missing in survey data and she did not mention her age during interviews. However, due to the study design, her age was between 55 and 58 at Time 1. <sup>b</sup>Heather's adult and only daughter died from cancer in 2002. <sup>c</sup>Helen had one stepdaughter from her ex-husband's prior marriage. They had three children together, and she adopted two more children from her friend when she died.

## **“What Has Made My Life Rich is Family”: Centrality of Relationships?**

All but one participant extensively discussed relationships in their narratives. Critical family relationships included those with husbands or partners as they entered older adulthood, adult children, and others needing care including aging parents, grandchildren, and other extended family members. Most participants expressed a desire to follow typical gendered social norms during adulthood. Yet, intersectionality of race and gender shaped lives distinctly: five White women were married at the time of the interviews, whereas none of the Black women were married (only one was married but divorced at Time 4). How purpose in life may be unpacked in their discussions of relationships varied by their marital status over the life course, including remaining married, being divorced, and never married.

### **Marriage as the major life course context**

Among the five White women who remained married, Harriet, Lany, and Lydia, explicitly shared relationships as related to their purpose in life. For Harriet, her discussion around relationships was mostly meaning-driven and relayed how she actively attends to them:

What has made my life rich is family relationships, and relationships with my husband, and his significant family, and to have been a part of my family as long as I could, and to have taken care of my parents as they took care of me. That would certainly be a theme. Not just family relationships, but just relationships in general... I really value friends. I try to nurture them, and to take care of friendships (Harriet, Time 1).

However, such a realization did not come without effort. Her first marriage with her college boyfriend ended after six years and she decided to resist pressures to quickly remarry and focused rather on her career and social network:

I felt what a loser I am, you know, the black sheep of the family. So, it was pretty low... The next decade would be 30 to 40 [years of age]. I called it “Woman grows up”. I loved my job, and started to meet a whole other world of people who were like me. They were single women that were empowered, confident, divorced or never married... I had more guy interests than I ever thought possible. Kind of skirting relationships because I didn’t want to get settled down because it had not been good for me... At 40, I

was a little bit restless... I’ll call this “The Beginning of the Big Change” (Harriet, Time 1).

Meeting her second husband in her early 40s, Harriet experienced a satisfied marriage marked by shared values and interests. Three years later, she became a caregiver for her parents until they died and expressed satisfaction with her role. At Time 1 and Time 5, she consistently expressed her desire to reconnect with her husband’s family in New Zealand. She shared that his family will feature prominently in the future by underscoring her goal to be part of their lives, especially with the children because she did not have her own.

In contrast, Lany and Lydia highlighted how their lives were primarily focused on the home and caring for their husbands and children. Both women clearly expressed not knowing their purpose in life except highlighting the importance of family relationships. Taking into account their life course experiences, both Lany and Lydia’s fathers were alcoholics and they expressed greater closeness to their mothers. Lany’s mother modeled caregiving within the family due to a sister born with a disability. Being a full-time mother and wife since age 30 has been central to Lany:

I feel very close to my husband. We are very lucky we have a very nice marriage I just like being with him. So I think that the purpose in life is to connect with other people, interchange ideas and always keep learning, always keep learning... There is a reason why I have been put into this life. I cannot figure out what it is, though, and I do not even feel that if I accomplished some huge goal that I set for myself in the next 20 years... I do not think that is going to be it. Maybe one of my kids will do something great, and I was just put on this earth to be a mother for the two kids. I do not know. Maybe I was put on this earth because the man I married (Lany, Time 1).

I guess I really haven’t figured out what my purpose here has been unless it’s just been to be a mother and a wife and to maybe be an extra person thrown into this having this handicapped sister thing so that now there are three of us left (Lany, Time 5).

Lydia got married to her first husband, an Air Force pilot, right after college. However, a year later, he died during a mission and Lydia, grieving and feeling “out of time” moved back to her parents’ home. Remarrying two years later, she worked to gain an independent self-identify. After having twins, the death of her father, and the dependence of her mother for care, Lydia was

uncertain about her purpose in life but thought it would be “the gift of me to others,” especially to her family. At Time 5, however, Lydia described the continuous harassment by her sister, which may have contributed to her relatively lower PIL, her greater interiority, and focus on self:

I’m my own best friend. You know, people come, people go... We always used to say, you can’t expect others to be happy with you or like you unless you like yourself. My parents told me early on. And that has been thematic throughout my whole life, and it really hit home with my current crisis (Lydia, Time 5).

To Lany and Lydia, relationships may be better characterized as what provided them with a meaningful life rather than purpose in life they had pursued compared to Harriet.

Although all five married women affectionately discussed their lives as closely interconnected with their husbands’ life plans through Time 1 and Time 5, only Harriet reported higher PIL. Harriet *proactively* took a turn in her life and was able to balance her marriage, career, and caregiver roles to her parents. Lany, Lydia, Laura, and Lisa overcame significant changes in their families and reactively experienced their roles as sisters, daughters, wives, mothers, and/or caregivers within traditional frameworks of performing reproductive labor and of subsuming individual purpose to their husbands’ and children’s trajectories. They generally emphasized their family rather than work roles.

### **Marital disruption and changes in life course trajectories**

Four Black and three White women were divorced at Time 5. Consistent with the trend observed among the married women, the divorced participants with higher PIL (one White and four Black women) tended to actively resolve the discrepancies between their life course and social norms compared to those with

relatively lower PIL. Divorces emerged from intentional decisions rather than emergencies for the higher PIL women. For instance, Helen, Hester, and Hanna took actions to end their marriages because they were unhappy with their ex-spouses and wanted a better future:

And we [my first husband and I] were married like 13 years, and he died [from suicide]. Two years later, I met my second husband, and we married the next year. And we were married almost 20 years and we got a divorce last year. I asked for it. It was a civil process, but it was time for me to move on... even as I was divorced I still looked to working in a unit. I’m always used to working in a team, and it feels very strange for me right now to be doing these alone -- even though I obviously wanted it and proceeded along those lines. And it’ll [marriage] probably always be something, you know, that I’ll want in my life (Hanna, Time 5).

In contrast, Leah married after college but chose to divorce her husband a few years later. Although she was very close to her mother, her mother died in her late 80s. Leah was the only participant in the study who did not mention family relationships as one of her life foci. However, she expressed that being a wife and mother would have made her life meaningful. She described how her purpose in life differed as she imagined the lives of other women:

Somebody else would have had a completely different book because their most outstanding part of their life would have been their husband, and their children, and their mother and father, and taking care of their elderly mother and father, and I don’t have any of that, so it’s been really about my career and luckily, I do have something to speak about because I went back to work, so otherwise, I would really be a zero (Leah, Time 5).

**Table 2.** Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Centrality of Relationships	Marriage as the Major Life Course Context Marital Disruption and Changes in Life Course Trajectories Intermittently Partnered but Never Married
Negotiating Role of Work	Work as a Vehicle to Purpose in Life
Agency and the Pursuit of Purpose	Sense of Self as Shaping Purpose in Life Roles of Past Challenges as Shaping Purpose in Life Role of Spiritual Guidance and Support as Shaping Purpose in Life

### Intermittently partnered but never married

The centrality of family relationships was also prominent among four never-married Black women, two of whom had higher PIL and two had lower PIL. Helena and Haley demonstrated how they reframed attitudes and perspectives as being “never-married” to being connected with others rather than dependent on romantic partners or own biological children. As a teenage mother, Helena was determined to work and take care of her son with help from her mother. Over the years, she provided care for her mother, her siblings, and her child. To support herself and her family members, she persisted on completing her college education in 2003:

When I was going to Rosemary University and the company, which they paid my tuition, but I ended up going to a college I never wanted to go to and I cried but I wanted to finish... I just couldn't find anything right at the time. But as time went by God said-- okay, you can make things right. Just go ahead and focus on what you want to do and that's what I did... I was grateful that not only for myself but also grateful that he [son] was seeing me graduate from college. I don't give up no matter how long it takes (Helena, Time 5). This persistence in goal striving may be associated with high purpose.

Similarly, Haley was able to reframe her childless identity by caring for extended family members. Due to many family losses, Haley learned to maintain a *proactive* attitude to life. She recalled her mother saying, “You don't ever know when that [getting cancer] might happen to you.” She continued, “And it did later on in life so you just have to face it. You facing your fears and go ahead.” She described her strong focus on family relationships now and in the future:

I have like five or six young nieces. I'd just like to be able to enjoy more time and be able to be there with them. Go out with them more. 'Cause I came from a large family and we always had kids in the family (Haley, Time 1).

In contrast, Lili and Lucy really didn't feel strong sense of purpose without being partnered. Moreover, their prior traumatic life events might have shaped their lack of agency. Lili grew up without knowing her father because he was always on military missions. Due to being a caregiver for her mother since Lili was in her 20s, Lili felt that she was prevented from pursuing a marriage and a career. In her 30s, Lili resumed contact with her father and re-discovered herself because she finally felt connected to her father. She completed her college

degree in her 40s and tried to be more independent after her father died. During the interviews, even though Lili felt like she still struggled to define herself as a single and childless woman, she laughed, calling herself a “late bloomer.”

For Lucy, growing up with a single mother helped her mature faster than others. Even though it was a conscious decision to have her son once she was established in her career, Lucy's boyfriend did not marry her at that time. Due to a traumatic experience with her son's day care, she opened her own day care and took care of her son and other children most of her life. At 29, her fiancée died in an unexpected family argument when she was pregnant with their daughter. With her work and family trajectories, she had been living with her children and their families but desired to be married. At Time 1, Lucy talked about getting married with a man, who had been pursuing her for more than 20 years; however, she remained unmarried at Time 5 but did not share the reasons in depth.

I had a boyfriend back then-- he was my first. He was my McDreamy. And he broke my heart, and he married somebody I knew and had two kids. After they'd broken up, he would always come by the house, and I always shoved him away. After 20 years, he kept coming by, kept coming by, and now we are engaged, and we're going to get married. I didn't think I would ever, cause I got a lot of problems. I'm going through getting me some teeth and then, you know, my nervous system. My hand is messed up. I got diabetes. So I just got a lot of things. But you know what? He doesn't even care about all that stuff. He just wants to love me and takes care of me, and I'm going to let him do it. I'm really, really happy (Lucy, Time 1).

Overall, 15 out of the 16 participants emphasized marriage or partnership as central to their lives. Their marriage or plans for future partnerships reflected their midlife roles in that they were not only looking for intimacy but also voiced a desire to balance their romantic relationships and their established relationships with adult children and other kin. Given that participants had varying partner statuses and came to their current status as an outcome of diverse lifelong experiences, what seemed to differentiate those with higher versus lower PIL was whether they *proactively* pursued their relationships as tied to their roles within in the context of family. Moreover, those with higher PIL were more likely to reframe their divorce or never-married status to

a broader connection of others they care for rather than confining in romantic or parent-child relationships.

### **“I Try to Hold onto My Job More than Anything”: Negotiating the Role of Work**

With the exception of Lany and Lucy who identified as homemakers, the other participants emphasized the negotiation of paid work and family responsibilities. At Time 1, 13 women were still working and three had retired. Two participants went back to part-time work for self-interest. Only one woman retired after Time 1. Most participants were financially comfortable with annual incomes ranging from 50,000 to over 300,000 dollars, but three Black women described financial struggles every year of the study with incomes below \$25,000, including Lucy (home day care), Heather (entrepreneur), and Helena (unemployed). Depending on the earlier life experiences and turning points associated with their social location, they discussed work as a vehicle to a meaningful life and/or as a means to an end.

#### **Work as a vehicle to meaningful life**

For five White and two Black women, work helped them contribute to the lives of others. However, among them, only Hester, a career-oriented Black woman, explicitly expressed her purpose in life in giving to others through work. She cited her mother, who died when Hester was 17, as having taught her generativity. She also shared how the historical context of the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women’s Movement shaped her civic and social values. As a result, her career was highlighted over her child and marriage. Hester pursued her profession as a playwright and artist and aimed to share her stories of racial discrimination to encourage young Black girls to step outside their comfort zones. She explained her investment in establishing a nonprofit organization to help these young girls:

Can you imagine the power Black women would have if we just stepped outside our comfort zones and just started living? Stop being so uptight about I got to get a man, I got to get a man. And there’s so many men. I’m like, girl, please. Get a man. But the thing that attracts men is women who are comfortable with themselves. You know, you like being around them. You want to smile with them. Come on. So if I can get black women to do that, gosh, I’d be a miracle worker. But my projects are working with black women to get out of their comfort zones, working with my girls, and my writing and performing (Hester, Time 1).

Other participants worked in positions that extended relational frameworks to clients, patients, and students. What made their work meaningful was their involvement in helping others in professional roles as teachers, counselors, health-care administrators, nurses, and founders of charity organizations. Three of them had higher PIL and discussed how they intentionally pursued their careers to help others whereas the other three with lower PIL attributed their path to meaningful careers as luck. For example, Harriet and Leah, both educators, followed a normative career life course, getting their college degrees and beginning work immediately. Harriet, a school counselor, expressed her fulfillment at work:

I very much liked my work. [It’s a] very fulfilling career, and it’s not done. I will continue to do some work, and it fits very well with who I am in my value system, you know to be in that field, so I guess that’s why it’s significant (Harriet, Time 1).

In contrast, Leah has been a schoolteacher for her adult years, retired in 2007, and went back as a substitute teacher. She expressed luck that work has been central to her life due to her lack of partner and children:

There were times when I wanted to quit after about eight or nine years. That’s a real turning point in the (inner city) public schools. You get real burned out, especially where I was... You’re actually punished when you go to a different school system because if you’ve been teaching 10 years in (a Midwest city) they feel like you’re worthless and they demote you... I kept on thinking well, you know, you’re in your 30s. I mean my goal was to be married and have children still. Not to work for 35 years as a single person... So I stuck with it and things got better because I do remember making a conscious decision to change within the school system. I changed the level of the students I taught... then I started liking it (Leah, Time 5).

Interestingly, these women with similar careers viewed their work quite differently, with Harriet viewing her career as important to her identity, while Leah seemed to view her work more as a job that she eventually got to like.

For four participants, engaging in work was motivated by their life course transitions after active parenting or changes in partner status. As a result, they entered careers in their 40s and sought careers that aligned with life goals. Consistently, those with lower PIL developed their careers as a result of *reacting* to life

challenges. For example, Lulu accidentally signed up for a nursing program at 42 when moving with her daughter for her college. Over time, Lulu expressed a strong and persistent focus on work both as a vehicle to purpose in life and to meet her financial needs after her divorce and caregiving responsibilities were over. Luckily, Lulu's late career entry into nursing has fulfilled her personally:

Finances are a huge issue. It's been a horrible year. I'm really hoping... to accomplish in the future is some kind of financial security where I'm not living hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck. You know, that's a huge goal for me to learn how to manage my money and, and get myself some sense of security there. As far as accomplishing things, you know, my job itself is just kind of a rewarding type job... I just want to keep doing what I do and have some kind of financial security. Be able to help my family a little bit more... I don't have anything huge (Lulu, Time 1).

Overall, for these five White and two Black women, careers were described as a vehicle to meaningful life regardless of how and when they entered their careers. Only one of them explicitly discussed pursuing a specific career as her purpose in life. We found that the three women with relatively lower PIL perceived their careers as part of fate or luck, whereas the four participants with higher PIL described how they *proactively* made progress in their careers.

Women discussed the importance of work through their on-time or off-time transitions to careers. As a result of their prior life experiences, some women highlighted their employment as a vehicle to achieve a meaningful life whereas some expressed work as a means to establish financial security for now and in the future. Consistent with the findings of family relationships, those with higher PIL viewed themselves as proactively directing their career trajectories whereas those with lower PIL positioned their work goals as a reaction to lack of family relationships or saw themselves as subsumed into family-related goals (particularly husbands) as they saw their roles as family supporters rather than leaders or individuals with autonomy and purposeful work goals.

### **“I Have Inner Strength that I Never Did Think”: Agency and the Pursuit of Purpose**

Participants explicitly discussed *agency*, the extent to which they actively made choices in their lives, in three distinct but related ways. Some women put themselves central and shaped their life course paths to strengthen their own identities. Some women discussed how they

found inner strength, determination, and resilience through past life challenges, such as the death of family members, divorces, abusive marriages, or health crises. Lastly, for some, faith and spirituality emerged as a linchpin for giving them a sense of agency.

### **Sense of self as shaping purpose in life**

Participants with higher PIL showed strong motivation towards self and generativity, which resulted from others' help when they were in difficult situations. These women intentionally reached out to others who had similar challenges to their own when young. Hanna explicitly mentioned her purpose in life as paying back the help she received from others to overcome hard times when her husband unexpectedly committed suicide. For example, after divorcing her second husband in her late 50s, Hanna shared she was now able to focus on herself rather her husband and children. She said, “This is the first time I decided that I can be responsible for my own happiness and I will (Time 5).” She realized that she had more opportunities to focus on her own well-being and be an inspiration to others through mentorship in life and at work.

In contrast, when in doubt about themselves due to their confinement within family and social roles, women with relatively lower PIL tended to show lack of agency to put themselves central in their life course paths. For example, as discussed earlier, Lany and Lydia considered themselves as supplemental to their husbands, children, and family members who needed care. Off-time life events particularly could be disruptive to one's sense of agency. For example, Laura commented at Time 1, on her passive nature during her childhood due to a chronic illness and how she became proactive after her recovery in adulthood. However, with her relapse at age 52, Lydia had struggled with her illness and shared her reactivity at Time 5:

Now with all the years I've had Crohn's Disease, I've heard or been taught that you are not your illness. No matter how I try to embrace that, sometimes that's not true for me. I guess it just brings me back to the same place I was when I first got diagnosed, and then every time I had a flare-up. So in my mind, I am Crohn's Disease. I mean it's who I am to me. I wasn't always in charge of my life. Sometimes there were other things that were calling the shots, like my illness (Laura, Time 5).

### *Roles of Past Challenges as Shaping Purpose in Life*

Both higher and relatively lower PIL participants shared how they survived challenges and realized they

were stronger than they had previously thought. For example, Lulu discussed how she coped with alcoholism and learned to be appreciative in life:

I went through a lot of Al-Anon because of my mom and all the alcoholism in our family. And, you know, that's what they teach you. And, I'm really glad for that. I mean that's why sometimes I think people say, oh, what a horrible way to grow up. And I think it really was a blessing because, you know, really, Al-Anon or those programs—they teach you things that I don't think a lot of times normal, everyday people get to learn or think about so. Like to be grateful (Lulu, Time 1).

Lulu's case highlighted how adversity was reframed with a more mature perspective. Another participant, Hanna, expressed resilience through her first husband's suicide by actively pursuing her health care career, and divorcing her second husband because their life goals were not aligned. Moreover, some participants further reflected on the origins of such agentic strength:

I always look at the bright side of life. The cup is not always half full. I always try to... look at life that there's a good side and there's a bad side. No matter how dark it may look... there's a good side to everything. 'Cause my father always was a happy person and my mother was, too. No matter what would happen to him and my mom, she was always happy... she was the type of person that she could have but two pennies in her pocket and if you asked her for a penny, she would share it with you (Haley, Time 1).

I'm stronger than I thought I was, and I have inner strength that I never did think, and I think I got that from my mom... and my aunties... I was the only child... I had lived with all of my aunts. My mother had five sisters. Okay? She had one brother. I think each one of them had a hand in raising me, and I picked up a little bit from all... and once I found out that I could just— I was patting myself on the back when I threw that crack (drugs) out and the stuff. I said look at me. You could do anything... And when I did that that gave me a confidence I never thought I had. (Lucy, Time 1).

Recognizing self-strength as well as being true to oneself and to others were important for all participants, regardless of race or PIL status. Even though many of them had experienced life crises, they remained hopeful for the future.

## **Role of spiritual guidance and support as shaping purpose in life**

Faith and spirituality were fundamental to 7 participants. These women tended to discuss their spirituality as external, under the control of God, and carrying them through life. Helena shared, "Having faith in God more so than human beings cause... I just feel that God would never fail you, whereas a human being will" (Helena, Time 1). Moreover, faith was practiced through praying daily:

I just think I've been very lucky, a very lucky person. I, you know, and just look where I started and where I am now, and the things that I've survived, I just think I'm very lucky, very fortunate... it's probably a combination of my God, whoever he is, and myself (Lulu, Time 1).

Three women with higher PIL explicitly shared their purpose in life as belief in God. Heather had lost her adult daughter to cancer in 2002 and still mourned her loss. Throughout her life stories, she described her deep faith in God. It was clear that her prayer and connection to God on a daily basis had given her a higher purpose in life:

I just know that we're all here for a purpose. I believe this is like a schoolhouse for learning. Whatever things we're going through, it's for a reason... Nothing is by accident. And I don't have the answers, but I wish I knew why things happened to me like they happened, but they happened for a reason. So maybe we'll end up coming back to correct whatever things in this life... There is a Supreme Being for whatever reason you're here (Heather, Time 1).

Holly and Helen were unique in their deliberate actions guided by their spirituality. Holly identified her purpose in life as having faith in God and sharing God's guidance with others throughout her life stories:

Faith would be the major theme... I can take care of my own children... my faith in my ability to raise my children was from the time when I left my husband till maybe the time they all grew up and taking care of their own cause all of them are taking care of their own children. They all are doing very well. And I just believed in that. That's all. And, and that -- it was just faith (Holly, Time 1).

This is what I think my whole purpose is: My whole purpose is not here on earth to make money. My whole purpose is not here on earth to live a life of luxury, even though I want to. But

my whole purpose to me is to give glory to God (Holly, Time 5).

Holly cared for disadvantaged women beyond racial boundaries: "A lot of people only think it's Black. No... that physical abuse does not just happen in racial people. It happens in all people (Time 1)." She found a sense of purpose in practicing the guidance of God by teaching Sunday school. The other is Helen, who also explicitly discussed how she integrated her Buddhist faith into a worldview of relationships. For her, life was about connection with family members, community, and other human beings. Her poor childhood experiences made her determined to advocate for educational justice for disadvantaged students:

I would like to work in... a reformed educational system. I think there are a lot of problems in the current system and that it would be nice if we can start to work toward reforming some of the things that happen, especially in terms of funding our schools... because of the experiences that I've had teaching different variety of students, I think that I could be an advocate for those that don't have. . . That's not your life anymore. You're living day to day, minute to minute, penny to penny... I think that having had that experience... I can advocate better for those that don't have and understand what their situation is and why they make some of the choices that they make (Helen, Time 1).

Only one participant with lower PIL, Lisa, expressed her purpose in life as given by God. She believed God gave reasons to everything happening in her life, whether positive or negative, but it was not clear in what ways her faith guided her purposeful aims on a daily basis.

I believe in God. I believe in the Supreme Being, God, whatever. And I believe he has a purpose for us being here. And, I know that he's real because of all the different things he shows me at times. I attend religious functions sometime. I visit churches with some friends. I watch it on TV. I read my bible sometimes, but I pray every day and I talk to God every day. And I guess I'm not a real religious person as far as going to church every Sunday, but spiritually, I have to connect with God every day (Lisa, Time 1).

### Discussion

Studies have consistently shown a quantitative decline of purpose in life from midlife to older adulthood, with men

having higher purpose in life than women (Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017). To address the lack of qualitative research on purpose in life, our study was an exploratory qualitative inquiry comparing the life narratives of sixteen midlife Black and White women showing quantitative higher and lower<sup>1</sup> purpose in life (PIL). The analysis of life stories highlighted three major themes. The importance of relationships was evident as revealed in our first theme. All except one participant with lower PIL emphasized the centrality of family relationships as a fundamental life focus despite the salient racial variation in self-identity, family experiences, and partnership histories/current status. Second, many women emphasized work as a vehicle to a meaningful life and/or to establish financial stability. Taken together, women with higher and lower PIL might perceive family and work as what provides them with a meaningful life; however, what differentiated those with higher from lower PIL is whether family and work drove the participants' purposeful goal pursuit. Participants with higher PIL tended to proactively craft their own life courses of family and work, whereas those with lower PIL lived their lives within the contours and flow of their normative and non-normative life transitions. Third, consistent with the findings of proactive versus reactive attitudes in the prior two themes, women with higher PIL demonstrated a strong sense of agency, whereas those with lower PIL struggled to regain their agency, in the context of searching for a sense of self, overcoming challenges in life, and pursuing spirituality. Specifically, the participants with higher PIL explicitly discussed how they took actions to fulfill their lives compared to the lower PIL counterpart. Both higher and lower PIL White and Black participants demonstrated various combinations of proactive, reactive, and social learning developmental pathways of purpose in life (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Taken together, our findings further suggest having a *proactive*, *agentic*, and *sense of control* type of attitude towards the world and one's place in it seems to be key to maintaining higher purpose in life as opposed to reacting to life events during transitions.

Consistent with prior studies (Bronk, 2014; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996), participants' lifelong involvement with family and work served as an important factor for establishing purpose in life. We found purpose in life would be derived from family and work when people pursued related goals *proactively*. However, it is important to consider how these women's lifelong socio-historical contexts shaped their life narratives (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Neugarten & Datan, 1996). The participants were born in the 1950s

and experienced radical social changes (Elder & Johnson, 2003; Stewart & Torges, 2006). During adolescence, this cohort experienced the insurgence of various social movements specifically the Civil Rights and Women's Movement, which may have motivated most to pursue careers outside of their homes. Through their young and middle adulthood years, many assumed both family and work responsibilities, and they often strived for the balance between the two realms (Brown, Matthews, & Bromberger, 2005; Lachman, 2004).

Although studies showed significant positive associations between being married with purpose in life (Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017; Pinquart, 2002), the facts that in our study none of the Black women were married and that they showed higher PIL than White women are striking. Considering the historical context, the White women in the sample were part of the first generation liberated to look beyond traditional roles of wives and mothers and pursue work outside of the home, while Black women tended to continue a long generational practice of work and entered the work force earlier to help their kin. We found White and Black women discussed their roles qualitatively differently in the narratives. White women tended to discuss extensively their roles as wives, mothers and/or adult daughters to their aging parents whereas Black women were more likely to see themselves in relation to their broader kin networks (Stack, 1974). Perhaps the single status might have motivated the Black women even more to pursue goals proactively through extended family networks. In our study the Black women may have created an identity as strong individuals embedded in a social network that included many ties (cf. Stack, 1974) but without the strong normative expectation of marriage that the White women of this era experienced.

The underlying push and pull forces between social expectations and individual freedom may exist (Elder & Johnson, 2003), but it takes much more resources for one to proactively navigate racial and gender revolutions in societies. For instance, a qualitative study on Canadian midlife women's construction of single identity (Moore & Radtke, 2015) showed the distinction between their "transformative midlife" and their married peers' "standard midlife." Living in the context where marriage is expected may create strong expectations that a "standard" midlife woman should be married, have children, own a house, and live a financially and socially comfortable life. Their findings suggest that the single midlife participants actively created an alternative identity of "singleness" to counter the standard midlife identity. As evidenced in this study, when individuals

pursued their lives more proactively, confronting social and cultural norms, they tended to derive a deeper sense of purpose in life.

The participants also expressed purpose in life that was not limited to generativity (McAdams, 2012). Instead, when explicitly discussing their purpose in life as giving to others and spirituality, our participants showed agency in the form of generativity. Most emphasized the ability to actively influence one's own life course rather than passively allowing it to be determined by external forces (Bandura, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The ways the participants showed sense of agency in their narratives are closely related to Ryff's Psychological Well-Being dimension of autonomy (1989b), referring to the degrees of self-determination. In particular, it focuses on the ability to resist social pressures to be able to think and act independently as well as not to rely on others to approve own self. Agency has been one of the salient themes in life narratives and shows positive effects on well-being. For example, using a subset of the FLSA Time 1 data ( $n = 89$ ), Adler et al. (2015) found that themes of agency, communion, redemption, and contamination, summed across many scenes, predicted trajectories of mental health over 5 years. Another study further showed agency increased in the 47 patients' narratives after their psychotherapy sessions and significantly predicted their improvement in mental health over time (Adler, 2012). In our study, especially for those with higher PIL, finding strong agency in the midst of negative life transitions was important to help maintain their purpose.

Interestingly, spirituality was mentioned among a smaller subset of participants, four of whom explicitly identified their purpose in life as belief in God. Consistent with the existing research on meaning in life (Emmons, 1999; Greenfield, Vaillant, & Marks, 2009; Krause, 2008), spirituality has been seen as a common basis for guiding one's beliefs and motivational system, affecting how individuals appraise, understand, and interpret life experiences (Park, 2013). Although people may have purpose in life through social learning process of spirituality (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009), being spiritual does not guarantee higher sense of purpose in life as our participants with higher and lower PIL both emphasized faith in their lives. Consistent with the importance of religious beliefs and functions in the historical context of oppression for Blacks (Chatters, Nguyen, & Taylor, 2014; Krause, 2008), this study suggests a racial difference in spirituality and purpose in life among the participants. Indeed, among women who emphasized spirituality for purpose in life, all women

who were Black showed higher PIL. Moreover, Holly and Helen were the only participants who explicitly discussed how their spirituality motivated them to find purpose in poverty, discrimination, and racism. These differences may reflect cultural implications for spirituality for Black women compared to White women. Without more information on spirituality, it remains an empirical question how the intersections of spirituality and race may influence purpose in life.

### Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations but also offers directions for future research. A limitation is that purpose in life was not an explicit part of the life story interview protocol, but rather discerned through life story narratives – theorized to be one way in which purpose in life is constructed (McAdams, 2012). Although the authors applied the theoretical definitions of purpose in life (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff, 1989a) to capture purpose in life in the narratives, future research could incorporate direct inquiry of purpose in life in the life story interviews. Discussions on how participants define own purpose in life and how purpose in life influences daily experiences would advance our understanding of developmental pathways to purpose in life. Another limitation is that we only examined women in this study, but both men and women show declines in purpose in life at later ages, and future research should include men and women at all life course phases. Moreover, we were not able to distinguish the differences in higher versus lower PIL with race because only two Black women expressed lower PIL, which resulted in the racial differences in our higher and lower PIL subsamples. The finding that higher PIL women, most of whom were Black women, had more proactivity and sense of agency does not suggest racial differences in proactivity and sense of agency.

### Conclusion

This study is the first qualitative attempt to explore the life stories of White and Black women with extreme self-reported purpose in life scores using Ryff's scale (1989b), guided by our prior quantitative study (Ko et al., 2016). The study moved beyond variable-centric understanding of purpose in life to person-centric (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). The findings unpacked the contextual details regarding how the intersectionality of gender and race shapes the participants' lives, such as that these women constantly worked on balancing responsibilities within and beyond family and work contexts (Lachman, 2004; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Moen & Spencer, 2006). Nine women explicitly

discussed their purpose in life, which we found to be in three categories, including family relationships, generativity, and spirituality. Relatedly, family, work, and agency through self-identity and spirituality were three major themes revealed in the participants' life stories. As evident across the findings, women with higher PIL, however, tended to *proactively* direct their lives through family relationships, work, sense of self, life challenges, or spirituality compared to those with lower PIL. Given that midlife is a period of peak physical and psychological functioning, social responsibility, and plasticity in identity development (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Neugarten & Danan, 1996), being able to maintain a *proactive* attitude may be critical for developing purpose in life in one's future path to older adulthood.

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### Notes

Although the intent was to understand what drives purpose in life between higher vs. lower PIL participants, one must be cautious when interpreting the results, as PIL scores were higher or lower only in reference to the higher group. That is, for people with lower PIL, their mean scores were at the median range on the scale from 0 to 7.

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