

# Exploring the Role of Purpose in the Lives of Career Changers: A Qualitative Inquiry

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## Abstract

Although purpose in life is well-established as a key element of optimal human functioning, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring the role of purpose in individuals' lives, particularly in the context of career change. The aim of the study is to gain a deep understanding of the role of purpose in the lives of career changers, including the process of developing purpose and its impact on individuals' well-being. A qualitative method was employed that involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of thirteen participants who went through a career change process. The qualitative grounded theory analysis reveals a purpose process model, which posits that individuals experience purpose as an ongoing and dynamic process consisting of questioning, exploring, unfolding, and evolving as critical developmental stages of individuals' journeys to discover and develop purpose. The process of pursuing a purposeful way of living generally has a positive impact on individuals' hedonic and eudaemonic well-being but can also have its "dark side" that may detract from life. Practical implications for career counseling, as well as future direction of research are discussed.

## Keywords

Purpose, meaning, career development, grounded theory, and qualitative research

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Since the beginning of the positive psychology movement, which identified what makes life worth living as its core inquiry (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), there have been growing interest in understanding the role of meaning and purpose in individuals' working lives. Studies have shown the experience of meaningfulness and purpose at work is positively associated with job and life satisfaction (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) and psychological well-being and resilience (Ablett & Jones, 2007). While this body of research highlights the important role of meaning and purpose in individuals' lives, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring the deeper meaning behind individuals' experiences of purpose, in particular during a career change process. The aim of the study is to fill this gap by gaining a deeper understanding of the role of purpose in individuals' lives as they go through career change, including how they develop and discover purpose, as well as the impact on individuals' well-being. This will also provide practical insights for practitioners who work with individuals seeking more purpose in their careers, while taking into consideration the impact of such endeavor on individual's emotional and psychological well-being.

### **The definition and experience of purpose**

Despite the long-held recognition of the central role of purpose in individuals' lives, the concept has been given surprisingly little attention in the literature, which does not provide clear distinction between the construct of meaning and purpose. More research has been done in the closely linked construct of *meaning*, mostly resulting from Frankl's (1985) account of surviving the Holocaust by searching for meaning in the most difficult circumstances. Frankl's theory (1985) suggests each person has a unique purpose, and the primary human motivation is the will to find meaning and purpose. In Frankl's (1967) earlier writings, the concepts of meaning and purpose were often used interchangeably, and researchers have, for a long time, followed his lead. Ryff and Singer (1998) use meaning and purpose indiscriminately and suggest that having purpose in life means "feeling that there is meaning in one's present and past life" (p. 707). The lack of conceptual distinction between meaning and purpose means most studies do not distinguish individuals' experience of meaning and purpose, and there are even fewer studies specifically exploring individuals' experience of purpose (Damon, Menon, & Cotton, 2003).

For a long time, the definition of purpose was often contextualised as part of the construct of meaning. Baumeister (1991) conceptualises purpose as one of the four main needs for meaning, alongside value, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Similarly, Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) conceive of purpose as an ingredient of meaningful living, consisting of the cognitive element (i.e. understanding of oneself and the world) and the motivational element (i.e. goals provide the individual with a sense of mission). More recently, scholars recognise the importance of distinguishing the construct of meaning and purpose, and suggested that meaning is about an understanding of the *why* of life, while purpose is focus on the *how* (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon & Worth, 2015). A number of definitions have been proposed to define purpose as a distinct psychological construct. McKnight and Kashdan (2009) define purpose as a "central, self-organising life aim that organises and stimulates goal, manages behaviour, and provides a sense of meaning" (p.242). Similarly, Damon et al. (2003) conceptualise purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once

meaning to the self and of consequences beyond the self' (p. 121). Despite these theoretical developments on purpose, there is a lack of empirical research on how purpose is expressed and experienced, particularly amongst individuals going through career change.

### **Development of purpose**

Another key objective of the present study is to understand how individuals discover and develop purpose. A review of the existing literature reveals several gaps. Firstly, although researchers shared the view that individuals develop purpose in different ways (Keyes, 2011), there is a lack of qualitative studies that explore how individuals discover and develop purpose. One qualitative study by Bronk (2011) examined the role of purpose in identity formation and found that purpose development promoted identity formation, while the identity development reinforced adolescents' commitments to purpose. While this study provides insights on the link between purpose and self-identity in the adolescent population, there is still a lack of data on the experience of developing purpose in the adult population.

Despite the lack of empirical research on the developmental process of purpose, researchers have attempted to develop theoretical models to explain the development of purpose. Kashdan & McKnight (2009) suggest three avenues through which individuals can develop purpose: proactive development (an active search through trial and error), reactive development (the experience of significant life events), and social learning (modeling behaviours). The authors argue that individuals can develop purpose through any one or a combination of these processes, although they admit that there is a lack of empirical studies supporting this theory.

Another area in need of more clarity is what motivates individuals to search for and develop purpose. Psychologists have different views with some claiming that it is driven by an innate motivation for meaning (Frankl, 1967) and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1987), and others arguing that it can be driven by both positive, life-affirming motivation, as well as negative and deficit-based ones (Reker, 2000). This study aims to address this question by examining the motivational drivers behind purpose and their impact on the development of purpose.

### **Outcomes of purpose**

In addition to the development of purpose, researchers have also investigated the outcomes of purpose. Purpose is found to be linked to a wide range of psychological and physiological benefits, with the presence of purpose positively associated with life satisfaction (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009), global happiness (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and improved immune functioning (Ryff, Singer, & Love, 2004). Although these studies provide useful insights on the benefits of purpose, most of them are quantitative designs, with a lack of qualitative inquiry into what makes individuals experience these effects and how they manifest in an individual's life. In contrast to the consensus on the positive relationship between the presence of meaning and purpose and well-being, there are mixed opinions on the link between the search for meaning and purpose and psychological outcomes. Some scholars found negative linkage between meaning-seeking and well-being, with the presence of meaning serving as a moderator to psychological distress (Cohen & Cains, 2011), while others suggest that the search for meaning is positively associated with subjective well-being (Park, Park, & Peterson,

2010). Another possibility suggested is that the different consequences of the meaning-searching process arise from different motivations behind the search process (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). This study aims to explore in more depth how the process of searching for and developing purpose can affect individuals' well-being.

Amongst existing literature examining the outcome of meaning and purpose, the majority is focused on the outcome of the presence of and the search for *meaning*, with a lack of focus on the outcome of the presence and the search for *purpose*. This presents a gap because meaning and purpose are distinct constructs, which result in distinct psychological processes and outcomes. Researchers suggested that individuals could experience varying levels of meaning and purpose in different domains (Reker & Wong, 1988). However, there is a lack of qualitative studies examining this multi-faceted nature of purpose, and little is known as to how the purpose development process in one particular life domain (e.g. work life) affects their experience of purpose in other domains and well-being.

### **The role of purpose in career development**

In addition to recognising the importance of purpose in individuals' lives in general, psychologists are also interested in exploring individuals' experience of purpose in the working context. Career change, referred to as work role transition that includes some degree of change in the actual job, work role, or profession (Higgins, 2001) has received more attention as a natural reaction to the changing nature of work where people change professions in search for greater meaning and autonomy (Handy, 1998). Various theories have been proposed to further our understanding of individuals' career change process. For example, Holland's (1997) person-environment fit theory suggests that individuals whose personalities are ill-matched to their work environment are more likely to change careers. Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that individuals have different self-perceptions, which can affect individuals' perceptions of the alignment between their idea about who they are and their beliefs about the new professions.

Although these theories add to our understanding of the key factors influencing the career change process, only recently has research started to focus more on exploring the role of meaning and purpose in career development. The most notable theory is Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski's (2010) bi-dimensional pathway model, with one dimension focusing on how people direct their actions to experience meaning at work and another dimension describing the difference in motivation for doing so. The intersection of these dimensions represents the four pathways to meaningful work: individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification. Another theory, Wrzesniewski et al.'s (1997) work orientation model, suggests that it is people's perception of their work rather than the work content that has an impact on one's experience of meaning and purpose at work. They proposed that people with a calling orientation (focus on fulfillment and socially useful work) have greater satisfaction than those with a *career* orientation (focus on advancement) or job orientation (focus on financial reward). These theories focus on individuals' perception of meaning at work and how the presence of meaning and purpose can contribute to positive outcomes, with few empirical studies exploring in detail how individuals develop and discover purpose and its impact on individuals' well-being.

In summary, the importance of this study is two fold: firstly, although purpose is increasingly seen as a distinct psychological construct to meaning, there is a lack of empirical research on how purpose is experienced and developed in individuals. The study aims to provide qualitative insights into the role of purpose in individuals' lives through semi-structured interviews, which cannot be obtained through quantitative research. This enriches our understanding of how individuals develop and discover purpose, how they define purpose and the impact of developing purpose on individuals' well-being, which is a gap in the existing literature. Secondly, by focusing the research sample on individuals who have gone through a career change, the study investigates the interaction between individuals' perception and experience of purpose and their career decision making process, which provides practical implications for developing interventions to help individuals develop purpose and feel more fulfilled in their work life.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

Thirteen participants were interviewed individually, using semi-structured interview to explore the role of purpose in their lives. The data analysis followed the grounded theory methodology, which involves open coding, categorization, saturation, and theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically, the data analysis followed Charmaz's (2006) constructivist and pragmatist approach to grounded theory, which recognises subjectivity and the researcher's active involvement in the interpretation and construction of data. The researcher took a relativist epistemological approach, acknowledging that data collection and interpretation can be influenced by the researcher's perception and beliefs (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Participants**

Thirteen participants were purposely recruited from personal contacts and social media using the following criteria: 1) individuals having had one or more career change or are currently going through a career change process, and 2) individuals self-identifying as having a strong sense of purpose in life. A snowball strategy was used to identify participants that met the above criteria. The sample population was demographically heterogeneous, with both men (four) and women (nine), and age ranging from 27 to 37 (with an average of 31). The sample also consisted of individuals of diversified ethnic backgrounds and various careers including project manager, environment activist, leadership development consultant, community manager, education director, freelance writer, and financial analyst amongst others.

### **Interview procedure**

The data were collected from thirteen individual semi-structured interviews. Guided by the previous research on purpose and career development, an interview schedule was developed, which included a number of generic questions (e.g. What does purpose mean to you? What is the role of purpose in your life?), and a number of follow-up questions to help participants elaborate on their experiences (e.g. What impact, if any, does pursuing or living purpose have in your career and life?). At the end

of interview, the participants were also asked if they had anything else to share that was not already covered. Interviews were recorded with participants' signed consent and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and their rights to withdraw. All participants' names are pseudonyms. The researcher also completed a memo after each interview, reflecting on how the interview went and any specific impressions including the participant's emotions, behaviour, and body language.

### **Theory approach (principles) underlying data analysis and procedure of analysis**

The recording of each interview was transcribed, and details that could lead to identification of participants were removed to protect anonymity. The analysis followed the grounded theory principles, with data analysis starting simultaneously as the data were collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis also followed the constructivist approach advocated by Charmaz (2006), which places emphasis on the need for the researcher to immerse herself in the data in a way that embeds the narratives of the participants in the outcome. Such immersion is developed through the use of coding language but also requires that the researcher goes beyond the surface to constantly question the meaning in the data, including how the researcher's values and beliefs may affect the way the data are analysed.

Based on these principles, the analysis started with the line-by-line open coding process in which initial coding was created. It was followed by selective coding, which focused on identifying key categories emerging from the open-coding process and creating higher order codes with core categories to deepen the analysis (Glaser, 1978). The next step involved comparative analysis between the codes and higher order categories to identify key themes and sub-themes. The comparison of the various themes and sub-themes resulted in the identification of one underlying core theme, which is purpose as an ongoing and evolving process of discovering one's unique contribution in the world and seeking manifestation of the inner purposeful energy from within. The data saturation appeared to be reached after the eleventh interview, and the two remaining interviews were conducted to ensure saturation was reached (Morse, 1995).

Throughout the data collection and analysis, memos were written reflecting on theoretical understanding and connections as they emerged. Raw data were included in the memo to keep the participants' voices present in the theoretical building process (Charmaz, 2006). Compared to the traditional grounded theory approach, the constructivist grounded theory emphasises examining how the researcher's perceptions, values, and beliefs might affect the interpretation of the meaning of the data. As such, the memos not only served as an analytical tool to explore ideas as the theory developed, but also as a reflective tool to improve the researcher's reflexivity about the research actions and decisions.

### **Results**

The data analysis produced one core theme, "purpose as a process." This theme refers to the interviewees' experience of purpose as an ongoing and evolving process of pursuing a purposeful way of living, discovering one's unique contribution to the world, and seeking manifestation of inner purposeful energy in work and in life. Participants conceptualised the notion of process in different

ways, drawing on ideas around meaning, spirituality, strengths, resilience, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being. The key themes of the process of pursuing a purposeful way living will be explored below, with explanatory interview excerpts in italics.

### **Motivating factors**

There are a number of motivating factors that appeared to drive the process of developing one's purpose, including the desire to make a positive impact, "*wanting to be who I am*" (David) and avoidance of regret in life. Participants typically referred to "*making a positive impact on others*" (John) and "*focusing on the service you are providing to the world*" (Helen) as key driving forces of pursuing purpose. Anthony believed that the way he can make an impact was through "*being the best I can be and becoming an expert on a subject matter and being able to use it to develop others and seeing the tangible outcome.*"

For many participants, the desire to align one's career with one's value and perception about oneself was a key factor in driving the development of purpose. Participants generally saw purpose as something that was closely linked to their identity, as Helen stated, "*My purpose is the essence of who I am. I don't think I could live as a person if I didn't have it.*" Jimmy shared similar thoughts: "*Purpose is about living in alignment with who you are and the most important thing on this journey is actually feeling more myself.*" Participants also talked about avoidance of regret in life as a key factor that drives them towards a purposeful way of living, as David expressed, "*If I don't try those things I'm going to regret it. One of my fears is sitting there old and wish I'd have done that – this fear drives me.*"

### **Purpose as a process**

Although each person went through a unique process of developing purpose, there were four themes that emerged as the key stages individuals experienced: questioning, exploring, unfolding, and evolving. Interviewees experienced purpose as "*a journey that you never really arrives at it*" (John), and it was through a dynamic process that they gradually discovered their unique place and contribution in the world and learnt to find manifestation of their inner purpose energy. These four stages of the process model are presented below.

**Questioning.** Generally, interviewees recognised that the process of developing purpose was initiated by questioning the status quo, triggered by a combination of internal and external factors, ranging from feeling frustrated and dissatisfied at work to significant life events. These factors triggered individuals to question the value of their work, "*what I am put on earth to do,*" and "*what unique contribution can I make.*" Most of the participants also recognised the importance of listening to one's "inner voice" and taking action to make a change, rather than ignoring it. The lack of personal meaning was regularly featured as the source of dissatisfaction at work, resulting in individuals questioning their career directions. Helen stated, "*I stopped doing the work I was doing because I felt it was not meaningful to me.*" David shared a similar reason that prompted him to change career: "*I realised that things weren't so comfortable, and it was really characterised by just waking up every day and thinking that it just didn't mean anything to me anymore.*" Participants also referred to the clashing of value as a trigger for them to start questioning if they had made the right

career choice. Laura recognised that she initially chose her career path to “*prove that I was worthy as it is one of the most competitive fields,*” but she got to the point “*where that clash of values just became too much and I felt disconnected from people at work.*”

Significant life events, including the death of a close family member or friend, and personal struggles, also served as catalysts for change. Laura spoke about her young cousin’s death from illness, which made her realise that “*life is a gift and you owe it to people who don’t have that opportunity to live life to the fullest.*” Similarly, Monica talked about going through a “*personal meltdown,*” which made her “*confront the fears and have the courage to face up to what was going on internally.*”

**Exploring.** Following the initial questioning phase, participants typically go through an exploration stage, which consists of self-reflection and discovery, a sense of personal agency, and the value of external support. The self-reflection and discovery typically involved introspective reflections, such as reflecting on one’s past experience to gain self-knowledge, as well as external-driven actions, such as “*trying things out*” to “*gain the courage to make the bigger leap*” (John). Anthony shared that he reflected on past experiences where he “*got a sense of flow and just wanted to do it again*” to understand his strengths better. John shared his self-exploration journey in more detail:

*I gave myself the permission to explore those big questions... what’s my place in the world, who am I meant to become, why am I here... for the first time I got in touch with what I enjoy outside of the confines of treadmill... exploration to me is about feeling, hearing a curiosity and then just running with it.*

A sense of personal agency, or individuals’ subjective perception that they are initiating, executing, and controlling their own actions, was another sub-theme that emerged as participants acknowledged pursuing a purposeful life involves recognising that “*it’s all within your control to make changes in life, at least the actions you are taking*” (Jennifer), and it is essential to “*have the discipline to follow through*” (Annabel). John talked about how stepping outside of his comfort zone helped him move forward: “*you learn the most by doing things you don’t normally do. You just have to go for it and put yourself out there.*”

The value of external support in the form of communities and mentors has also emerged many times as a key factor that fosters the development of process. Jennifer felt she was “*lucky enough to be part of different communities and to have stimulating conversations with like-minded people,*” and it helped her “*open to the idea of living an alternative way without rules.*” Similarly, Helen stressed the importance of having a mentor to keep her on track of living up to her purpose: “*My mentor is my ‘saving grace’... he prevented me from getting lost inside of my own head and helped me channel my energies and become really good at what I do so that I can live up to my purpose rather than just thinking about it.*”

**Unfolding.** As individuals went through a phase of exploration, it was usually followed or accompanied by an unfolding phase, where individuals’ sense of purpose became clearer. The key sub-themes include seeking manifestation of the inner purpose energy, believing in oneself, and reshaping self-identity. While most participants shared a sense of progress during their purpose development process, the nature and the speed of the unfolding process differed, and how purpose



is experienced also varied. For some, the unfolding process started from within as they “*access the inner purposeful energy and find a healthy expression in the worldly activities*” (Helen). Helen used a metaphor of volcanic eruption to describe her experience:

*At first I went through a soul searching process and realised that I need to stop doing what is not purposeful, it's like small volcanic eruption with lava flows. The energy would crop up once in a while, either I was not conscious of it, or I was subconsciously suppressing it. But it's like a volcano that's going to erupt. I think I experienced an explosion, where it overwhelmed every other force inside of me, and I think I went through a period where I needed to learn to tame it and channel it to find a healthy expression.*

For others, the unfolding process was more about connecting with the external world, as they proactively used the external feedback as information to adjust their direction and gain clarity on the expression of their purpose. For example, John shared: “*I started to see common threads when people approach me in a similar way – I started to realise maybe this is who I am because I'm having similar effect on people across the world.*” Most participants also spoke about the need to believe in themselves and how they became more confident in their skills and abilities as they gained more clarity on their place in the world. Monica spoke about her experience of developing a book club from scratch, which helped her “*develop the confidence that I never believe exists in myself.*” John also talked about the importance of “*developing a new confidence in yourself, because it's like being in the woods you have no idea how things are going to work out – and you have to have that belief in yourself.*”

**Evolving.** A common theme that emerged was that participants generally considered purpose as an ongoing process without a fixed destination. Tracy described purpose as an “*ever-growing organism... and it's like the anchor that will dock sometimes but you'll pull it back up and move along and find some new sea.*” Participants also talked about the scope and intensity of purpose changes over time. Jennifer reflected, “*In the past I wanted to change the world and have a massive impact, but what I've realised is, I just care about the impact I'm having directly on those around me in the moment.*” Annabel also experienced a shift in how she experienced the manifestation of purpose in life: “*I now appreciate purpose to be much more malleable with different level of intensity and concentration. It's a shift for me to understand purpose in its broader sense so it can be applied to different things.*”

In addition to the evolving nature of the strengths and scope of purpose, interviewees also acknowledged that while there was an “*overarching theme*” of what their purpose was, how it was expressed could evolved over time. Monica described her purpose as an “*all-encompassing umbrella everything can hang off that.*” Helen thought her purpose had evolved from a narrow definition because she wanted to “*help people in a broader way.*” The evolving nature of the purpose development process also means that an individual's continued learning and growth is a key part of the journey. Annabel talked about her personal growth coming from becoming who she is: “*I felt I have grown so much as a person, and what's most important is actually feeling more myself, and that to me is what growth means.*”

### **Purpose as a driving force expanding life**

Participants indicated that pursuing a purposeful life has a positive impact on their lives by having enhanced psychological well-being, feeling energised and focused, and experiencing a sense of self-transcendence. They referred to their experience of improved psychological well-being as feeling fulfilled and satisfied in their lives, and as gaining personal power, confidence, and resilience to overcome challenges. Laura spoke about *“feeling much happier and just so much at peace with myself.”* Helen shared her feeling of *“having more power”* by *“accessing your own power that comes from that purposeful energy.”* Fiona used the analogy that having a purpose was like *“having a protective shield”* to help her resist personalising the criticism when fighting for a cause she believed in.

Interviewees also described how living a purposeful life makes them feel energised and focused on pursuing their goals. Catherine spoke about *“the sense of real excitement and energy”* when she started putting ideas into work. For most participants, purpose serves as a driving force that *“gets me up in the morning”* (Jimmy) and *“keeps me focused on what needs to be done”* (Annabel). Purpose helps individuals make career and life decisions by serving as a *“compass”* (Joanna) and *“litmus test”* (Annabel). Notably, participants experience purpose as a more sustainable source of motivation than some other psychological constructs such as passion. As Fiona put it, *“I feel purpose is more sustainable, and it varies in intensity, whereas I feel passion is either on or off. Passion is almost like lighting the match, you just light up when you need them, but purpose is lighting the candle - it just keeps burning.”*

Finally, interviewees mentioned the experience of losing their ego and transcending beyond themselves to reach a common goal, which allows a sense of acceptance, expansion of self-boundaries, and connection with something *“bigger than oneself”* (Monica). Fiona shared her experience of losing the ego when pursuing a cause she particularly cared about:

*I began with a huge ego and it prevented me from moving forward. When you lose the ego you can see you might not necessarily be the best person to take on the task, but you know who is and actually they need to lead the task, and I've learnt to be okay with that.*

### **The dark side of purposeful living**

Although most participants considered pursuing a purposeful way of living as having a positive impact on their lives, the process can also yield negative psychological effects that could derail the development of purpose if they lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and making too many personal sacrifices. However, participants also recognised the positive potential of the dark side, which can serve as a catalyst for personal growth.

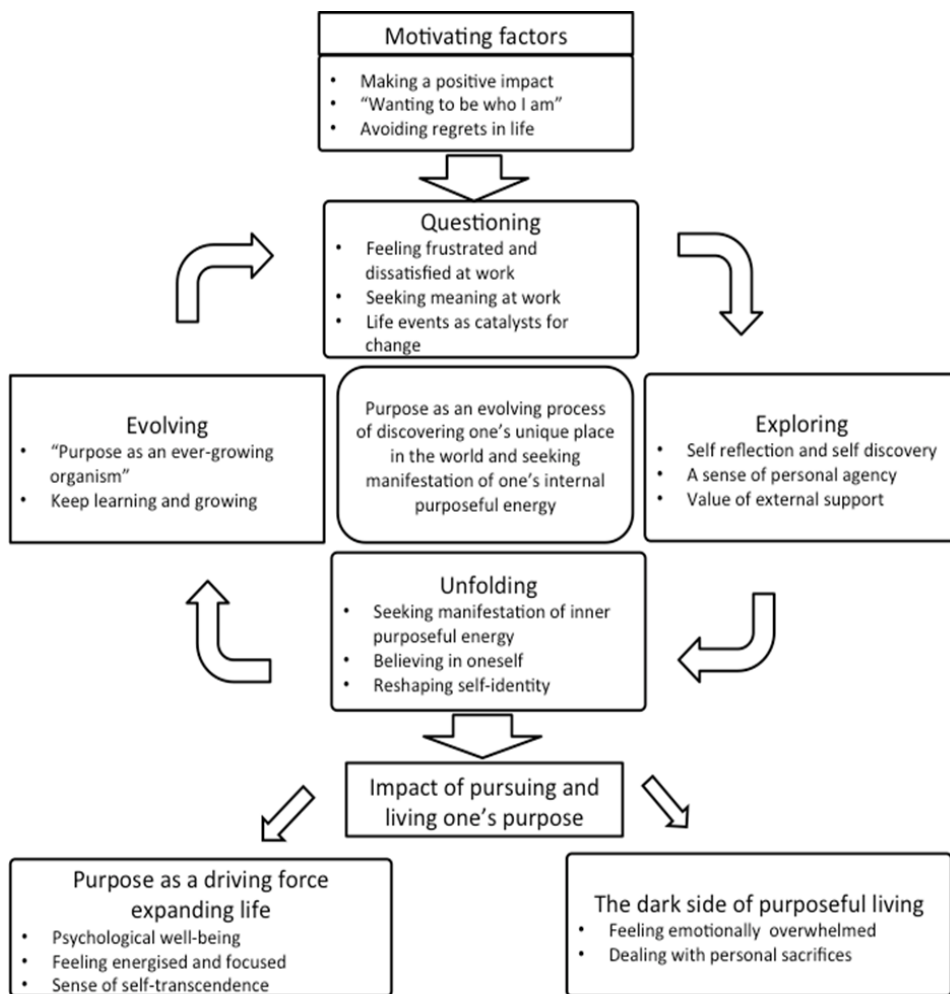
Pursuing and living purpose can be emotionally overwhelming, with positive experiences alternating with stressful and challenging times. Monica described her journey of pursuing purpose as an *“emotional roller-coaster”* and *“there are so many highs and lows and it takes a lot of guts to lean into your vulnerability.”* Similarly, Anthony shared he felt *“the guilt of not caring enough”* and found it a difficult experience. The emotional challenge could also come from external sources, as Tracy spoke about having to *“deal with skeptical voices and cynicism”* as she forged an unconventional career path. However, participants also recognised that although some of these

experiences might appear negative on the surface, they could be empowering and lead to positive outcomes. As John expressed:

*I have definitely experienced emotions that I had never experienced before, such as a deep sense of loneliness and sadness. Although on the surface they are bad things, actually they are an equal part of being human, so I think to embrace them and go deep into them is actually a brave and beautiful thing.*

Furthermore, some interviewees spoke about the challenge of dealing with personal sacrifices, including losing financial income and undermining personal relationships. David shared that it was challenging to take a big leap from “big corporate salary” to “dealing with the uncertainties of being a freelancer.” Similarly, Anthony spoke about the “tension in trying to search for something at the expense of your own needs, be that emotional or physical well-being.

In summary, the key themes of the purpose process model discussed above can be summarised in the form of grounded theory model as illustrated in the Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Key themes of the purpose-process model

## Discussion

This study shed light, for the first time in a detailed way, on individuals' experience of purpose in the context of career change, and has expanded our understanding of individuals' experience of purpose, by showing that purpose is an ongoing dynamic process that individuals engage in to discover their unique place in the world and pursue a purposeful way of living. Individuals see purpose as an ongoing journey of inquiry, discovery, and growth, rather than simply a fixed destination. The grounded model also suggests purpose can be experienced as a flow of energy that individuals can access at any time inside themselves and be embodied in a variety of activities in which they engage.

The study unveils a purpose process model that explains the key themes emerging from participants' experience of pursuing a purposeful way of living and explores the motivational factors that drive the process, as well as the impact of the purpose development process, including both positive impact that can expand life, as well as the dark side that could detract from life. These findings add to our understanding of the developmental process of purpose in the adult population, which is a gap in the existing literature. Some of the elements of the grounded model deepen our understanding of existing theories on meaning and purpose, such as Baumeister's (1992) theory of needs for meaning, Rosso et al.'s (2010) meaningful work pathway model, and Wong's (2016) meaning-seeking theory. Furthermore, by focusing on exploring the role of purpose in the context of career change, the study provides new insights on how purpose can facilitate positive results in career change, which not only adds to our understanding of existing career development theories, but also offers practical implications on designing purpose-oriented career interventions to support individuals pursuing more fulfilling careers.

### Purpose as a process

Purpose is often defined as a noun in existing literature, as a central self-organising life aim (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009) and a stable intention to accomplish something meaningful beyond oneself (Damon et al., 2003). However, the findings suggest that purpose can also be considered as a verb – a dynamic process – in the sense that the journey itself also forms a key part of the meaning. A key overarching theme from the study is that individuals experience purpose as an ongoing and open-ended process that facilitates self-discovery, personal growth, and identity development. A number of themes are identified as key components of the purpose process, including “questioning,” “exploring,” “unfolding,” and “evolving.” What initiated the purpose process typically involves questioning the status quo, which can be triggered by a sense of dissatisfaction, a lack of meaningfulness in one's work, or significant life events. The exploration phase involves self-discovery and exploration, a sense of personal agency, and the value of external support. These findings support the purpose development theory proposed by Kashdan and McKnight (2009), given the process model involves a combination of proactive and self-initiated elements (e.g. self-discovery), reactive elements (e.g. life events as catalysts for change), and social learning aspects (e.g. external feedback and influence). This study provides deeper insights into how these processes unfold, as well as the psychological impact of such processes, which provides implications for practitioners to guide individuals in their search for meaningful careers.

In addition, some other elements of the purpose process model link to existing theories in positive psychology, such as the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Individuals consider the challenges and difficulties as necessary components of the purpose journey and learn from them in order to achieve personal growth. Participants also mentioned that identifying and applying strengths helped them get more clarity on how they can use their talents to serve the world and develop a sense of purpose as they explore career options. Strengths are defined as “the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 8), and the results support the findings from the existing literature that using one’s strengths can help cultivate a sense of purpose at work (Dik, Steger, Gibson, & Peisner, 2011). These findings offer implications for practitioners to focus on helping individuals identify and apply strengths as a pathway for more meaningful work.

Finally, purpose as a process is also reflected in individuals’ experience of how the scope, intensity, and expression of purpose evolve. Although existing research indicates that the level and sources of meaning can change over a life span (Ryff & Essex, 1992), these studies are mainly focused on the construct of meaning instead of purpose. Furthermore, most existing studies are quantitative designs, but this study offers detailed insights into how individuals’ experience of purpose evolve in the context of a career change process, which contributes to our understanding of the multi-face and dynamic nature of purpose.

### **The impact of pursuing a purposeful way of living**

The study sheds light on both the positive impact and “the dark side” of discovering and developing one’s purpose in a career change journey. The findings suggest that pursuing a purposeful way of living enables individuals to enhance psychological well-being by feeling fulfilled in their work, gaining personal confidence, and creating a psychological buffer against challenges. This supports the findings from existing literature that the sense of meaning and purpose is a key component of resilience (Wong & Wong, 2012) and has practical implications for practitioners to develop a purpose-oriented approach to help individuals build up the psychological and mental resources to navigate the challenging aspects of the career transition process.

Existing research on the search for meaning has received criticism for focusing mainly on its relationship with subjective well-being, with little emphasis on exploring the impact of the meaning-seeking process on eudaemonic well-being (Wong, 2016). In contrast to subjective well-being, which focuses on the experience of feeling good (Ryan & Deci, 2001), eudaemonic well-being refers to the degree to which an individual’s life is characterised as in alignment with their value (Waterman, 1993). This study identified self-transcendence as one of the key outcomes of pursuing one’s purpose, which supports Wong’s theory (2016) that the meaning-seeking process can lead to self-transcendence through mindful awareness, seeking one’s calling, and faith in a transcendental realm. This expands our understanding of the process of searching for purpose by going beyond the cognitive and mechanistic aspects (Park et al., 2010) and provides new insights into the spiritual aspects of the purpose development process.

However, it is worth recognising that developing purpose is not without its challenges and can lead to distressed emotions. These results support the findings from existing literature on the stress-inducing aspect of searching for purpose, which can be filled with frustration and distress (Steger,

Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006). However, what the present study also shows is how individuals can embrace these difficulties and use them as a springboard for positive growth as they embrace psychological discomfort as a necessary step towards a purposeful life. This provides new empirical insights which support a more holistic approach to positive psychology that not only focuses on positive conditions in human life but also on exploring how positive growth and outcomes can be achieved through difficult experiences (Ivtzan et al., 2015).

### **The role of purpose in career development and transition**

This study identifies a number of mechanisms through which purpose can facilitate the experience and results of career change. Firstly, pursuing a purposeful way of living helps individuals develop a sense of identity that is aligned with one's personal values, which in turn, reinforces and fosters the development through self-exploration and discovery. A number of participants expressed purpose is "*at the core of who I am*" and as their journey of developing purpose unfolds, they are "*feeling more like myself.*" These themes support the findings in the existing literature that identity affirmation often accompanies career transitions (Ibarra, 1999) forming a key pathway to experience meaning (Rosso et al., 2010), and that establishing a purpose helps individuals develop a sense of identity (Bronk, 2011).

However, what is unique about this study is that it shows how self-identity, career transition, and purpose development interact with each other through a dynamic process. This represents a response to the call to focus on individuals' development over time and avoid the pitfalls of some traditional career theories that often consider people and their careers as static rather than evolving (Arnold & Cohen, 2008). As purpose is experienced as an ongoing journey, it allows individuals opportunity to explore different possible selves. This ties in with the possible selves theory, which suggests that each person has many possible selves and that they play a significant role in an individual's career change as they free people from being restricted or trapped in their options (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The grounded model provides new insights into how the development process of purpose and identity can work together to facilitate positive change. It also has practical implications to guide individuals to explore how they can develop purpose in career change, which typically doesn't receive much attention in career exploration activities (Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008).

Secondly, purpose also serves as a mental and psychological resource one can draw upon to overcome challenges. Participants experience purpose as "*an inner energy that exists within oneself,*" and they can draw up the energy and find worldly expression in different activities. The study also suggests that pursuing a purposeful way of life can help individuals develop personal power and confidence, and serve as *guiding principles* and *compass* as they focus on what truly matters to them. As such, purpose could serve as an identity-related resource as it offers individuals direction, focus, and energy. This adds to our understanding of the existing theory suggested by McKnight and Kashdan (2009) that purpose stimulates psychological flexibility and fosters efficient resource allocation that leads to a higher level of cognitive and behavioral activities.

## Limitation and Future Direction

The results of the study need to be considered in the context of a number of limitations. Firstly, although efforts were made to ensure the participant sample varied in age, gender, choice of career, and ethnic background, it can be argued that the sample is to some extent homogenous. Most participants grew up in western culture, and their perception could have been influenced by western culture and society. Participants also came from relatively similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Future research can explore how culture, age, and socio-economic status might affect individuals' experience of purpose.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies to examine how purpose evolves over a life span can also help substantiate the process model further. The findings suggest that rather than experiencing purpose as a fixed and stable central aim in life, individuals experience purpose as an ongoing process in which they discover their place in the wider social context and find manifestation of their inner purposeful energy. Although attempts have been made to explore the evolving nature of purpose from a retrospective perspective by gathering data on how individuals experience purpose over the course of their career change, future research may consider following individuals over a longer period of time to better understand how the process of purpose unfolds from a life span perspective (Super, 1990).

## Conclusion

The study adds to our understanding of individuals' experience of purpose by showing that purpose can be experienced as an ongoing and evolving process in which individuals engage to discover their unique place in the world and seek manifestation of their inner purpose energy in a variety of activities throughout their lives. The grounded model also unveils a purpose process model of pursuing a purposeful way of living consisting of key themes, including the impact of the developmental process on individuals' well-being. These findings not only expand our theoretical knowledge of purpose but also offer practical implications for practitioners to provide purpose-oriented interventions to support individuals in their career change process. Furthermore, the study adds to our understanding of how the dynamic process of purpose and identity development can complement and reinforce each other, and the various factors that can foster or derail the process. In addition, pursuing a purposeful way of life is also shown to provide the psychological resources and buffer to help individuals overcome the challenges throughout the career change process. It is important for practitioners to explore purpose-oriented activities to help individuals navigate career change to gain clarity on career direction, as well as build resilience.

Finally, the study represents a response to the call for more qualitative research on the deeper meaning of the more complicated aspects of human flourishing, such as meaning and purpose in life (Wong, 2016). The grounded model recognises that each individual's process of developing purpose is unique and shows a wide spectrum of how the scope, intensity, and expression of purpose can evolve over time. Similarly, such process can lead to a positive impact that can contribute to both hedonic and eudaemonic well-being, but also can result in experience of distressed emotions that might derail the process. However, the dark side can act as a seed for positive change as people

develop a growth mindset to learn and grow from these challenges. These findings add to the empirical evidence supporting the importance of embracing challenging emotions and situations for positive growth (Ivtzan et al., 2015).

Based on the findings of the study, it is important to recognise the development of purpose as a key component of individuals' career development process, and future research may explore this theme in more detail through a longitudinal study. As a deeper understanding of the experience of developing purpose is gained, purpose-oriented interventions can also be developed based on the purpose process model to form an integral part of career and vocation guidance to support individuals pursuing a purposeful way of living.



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