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Conceptualizing similarities and differences between purpose in life and self-affirmation

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Abstract

Individuals contend with a variety of threats in daily life and may attempt to deal with them using various cognitive strategies. Two constructs borne from different literatures, purpose in life and self-affirmation, serve to promote well-being and to protect individuals from such threats. While self-affirmation has often been examined as a manipulation, purpose has, until recently, been considered a dispositional resource. However, both self-affirmation and purpose seem to confer similar advantages in response to threat. This paper reviews the evidence for the protective benefits of both purpose in life and self-affirmation, describes the mechanisms by which each confers these advantages, and considers the boundary conditions of each. Key similarities and differences are discussed, and we argue that there are broad gaps in the literature regarding *where* and *when* these constructs might operate differentially, or *why* these differences exist. We conclude with a call to researchers to explore empirically how and when these important interventions might be differentially beneficial to those who cultivate them.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, individuals may be confronted with threats, large and small. For instance, people experience threats to their identity (Frantz, Cuddy, Burnett, Ray, & Hart, 2004), receive concerning health information (Klein & Harris, 2009), grapple with feelings of personal anxiety (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013), navigate uncomfortable social situations (Burrow & Hill, 2013), and endure the consequences of severe poverty (Machell, Disabato, & Kashdan, 2016). Fortunately, many individuals are equipped with psychological resources for successfully negotiating the threats they face. Two prominent constructs hailing from disparate literatures within psychology have been found to confer protection against the ill effects of everyday threats: purpose in life and self-affirmation.

There appears to be methodological overlap in the procedures used to affirm the self or to induce purpose in life, and at times, similar ways of testing for these effects. Given this overlap but also recognizing the subtle differences between these constructs, researchers could benefit from a more precise understanding of how self-affirmation and purpose should be operationalized, and by what mechanisms individuals are impacted by these important constructs. Despite the copious amount of research conducted on both constructs separately, there has been no systematic investigation into their points of overlap or distinction. Here, we provide an overview of research on both sense of

purpose and self-affirmation, describe the defining characteristics and known correlates of both constructs, unpack the mechanisms by which each is thought to confer advantages to individuals engaged with them, and lastly, consider the boundary conditions for both sense of purpose and self-affirmation to more precisely identify the situations in which each is most likely to mitigate threats.

2 | DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

2.1 | Purpose in life

What is purpose, and what does it mean to have a sense of purpose in life? Purpose is considered a “central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning, which directs life goals and daily decisions by guiding the use of finite personal resources” (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009, p. 242). Many contend that it is a higher order construct that coordinates an individual's motivations and pursuits of accomplishment (Hill, Burrow, Sumner, & Young, 2015; Martela & Steger, 2016), which concerns the “tendency to derive meaning from life's experiences and possess a sense of intentionality and goal directedness that guides behavior” (Schaefer et al., 2013, p. 3; see also Ryff, 1989). Purpose captures “the extent to which a person engages in activities that are personally valued” (Scheier et al., 2006, p. 291). Purpose can be internally oriented and can relate to prosocial matters outside of the self, such as an individual's “desire to make a difference in the world” (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003, p. 121). Several theorists argue that purpose is a foundational psychological asset: Frankl (1959) defined purpose as an “inner strength” (p. 76), and Ryff and Keyes (1995) contend that purpose in life is a core facet of psychological well-being.

It must be noted that meaning and purpose in life are often conflated within the psychological literature. Consistent with recent scholarship (Hill et al., 2015), we contend that purpose and meaning in life are distinguishable constructs, with purpose being a more prospective and action-oriented notion. In this paper, we aim to emphasize the construct of purpose and focus our review on theories, measures, and intervention strategies for which purpose, in particular, is the construct of intended interest.

2.2 | Self-affirmation

Self-affirmation, by contrast, is “an act that demonstrates one's adequacy” (G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 337; D. K. Sherman, 2013) and is the process by which individuals attempt to “cope with one kind of self-threat by affirming an unrelated aspect of the self” (Steele, 1988, p. 263). Steele (1988) theorized that individuals are driven to maintain a positive sense of self as “competent, good, [and] coherent ...” (p. 262). Further, he argued that when one's self-concept is threatened in some way, individuals might strive to regain or maintain a strong sense of self, sometimes attempting to explain or rationalize their behaviors. This “self-affirmation system” is activated in response to threat and remains engaged until one's positive perception of self is restored. During times of threat, self-affirmation may help to provide a reminder of one's self worth and personal resources (e.g., G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014; D. K. Sherman, 2013). Importantly, individuals can regain this positive sense of self even without directly resolving the original threat; people can affirm other importantly held beliefs in contextually unrelated areas of the self and still feel relief. Thus, even if a threat is specific to one domain, self-affirmation can bring relief by reminding an individual of other importantly held beliefs to boost the global sense of self more generally.

3 | MANIPULATIONS AND MEASURES

3.1 | Purpose

Generally, purpose is discussed as a dispositional resource, as a rather chronic trait, and numerous studies suggest that purpose is implicated in a broad array of positive outcomes. However, other studies have successfully manipulated (at least temporarily) levels of purpose.

3.1.1 | Purpose as a disposition

Several measures seek to quantify one's dispositional (trait) purpose in life. For instance, the Life Engagement Test (LET) is a 6-item scale that "provide[s] an index of purpose in life by assessing the extent to which a person considers his or her activities to be valuable and important" (Scheier et al., 2006, p. 292). Items include "To me, the things I do are all worthwhile" and "There is not enough purpose in my life." Ryff's (1989) Purpose in Life subscale of the Ryff Psychological Well-Being measure includes questions such as "I have a sense of direction and purpose in my life" and "I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality."

3.1.2 | Purpose manipulations

Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that individuals induced to think about purpose can experience similar positive outcomes to individuals with high levels of dispositional purpose (e.g., Burrow & Hill, 2013; Burrow, Stanley, Sumner, & Hill, 2014). Generally, these manipulations involve a writing task wherein participants describe their purpose in life. For instance, in one study (Burrow, Stanley, et al., 2014), participants responded to the following:

Please take a few minutes to think about what it means to have a sense of purpose. Really reflect on the idea of purpose. When you're ready, write a few sentences describing your purpose and give an example of its role in your life. Even if you don't have a purpose, please try and give an example of what your purpose might be.

Similar prompts have been utilized elsewhere (e.g., Burrow & Hill, 2013; Burrow, Hill, & Sumner, 2016). In contrast, Bundick (2011) utilized an interview procedure wherein participants were prompted to consider and reflect on their goals and purpose in life.

3.2 | Self-affirmation

In contrast to purpose in life, self-affirmation has been studied more so as a transient state, induced by an act, rather than a dispositional trait, wherein an experimental manipulation brings "online" one's self-resources (e.g., self-esteem; Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993). This state is typically induced or manipulated through the ranking of important values, which include some form of those taken from Allport, Vernon, and Lindzey (1960) (e.g., economic, theoretical, social, and political; for a review, see McQueen & Klein, 2006). Then, participants are usually asked to write about their most important value and why it is important to them (e.g., D. A. K. Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000, study 2). However, recent research has begun to explore individuals' ability to spontaneously self-affirm (e.g., Brady et al., 2016; Emanuel et al., 2016).

Importantly, the personal resources associated with these affirmations are inherently available as dispositional characteristics. Such resources may be more or less readily available to individuals to bring online during times of threat. For example, Spencer et al. (1993) argue that individuals with high dispositional self-esteem have access to more self-resources to call upon than those with low self-esteem: When facing a threat, individuals with low self-esteem struggle to restore their feelings of adequacy, and self-affirmations are less effective for these individuals. It is important to note that these resources need to be brought "online." When individuals with high or low self-esteem faced a threat, self-affirmations were needed to remind them of their self-resources—without them, both groups showed the effects of dissonance (Spencer et al., 1993). Thus, it appears that self-affirmation is only effective for those who have dispositional resources available.

Further, constructs like self-esteem and other self-resources may be the dispositional parallel to self-affirmation: Self-affirmation is merely the task by which one is reminded of such resources. For instance, affirming the self through a values ranking and writing task is only effective for those who have high dispositional resources available to them, and affirmation is simply a tool that can be used to remind one of such resources. That is not to say that such resources, like self-esteem, cannot have state-like properties. Research on spontaneous self-affirmation seemingly supports this idea: In studies exploring spontaneous self-affirmation, individuals' are often asked to report their ability to think about important values to the self when confronted by a threat (e.g., Emanuel et al., 2016).

3.2.1 | Similarities and differences in experimental manipulations

While purpose and self-affirmation manipulation procedures have some degree of overlap, they tend to vary in some important ways. Many purpose and self-affirmation inductions involve a writing task, but the question stems of these prompts vary widely. Purpose manipulations are rather open-ended and do not prompt participants to write about any specific purpose or value (e.g., Burrow & Hill, 2013). In contrast, most self-affirmation value essays direct participants to consider a given list of values (for a review, see McQueen & Klein, 2006). However, for both purpose and self-affirmation inductions, the range of topics that participants might consider is expansive. Further, the degree of overlap between these may be dependent upon which value is ranked as the most important, and thus, about which value the participant writes. For instance, perhaps writing about one's purpose in life is procedurally and thematically similar to writing about one's most important value. Future research must unpack whether these prompts elicit writings on similar themes, values, and beliefs.

It is conceivable that writing about purpose may serve as a specific form of self-affirmation. That is, considering and describing one's purpose may bring online self-resources and potentially lead to an (at least temporary) increase in self-esteem. Might the similarities or differences lie in the content of the writing task? Perhaps the effects of purpose and self-affirmation interventions might be more similar to one another depending on the specific content of a response. In some cases, writing about one's purpose and why it is important could be procedurally similar to engaging with an important value from a self-affirmation task.

Consider the following scenario: in a classic values affirmation task, a participant is asked to select one value as most important, out of several values, all of which may be important to the participant to some extent. Adhering to the request, this participant selects relationships with friends and family to be their most important value and completes the assignment by writing in detail about these relationships. Yet, imagine if instead of writing about these relationships, this same participant was prompted to write about their purpose in life—and in doing so, chose to write about their life aims in the context of their close relationships with friends and family. For this participant, the task of writing about one's most important value may have considerable overlap with writing about one's purpose, though a purpose prompt may allow for a freer expression of these values and personal considerations. Perhaps writing about one's purpose in life is a strong but more organic way of reflecting on one's personal values and resources. However, research has yet to empirically explore this possibility.

4 | CORRELATES AND CONSEQUENCES

Purpose in life and self-affirmation can serve as important buffers against threats and afford protection to individuals across many different contexts. Below, we discuss a sampling of the correlates and consequences of each, and where similarities and differences emerge between them. Purpose in life is associated with positive health outcomes, while self-affirmation reduces defensiveness in the processing of health information. Furthermore, purpose in life aids in recovery from stress, while self-affirmation relates to individuals' reactions to stress. Research indicates purpose in life broadly relates to well-being and life satisfaction, while the relationship between self-affirmation and these positive outcomes is more complex. Both purpose and self-affirmation relate to decreased defensiveness and increased accuracy, but purpose is associated with goal reengagement, while self-affirmation relates to goal disengagement. Lastly, both purpose and self-affirmation are associated with increased comfort with diversity.

4.1 | Health

Research suggests that purpose is related to many positive health outcomes (e.g., Scheier et al., 2006), while self-affirmation can help reduce individuals' defensive responses to important health messages and increases intentions to make positive health changes. For instance, purpose is associated with reduced likelihood of stroke in older adults (e.g., Kim, Sun, Park, & Peterson, 2013), decreased risk of mortality (e.g., Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009;

R. Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016; Hill & Turiano, 2014), and lower likelihood of experiencing cardiovascular events (e.g., R. Cohen et al., 2016). In one study, purpose in life was linked with more optimal recovery for adults who had undergone knee replacement surgery and buffered against physical strain (Smith & Zautra, 2004). Research also indicates that for older adults, purpose is associated with increased movement (Irving, Davis, & Collier, 2017).

Much work has focused on self-affirmation as a means to reduce defensive processing of important, threatening health information (e.g., van Koningsbruggen, Das, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). Across several studies, self-affirmation increased individuals' intentions to reduce negative health behaviors (e.g., reduce caffeine consumption; van Koningsbruggen et al., 2009; D. A. K. Sherman et al., 2000) and individuals' willingness to pursue risk testing for disease (e.g., van Koningsbruggen & Das, 2009). In another line of work, researchers found that self-affirmation increased impoverished individuals' willingness to inquire about pertinent information regarding benefits and to take an informational letter regarding these benefits (Hall, Zhao, & Shafir, 2014).

4.2 | Stress

Research indicates that purpose helps individuals recover from stress while self-affirmation can help prevent or reduce stress. For instance, purposeful individuals recover better from exposure to negative stimuli than those with low purpose (e.g., Schaefer et al., 2013), and in another study, purpose was related to faster recovery from, but not the reaction to, social stress (Fogelman & Canli, 2015). Other work demonstrates that academic stresses can leave some students particularly vulnerable to poor school performance, but self-affirmation has been shown to alleviate these issues (e.g., G. L. Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012; D. K. Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009; see also, Borman, 2017; D. K. Sherman, 2013). For example, D. K. Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, and Jaremka (2009) found that students who affirmed the self prior to a stressful exam felt less stressed and had lower levels of epinephrine in urine samples compared to students who did not affirm the self. Other research found that affirming the self helped reduce academic decline in middle-school students who felt that they did not belong; African-American students who were randomly assigned to a self-affirmation condition had less fluctuation in sense of belonging than those in the control condition, and self-affirmation weakened the link between belonging and academic performance (Cook et al., 2012). Self-affirmation can also combat stereotype threat in women: Women performed worse on math tests when they were told that the tests were diagnostic of their math ability but performed equally well to men and women who did not receive the threatening information about diagnostic ability when they affirmed the self (e.g., Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006).

4.3 | Well-being and life satisfaction

Much research demonstrates that purpose is reliably related to general well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Burrow & Hill, 2011; Scheier et al., 2006; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2014), but research regarding self-affirmation and well-being is more nuanced. Purpose is associated with life satisfaction among adolescents, emerging adults, and young adults (e.g., Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). Purpose may promote greater perceived consistency of the self across time, which in turn can promote well-being even during times of change, and buffers against discrepancies between past and future selves (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Burrow, Sumner, & Ong, 2014), and is also negatively related to depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Irving et al., 2017).

While much research has explored the association between purpose and well-being, this trend has been less common with self-affirmation. One set of studies explored the impact of self-affirmation on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in two samples and found that, relative to a control, South Korean participants who affirmed the self for several weeks experienced increased meaning and flow, but only when they exhibited low eudaimonic well-being at baseline. In addition, self-affirmation improved eudaimonic and hedonic well-being in U.S. participants, but only for participants with low eudaimonic well-being at baseline (Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Other research indicates that spontaneous self-affirmation is positively related to well-being: Those more likely to

spontaneously self-affirm experienced increased hopefulness, happiness, and optimism, but less sadness and anger (Emanuel et al., 2016).

4.4 | Defensiveness

Purpose may protect individuals by reducing reactivity to self-relevant threats, while self-affirmation may protect against threats to importantly held beliefs. In a series of studies, researchers showed that although self-esteem was positively related to receiving greater numbers of "likes" on Facebook profile pictures, individuals with high dispositional purpose were buffered from this contingency, such that "likes" were unrelated to self-esteem (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). This suggests purpose can reduce negative feelings that might otherwise be experienced when one does not feel "liked" by others.

G. L. Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000) demonstrated that individuals are less defensive of disconfirming evidence to important beliefs after self-affirmation; self-affirmation led participants to perceive disconfirming evidence more favorably, although they did not give up that belief. However, those who do not affirm the self show typical levels of confirmation bias in the face of information that is important to them. Other research suggests that mortality salience, the threat induced by contemplating one's eventual death, can also be reduced through self-affirmation. In one study, mortality salience led people to evaluate a pro-USA essay more positively than an anti-USA essay, but this was not the pattern for those who affirmed the self. Affirmed participants were slightly more open to an anti-USA essay and evaluated the essay less negatively than those who did not affirm. Thus, those who were affirmed were less likely to derogate another's worldview (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005).

4.5 | Accuracy

Research demonstrates that both purpose and self-affirmation may increase individual accuracy. Research has explored purpose in relation to perceptions of effort and challenges: In a series of studies, Burrow, Hill, et al. (2016) investigated individuals' perceptions of the steepness of slopes and the effort involved in climbing such slopes. Results indicated that perceptions of how much effort would be required to climb slopes was positively related to how steep the slopes were perceived to be. Thus, individuals who believed that ascending the slopes would be challenging tended to overestimate the incline of the slope. However, this relationship was diminished for purposeful individuals.

In one legal context, researchers discovered that self-affirmation reduces misinformation in eyewitnesses. Participants heard or watched an event, after which they were exposed to false information. Participants given the opportunity to affirm the self and who received positive feedback (e.g., were told they performed well on a memory test) before completing the memory task were more accurate in their recollections than those who did not receive both interventions. Here, self-affirmation may help individuals to resist external influences (Szpitalak & Polczyk, 2015).

4.6 | Goal striving

Purpose has been shown to increase goals and goal reengagement, while in contrast, self-affirmation may reduce goal engagement. One study found purpose in life was positively associated with having personally important social and psychological, but not material, goals in cancer patients (e.g., Pinquart, Silbereisen, & Fröhlich, 2009), while in another, purpose was positively related to goal reengagement but not to goal disengagement (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003).

In contrast, Vohs, Park, and Schmeichel (2013) found that self-affirmation can reduce goal engagement and motivation. In this work, self-affirmed individuals were more likely to say that they would disengage in a goal than non-affirmed individuals. Here, self-affirmation increased motivation and persistence when individuals thought a goal was attainable but led to a decrease when individuals thought the goal was unattainable. Further, self-affirmation did not protect against failure; those who affirmed and then experienced failure evaluated themselves worse than those who did not affirm in terms of intelligence, competence, work ethic, and self-efficacy. Self-affirmation can also lead to

escalation in commitment to a failed goal: In one study, self-affirmation seemed to enhance the threat of failure, particularly when the affirmation was related to the value or ability that had been called into question by the prospect of failure (Sivanathan, Molden, Galinsky, & Ku, 2008).

4.7 | Racial bias and attitudes toward diversity

Purpose in life is associated with increased comfort with racial diversity, and self-affirmation has been shown to reduce implicit racial biases. Research suggests that purposeful individuals are more comfortable in socially diverse settings (e.g., Burrow & Hill, 2013; Burrow, Stanley, et al., 2014). In a set of studies examining the impact of ethnic composition of a busy commuter train on passenger mood, passengers low in purpose experienced negative mood when the percentage of out-group members on the train increased. However, for purposeful individuals, there was no relationship between percentage of out-group members and mood (Burrow & Hill, 2013). Other research also suggests that dispositional and primed purpose can increase comfort with diversity such that purposeful individuals are more comfortable with diversity (Burrow, Stanley, et al., 2014).

Self-affirmation serves as a useful manipulation to reduce racial biases and the threat of appearing racist. Research indicates that whites who are told that the implicit association test (IAT) measures racial bias experience stereotype threat, which increases their pro-white IAT scores (e.g., Frantz et al., 2004; Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007). Further, these scores are high even for those who are motivated to control racism and prejudice (Frantz et al., 2004). Importantly, self-affirmation attenuated IAT scores, even in individuals who value not being prejudiced (Frantz et al., 2004). Interestingly, participants who affirmed egalitarian beliefs before taking the IAT did not show elevated pro-white IAT scores, even when experiencing the threat of knowing that the IAT measures racial bias (Frantz et al., 2004). Similarly, Rudman et al. (2007) found that participants experiencing threat showed elevated levels of implicit self-esteem, but self-affirmation eliminated compensatory processes, which reduced racial bias and increased self-worth. Overall, it appears that self-affirmation can provide a powerful buffer against implicit racial biases.

5 | MECHANISMS OF PROTECTION

By what mechanisms do purpose and self-affirmation protect individuals from reactivity to threatening information? With respect to the demonstrated benefits of purpose, purpose's ability to orient an individual toward the future and to help individuals see themselves in reference to a broader social context (e.g., Bronk, 2011) is likely to account for these effects. For example, in regard to buffering adolescents from the negative effects of poverty, purpose may increase hope for a better future, leading youths to imagine an idealized form of themselves which decreases antisocial behaviors (e.g., Machell et al., 2016). Further, purpose can buffer individuals against negative affect during times of uncertainty or discomfort (e.g., Burrow, Stanley, et al., 2014), and those with a greater sense of purpose may be better able to inhibit impulsive behavior compared to those low in purpose (Burrow & Spreng, 2016). Other research suggests that purpose increases information search and confidence in mock police investigators, and while the exact mechanism is unknown, it seems that purpose increases individuals' motivation to find the legally correct answer (Burd, Burrow, Torrie, & Nam, 2016).

More research has examined the mechanisms by which self-affirmation produces positive change. Some argue that it does so by reinforcing self-integrity (e.g., Steele, 1988), boosting other self-resources (for a review, see Sherman, 2013), or increasing openness to counter-attitudinal information and individuals' willingness to compromise (e.g., G. L. Cohen et al., 2007; for a review, see Lee, Turetsky, & Spicer, 2017). Others suggest that it reduces the accessibility of negative thoughts (e.g., Schmeichel & Martens, 2005). Further, self-affirmation increases positive other-directed feelings (e.g., love, connection; Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008) and individuals' perceptions of their self resources, which is associated with lower stress appraisal (e.g., Creswell et al., 2005). Self-affirmation can also make individuals feel more secure in their self-worth, so failures and/or stressors seem less severe (e.g., D. K.

Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009) and may inhibit self-doubt (e.g., Jaremka, Bunyan, Collins, & Sherman, 2011). Affirming the self is related to self-regulation and may combat depletion (Loseman & van den Bos, 2012; Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). Other work suggests self-affirmation leads to a broader perspective of the self (e.g., Burson, Crocker, & Mischkowski, 2012; Critcher & Dunning, 2015; D. K. Sherman, 2013; Wakslak & Trope, 2009).

Comparing these two bodies of literature, purpose in life and self-affirmation may, at times, rely on the same mechanisms. For instance, in both literatures, there is some discussion of the broadening of one's perspective (e.g., Bronk, 2011; Critcher & Dunning, 2015). In turn, an expanded view of the self may make immediate threats seem more trivial (e.g., D. K. Sherman, 2013; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). In contrast, while both purpose and self-affirmation can be goal related, several studies indicate that purpose is positively related to having goals and to goal reengagement (e.g., Pinquart et al., 2009; Wrosch et al., 2003), while some research suggests self-affirmation can lead to goal disengagement (e.g., Vohs et al., 2013). It is not clear, however, how motivation or perception of goal attainability factors into the differential effects of purpose in life and self-affirmation: While Vohs et al. (2013) found that self-affirmation increased motivation for goals perceived as attainable, less is known about perceptions of goal attainability and purpose in life. Perhaps self-affirmation relates more to the goal of maintaining a strong sense of self in the here and now, while purpose draws an individual's eye to future goals more generally.

As illustrated above, purpose seems to connect individuals with a sense of their future and potential goals and provides a sense of stability. In contrast, self-affirmation may buffer individuals against more immediate threats by bolstering a sense of self, alleviating stress, and reducing reactivity in the moment. Nevertheless, both purpose and self-affirmation can both help individuals to focus on others rather than themselves and to have a broadened perspective more generally, allowing them to perceive the threat as more minimal. Paramount in future work is to increase identification of mechanisms relevant to purpose, in particular. Comprehensive side-by-side comparisons of purpose and self-affirmation await a more balanced glimpse into mechanisms accounting for the benefits of purpose as has currently been explored for self-affirmation. Without more even attention, researchers cannot ascertain the extent to which purpose and self-affirmation may overlap in terms of driving mechanisms or outcomes.

6 | BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

Both purpose and self-affirmation have been shown to be psychological assets for those capable of engaging with them. Yet, under certain circumstances, both may fail to protect individuals from threat. For instance, dispositional purpose in life appears to decline with age, suggesting that a sense of purpose may be less accessible to us as we get older (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Further, Kashdan and McKnight (2013) explored purpose as an intervention for those suffering from Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD): While purpose inductions helped those suffering from SAD to experience a greater sense of meaning in life and self-esteem, healthy controls did not see similar gains. Similarly, Burrow, Stanley, et al. (2014) found that purpose was only helpful in alleviating threat when white participants were faced with the demographic trends pointing to a "majority minority" in the USA compared to all other groups combined—there was no relation between purpose and threat when participants believed they would remain the majority. Purpose may be limited in the sense that it is most helpful to those most in need and may not provide a boost for those who are already secure.

Self-affirmation is limited in some similar ways. In one study, self-affirmations helped women experiencing stereotype threat related to spatial abilities but did not impact men's performance, suggesting that self-affirmation is helpful only when threat is important to one's identity (Martens et al., 2006). Relatedly, affirming the self can reduce participants' feelings of relationship threat in those with low, but not high, self-esteem (Jaremka et al., 2011). Further, self-affirmation may be most helpful in reducing racial bias in individuals highly motivated to not be prejudiced (e.g., Frantz et al., 2004). Self-affirmation is beneficial to individuals facing threatening alcohol-related health information, but only for moderately heavy drinkers (e.g., Klein & Harris, 2009). Other research indicates that self-affirmation can increase one's pain tolerance, but only when individuals have previously exerted self-control

(Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). This work indicates that there may be a “sweet spot” for self-affirmation and threat reduction (see also, Protzko & Aronson, 2016).

It is important to consider the duration of the effects of purpose in life and self-affirmation interventions and manipulations. Some research exploring the duration of self-affirmation interventions found improved academic performance of Latino students 2 years after a values affirmation intervention: Further, previous interventions allowed individuals to spontaneously affirm the self (Brady et al., 2016). Other self-affirmation research, too, suggests that effects can last up to 2 years (e.g., G. L. Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). To date, no known research has explored how long the effects of purpose in life primes last. However, what is known suggests that dispositionally purposeful individuals reap many long-term benefits (e.g., Boyle et al., 2009; Burrow & Hill, 2011).

7 | CONCLUSION

Despite the abundance of scientific inquiry into the benefits of purpose and self-affirmation separately, there are noticeable gaps in our understanding regarding the distance between them. Important questions await theoretical consideration and empirical investigation. For example, can purpose be thought of as a specific form of self-affirmation? Do purpose and self-affirmation differ by temporal perspective alone? As discussed above, the act of writing about purpose may serve as a self-affirmation induction; a reminder of dispositional resources available to one's self that relates to the future. Purpose broadens one's perspective and may relate directly to one's identity, providing a conceptual link between past and future selves. Self-affirmation, in contrast, may simply be a tool by which self-resources are brought to the foreground and may be enacted on already available resources. Importantly, purpose may be able to help individuals imagine their future selves, even if one does not have resources immediately available, whereas the value of self-affirmation may be restricted to situations where self-resources are already readily available and salient.

We still do not fully understand the mechanisms by which these constructs confer benefits or how they differ in terms of the processes by which they help individuals to reap those benefits, nor do we fully understand their potential limitations. Both purpose and self-affirmation seem to broaden one's perspective, but the extent to which they do so is less understood. Purpose may broaden one's perspective well beyond the here and now, past immediate contexts of threat. In contrast, self-affirmation may be most successful at combating immediate threats, and only when one has important self-resources available to them.

Determining where these constructs *do not* overlap may be the most revealing in terms of where and when they bestow the greatest advantages. For instance, purpose has been shown to increase goals and goal reengagement, while self-affirmation can reduce goal engagement. Inducing purpose may make individuals less likely to abandon unattainable goals as it may provide strong motivation to attain a particular future, whereas with self-affirmation, drawing on other available self-resources already presently available may make individuals more likely to do so by providing an immediate reminder that the present self already has much available.

By exploring these inductions separately and in different contexts, we are unable to determine the power and scope of either. Future research should explore both constructs concurrently to determine the extent of the overlap between them and to investigate whether they have unique effects, and which is most powerful in a given situation. By exploring both as manipulations and analyzing the content of participants' writing, more precise themes may emerge. Investigators and practitioners stand to benefit from a more precise distinction between these two constructs, both in terms of basic research application and determining which manipulation to utilize for different samples for whom the consequences matter most.

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