PREDICTING PURPOSEFULNESS AMONG INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETES

David Light Shields
St. Louis Community College

Christopher D. Funk
University of Missouri-St. Louis

The concept of life purpose has emerged as an important aspect of character with implications for a range of character-related dispositions and behaviors. In this study of intercollegiate athletes from diverse sports (N = 2,374), we examined purpose in relation to 2 aspects of identity (moral and athletic), 2 contesting orientations, empathic concern, and fear of failure. Results indicated that purposefulness correlated positively with all study variables except fear of failure, which correlated negatively. Results of hierarchical regression demonstrated that control variables (gender, age, sport area, and years competing) accounted for only 1% of the variance in purpose scores. The main study variables accounted for an additional 24% to the explained variance, with athletic identity and partnership contesting orientation contributing the most to the final model. Results are discussed in terms of how interactions between person variables and the affordances of sport may contribute to development of a sense of purpose.

Back in the late 1950s, Victor Frankl (1959) suggested that the most powerful human motivation is the need to find meaning or purpose in life. Apart from a brief burst of empirical interest in purpose during the 1960s, inspired by Frankl's theorizing, psychologists were slow to pick up on the importance of purpose to human well-being. However, the past 2 decades have seen a burgeoning emphasis on meaning and purpose largely inspired by the positive psychology and character education movements. Having a sense of purpose in life has emerged as an important component of mental and physical health, and a predictor of many positive outcomes such as self-esteem (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001), resiliency (Benard, 1991), effective coping (Whitty, 2003), happiness (French & Joseph, 1999), life satisfaction (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009), and overall well-being, thriving or flourishing (Benson, 2006; Bronk, 2012; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2011). Conversely, as predicted by Frankl, a sense of purposelessness is related to a range of negative outcomes, such as antisocial behavior (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994), substance abuse (Okasaka, Nobuaki, Nakatani, & Fujisawa, 2008), and depression (Bigler et al., 2001). Because

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** David Light Shields, dshields32@stlcc.edu

Journal of Character Education, Volume 15(1), 2019, pp. 53–67 ISSN 1543-1223

of its relevance to a broad range of positive qualities and outcomes, purposefulness has been referred to as a virtue or character strength (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003), in their influential paper on purpose, define it as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). This definition captures four critical elements that are shared by many researchers in the field. Purpose involves sustained personal commitment, far-horizon goal-directedness, personal meaningfulness, and a focus on impacting the world beyond the self (Bronk, 2014). Even though a sense of purpose is often considered to be a character asset, it is worth noting that purposefulness does not necessarily imply a moral commitment. Purposes can focus on ethical goals, goals that are morally neutral, and even ignoble ends. Presumably, many terrorists have a strong sense of purpose. Still, most researchers have focused on the development of positive or prosocial purposes (Bronk, 2014).

If character is defined broadly to include intellectual, moral, civic, and performance dimensions (Shields, 2011), it is easy to see how helping people develop a sense of purpose is central to many aspects and goals of character education. A sense of purpose tends to deepen relevant intellectual motivation and achievement (Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011; Yeager & Bundick, 2009), gives focus and expression to moral values (Damon, 2008; McAdams, 2009), often connects one to civic causes (Benson, Clary, & Scales, 2007; Damon, 2008), and encourages the development of capacities for dedicated and effective action (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Côté, 2002).

Developing a sense of purpose is a key developmental task of later adolescence and early adulthood (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Eccles, Brown, & Templeton, 2008), and it is certainly an important task for college students (Flowers, 2002). Most researchers who have investigated the developmental pathways to purpose have employed a dynamic and layered perspective of contextual influences (Bronk, 2012). Certainly, parents may play a prominent role in nurturing purpose (Damon, 2008), as can teachers and other adult mentors (Hill, Sumner, & Burrow, 2014; Parks, 2011; Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011). Peers, too, may be influential, especially when they share common interests, activities, and values (Bronk, 2012). And all of these relationships are interactional (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015); adolescents, for example, may reject parental values, respond to some teachers more than others, gravitate to certain peers, and engage in activities that connect them with a limited set of potential adult mentors. And these relationships take place in, and interact with, broader circles of influence, including local communities, multifaceted media cultures, societal power hierarchies, and national politics, to name a few.

While researchers have paid considerable attention to homes and schools as potential sites for purpose development, Bronk (2014) suggests that an important and largely unaddressed question is how extracurricular activities, like sports, might support the development of purpose. Such activities place adolescents or emerging adults under the supervision of mentors who may share similar perspectives and who may be equipped and well-positioned to recognize and support budding talents, interests, and values (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Parks, 2011). Extracurricular activities are also contexts within which relationships with like-minded peers can be built and directed at goal-driven pursuits.

Given the four characteristics embedded in Damon's definition of purpose, it seems probable that high-level sport experiences might be associated with purpose development, especially when those sport experiences reflect a collaborative and growth-oriented approach to competition. Similar to the enduring commitments evoked by purpose, years of dedication almost invariably precede being able to compete at the college level (Debois, Ledon, &

Wylleman, 2015), and few athletes would sustain their resolve through the years of training and preparation if they did not find sport personally meaningful (Jackson, Gucciardi, Hodge, & Dimmock, 2017). While most collegiate athletes do not see themselves entering professional sports, many do perceive sport as serving, at least indirectly, their far horizon goals (Finkenberg & Moode, 1996; Jackson et al., 2017); and many athletes experience a significant "beyond-the-self" dimension to their sport experience as they are often called upon to sacrifice for the sake of the team, and often willingly do so (Prapavessis & Carron, 1997). Even if sport itself may not be the primary focus of purpose for most athletes, the sport experience may still scaffold processes useful to forming a purpose and thereby may make purpose identification more likely.

Most research on purpose has focused on external influences, rather than personal characteristics that facilitate the identification of a purpose. In the research reported here, we focused on purpose among a large sample of intercollegiate student-athletes representing a diverse range of sports. Rather than focusing on coaches or other external influences, we examined the ability of several psychological variables to predict purposefulness, drawing from a set of constructs that have been linked in previous sport research to other positive character qualities, like sportspersonship and moral development. Specifically, we investigated contesting orientations, empathy, moral identity, athletic identity, and fear of failure. We used contesting theory, introduced below, as the primary theoretical framework.

Contesting Theory and Purpose

Contesting theory is about the way contestants think about—using primarily nonconscious "fast thinking" processes, to borrow Kahneman's (2011) term—the competitive process, their relationships within it, and the contest's normative structures. Building on research into the cognitive function of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Landau, Keefer, & Meier, 2010), Shields and Bredemeier (2009, 2011a) have identified two contesting orientations, each rooted in one or the other of two root metaphors: contest is partnership and contest is war.

Conceptual metaphors are important to the mental processing of abstract concepts or experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). A conceptual metaphor, which typically operates below awareness, works by creating a conceptual mapping between elements of a target concept (e.g., the contest) and analogous elements of a source concept (e.g., a partnership or a war). The resulting concept map promotes particular ways of perceiving the contest and those involved in it. While it is likely that athletes have access to and utilize both conceptual metaphors, only one can be cognitively active at a time, and research suggests that athletes have dispositional preferences between the metaphors (Funk, Shields, & Bredemeier, 2016; Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2015a, 2016a). A person's relative preference for activating the different metaphors is referred to as their *contesting orientation* (Shields et al., 2015a). And a person's contesting orientation has important implications for character-related behavior and dispositions (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2015b, 2016b, 2018a).

When utilizing the contest-is-partnership conceptual metaphor (hereafter abbreviated *partnership*), contests are construed in a largely collaborative light. While participants who frame the contest as a partnership certainly want to win, and may even exhibit more grit and self-control than others (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2018b), striving to win is still more important than winning itself. Such participants seek to use the contest's oppositional tension to promote mutual enjoyment and performance excellence. In contrast, when employing a contest-is-war conceptual metaphor (hereafter abbreviated *war*), contests are interpreted in a more narrowly antagonistic light and the goal is largely reduced to designating a winner or winners who receive tangible, symbolic, or psychological rewards.

Opponents are metaphorically rendered into enemies.

It may be that the two contesting orientations offer different affordances when it comes to developing a sense of purpose. Those athletes prone to perceive contests through the lens of partnership tend to see their sport experiences as opportunities for growth and mastery, and their relationships within sport as enabling a mutually enjoyable quest for excellence (Shields et al., 2015a). These characteristics of the partnership mindset may help facilitate a robust, activity-rich setting for sharing values, goals, and aspirations both within and beyond the team, all of which are important for developing a sense of purpose (Bundick, 2011). Of course, experiencing competition as more warlike can promote in-group harmony and clear, shared goals. Correspondingly, we hypothesize that both the partnership and war contesting orientations will be positively related to purpose. Still, we anticipate that the partnership orientation will be a better predictor of purposefulness because of its more prosocial nature—evidenced, for example, by its higher correlation with empathy (Shields et al., 2015b) and respect for opponents (Shields et al., 2015a)—and the wider mutuality of relationships it affords.

Identity, Empathy, Fear of Failure, and Purpose

Previous research (e.g., Shields et al., 2015a, 2016b, 2018b) has demonstrated that contesting orientations relate to a number of other constructs that are both important to character educators and may well relate to purpose. The first is identity. Developing a sense of identity is largely an adolescent and emerging adulthood phenomenon and is closely tethered to the development of purpose (Bronk, 2012; Damon, 2008; Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1980) proposed that the successful formation of identity leads to a corresponding commitment to a specific set of values and beliefs. Such commitment can be the foundation on which a sense of life purpose is built. Identity itself, however, is a complex and multidimensional construct (Wren & Mendoza, 2004).

Given the opportunities embedded in sports, in this investigation we focused on two aspects or dimensions of identity: athletic identity and moral identity. In light of the level of commitment required for participation in college sports, it is not surprising that many intercollegiate athletes build an important part of their identity around their role as athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Whether this gives them an adequate far-horizon perspective for consolidating a sense of purpose is an open question, however. But athletic identity is not the only type of identity that can be developed through sports participation. Sport is also an important achievement setting where participants must often make rapid and consequential decisions about ethical behavior (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Consequently, it offers many opportunities for moral engagement and reflection that can, especially if supported by peers and mentors, build a strong sense of moral identity. Given the interdependence between identity and purpose, we hypothesize that both athletic and moral identity will predict higher purpose scores.

Quality relationships with peers and significant adults are important to the development of purpose (Bronk, 2014). In sports, two personal qualities may be among the influences that promote or impede the development of such purpose-supporting relationships: empathy and fear of failure. Neither have received much attention from purpose researchers to date. Empathy may be particularly important for connecting to others and supporting the "beyond the self" component of purpose. As Damon (2008) suggests, purpose often develops as a person perceives, and responds with empathic concern, to unmet needs in the world around them. While the competitive structure of sport has sometimes been theorized to reduce empathy (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995), it can also provide opportunities for expanding empathic concern. In fact, learning to expand concern to opponents may be one of

the important ways that sports can contribute to positive development. We hypothesize that higher scores on empathic concern will predict purpose.

Fear of failure, on the other hand, may diminish a person's ability to develop and sustain close and open relationships and take the long-horizon perspective necessary for establishing purpose. When experiencing a fear of failure, energies are directed toward avoiding embarrassment and disappointing others. Rather than focusing on the strengths that one can devote to a purpose, fear of failure tends to lower one's self-estimate and create a sense of uncertainty for the future (Conroy & Elliot, 2004). For these reasons, our final hypothesis is that fear of failure will negatively predict purpose.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were freshman student-athletes (N = 2374, 51.0% male) drawn from multiple institutions from across the United States belonging to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). The NAIA is the second-largest intercollegiate athletic association in the United States and considers promoting character as one of its goals. Participants were of multiple racial identities (68.3% White/Caucasian, 11.2% Hispanic/Latino/a, 10.3% Black/African American, 1.1% Asian/Asian American, 7.6% Multiracial/Multiethnic, 1.5% other, 0.2% not given), ranged in age from 18 to 41 (M = 19.0, SD = 1.37), and had competed for a mean of 9.1 years (SD = 4.4) in their primary sport: soccer (n = 826), football (n = 571), volleyball (n = 409), cross country (n = 267), cheer (n = 98), lacrosse (n = 94), bowling (n = 65), and dance (n = 44).

Procedures

After approval by the institutional review board, participants were recruited through the NAIA's national office. Specifically, the NAIA had implemented an online educational program for its student-athletes and the registration procedure was modified so that prior to accessing the educational content, the athletes were given the option to participate in this study. Interested students were directed to an external site (SurveyMonkey), which housed both the consent form and survey; those who declined to participate were taken directly to the program's educational materials. Approximately 96% of eligible student-athletes agreed to participate in the study. Student-athletes who were under 18 or failed to indicate their age were not included. All instruments were administered in random order. All information was collected anonymously and securely, and no incentives were provided. After collection, data were imported into SPSS for screening and analysis.

Measures

Demographic and control variables. To control for their potential effects, we collected participants' age, gender, primary sport, and years of participation in their primary sport. Low- or noncontact sports (e.g., bowling, cheerleading, cross-country, dance, and volleyball) were coded 1, while medium- and high-contact sports (football, lacrosse, and soccer) were coded 2. Gender was coded 1 for males and 2 for females.

Purpose. To assess participants' sense of having a life purpose, we administered the Purpose in Life Test-Short Form (PLT-SF; Schulenberg, Schnetzer, Buchanan, 2011). This 4-item measure, drawn from the widely used Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964, 1969), was developed to avoid some of the psychometric difficulties that have plagued the 20-item PIL. In previous research, the single-factor PIL-SF was supported via confirmatory factor analysis, and strong evidence was provided for its concurrent and predictive validity (Schulenberg et al., 2011); the PIL-SF was also reported to have good reliability (α = .84), and nearly identical

reliability (α = .83) was found in the current investigation. Like the PIL, the PIL-SF employs a 7-point Likert-type response format with different anchors for each item, depending on item content. For example, the stem of one item reads "I have discovered," with response options ranging from 1 (*no mission or purpose in life*) to 7 (*a satisfying life purpose*).

Contesting Orientations. The Contesting Orientations Scale (Shields et al., 2015a) was used to assess the degree to which participants endorsed a partnership and/or war conceptual metaphor for contesting. The Contesting Orientations Scale asks participants to rate their agreement or disagreement with 12 statements, using a Likert scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). Six items reflect the partnership conceptual metaphor (e.g., "The purpose of competition is to bring out the best in everyone") and six items reflect the war conceptual metaphor (e.g., "In sports, like in war, opponents stand between you and success"). Since both scales reflect openness to competition, they are not completely orthogonal; still, respondents can score high on both orientations, low on both, or high on one and low on the other. Previous research (Funk et al., 2016; Shields et al., 2015a) has demonstrated that the measure has good factorial and concurrent validity, as well as strong gender invariance. Reliability in the current study ranged from good (partnership α = .84) to excellent (war α = .90).

Moral Identity. Moral identity was measured with the internalization subscale of Aquino and Reed's (2002) Moral Identity Scale (MIS). Participants are presented with nine moral traits (e.g., caring, fair, honest, helpful), asked to envision a person having those traits, and then asked to respond to five items related to the imagined person (e.g., "It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics"). Participants respond to each item on a Likert scale anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). The mean score across items is then calculated. Previous research has shown good internal consistency for the internalization subscale items (α = 0.85; Reed & Aquino, 2003). Reliability in the current study was α = .86.

Athletic Identity. To assess athletic identity, we used two slightly modified subscales of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale-Plus (Cieslak, 2004; Cieslak, Fink, & Pastore, 2005), the self-identity and positive affectivity subscales. Originally, the self-identity subscale included four items designed to assess the extent to which an individual perceives him- or herself to be an athlete. However, following analyses of model fit, Cieslak (2004) recommended omitting one item, which we did, leaving a 3-item subscale ("I consider myself an athlete;" "I have many goals related to sport;" and, "Being an athlete is an important part of who I am"). We also dropped the poorest fitting item from the positive affectivity subscale, resulting in three-items measuring the degree to which the respondent experiences enjoyment or satisfaction from being an athlete ("When I am participating in sport, I am happy;" "I get a sense of satisfaction when participating in sport;" and, "My participation in sport is a very positive part of my life"). Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 10-point scale anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 10 (strongly agree). The two resulting subscales had moderate to strong alpha coefficients: self-identity (α = .84) and positive affectivity (α = .93). For the correlational and regression analyses, we combined the two subscales and divided by two to form a single measure of athletic identity. The combined scale had a Cronbach alpha of .94.

Empathy. To assess respondents' empathy, the empathic concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) was utilized. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index asks respondents to assess how much they are like (or not like) each statement listed on the instrument. Respondents make their assessments on a 5-point scale anchored by 1 (*not at all like me*) and 5 (*very much like me*). The empathic concern subscale includes state-

ments such as, "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." The widely used Interpersonal Reactivity Index has received support for its psychometric properties with α coefficients generally ranging from .71 to .77 (Davis, 1983). In the current sample, the empathic concern subscale demonstrated good reliability (α = .81).

Fear of Failure. Fear of failure was measured with the 5-item Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory-Short Form (PFAI-S; Conroy, Willow, & Metzler, 2002). The long-version PFAI consists of five factors that assess fears of (a) experiencing shame and embarrassment, (b) devaluing one's self-estimate, (c) having an uncertain future, (d) important others losing interest, and, (e) upsetting important others (Conroy, 2001). The short form is made up of the most representative item from each of the five factors. Research indicates that the PFAI-S demonstrates good construct validity, is internally consistent and reliable, and shows factorial invariance across groups and over time (Conroy & Elliot, 2004; Conroy, Metzler, & Hofer, 2003). The short form is also highly correlated with the long-form measure (r = .92; Conroy et al., 2002). Sample items include "When I am failing, I am afraid that I might not have enough talent" and "When I am not succeeding, people are less interested in me." Respondents indicate how frequently they believe each statement on a 5-point scale ranging from –2 (*do not believe at all*) to 2 (*believe 100% of the time*). Scores were summed to provide a general index of students' fear of failing. In the current study, the PFAI-S demonstrated good reliability (α = .82).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analyses

Descriptive statistics for all variables, internal reliability values, and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. Study measures demonstrated good to excellent internal reliability, ranging from .81 for the empathic concern scale to .94 for the athletic identity scale. A review of the table further reveals that the Purpose in Life scale correlated positively, as expected, with partnership contesting orientation (.35), the war contesting orientation (.15), athletic identity (.42), moral identity (.24), and empathy (.21). Also consistent with expectations, it correlated negatively, but weakly, with fear of failure (–.12).

Regression Analyses

The primary aim of the current study was to investigate potential predictors of a person's

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations and Alpha Coefficients of Study Variables

Variables	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1. Purpose in Life	(.83)						
2. Contesting-Partnership	.35***	(.84)					
3. Contesting-War	.15***	.29***	(.90)				
4. Athletic Identity	.42***	.40***	.22***	(.94)			
5. Moral Identity	.24***	.37***	–.04	.27***	(.86)		
6. Empathic Concern	.21***	.27***	–.16***	.18***	.51***	(.81)	
7. Fear of Failure	–.12***	.00	.10***	–.07**	.04	.08***	(.82)
M	4.27	4.09	3.68	8.73	4.49	3.87	2.98
SD	.65	.70	.96	1.52	.67	.65	.84

Notes: Scale reliability (alpha) in parentheses on the diagonal. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

TABLE 2
Sequential Regression of Purpose in Life

Variable	*B*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*β*	*t*	*Partial* η^2	*Δ* R^2
Step 1							0.01***
Sport Contact	.00	.04	–.07, .07	.00	.10	.00	
Age	.03	.01	.01, .05	.07	3.00***	.00	
Gender	.10	.03	.03, .16	.07	3.02***	.00	
Years Competed	.01	.00	.00, .01	.03	1.30	.00	
Step 2							0.24***
Contesting Partnership	.16	.02	.11, .20	.17	7.45***	.03	
Contesting War	.06	.01	.03, .09	.09	4.18***	.01	
Athletic Identity	.13	.01	.11, .14	.29	13.82***	.08	
Moral Identity	.05	.02	.00, .09	.05	2.00*	.00	
Empathic Concern	.09	.02	.05, .14	.09	3.93***	.01	
Fear of Failure	–.10	.02	–.13, –.07	–.13	–6.44***	.02	
Total R^2							0.25***

Notes: *$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$. Sport Contact coded: 1 = Low/no contact; 2 = Medium/high contact. Gender coded: 1 = Male; 2 = Female.

sense of life purpose. We examined this question using sequential regression, conducted in two steps, with purpose serving as the outcome variable. To control for their effects, we entered sport type and demographic variables (age, gender, and years competed) in the first step. In Step 2, we entered our six primary predictor variables: partnership and war contesting orientations, athletic identity, moral identity, empathic concern, and fear of failure. Results are presented in Table 2.

The initial model that included sport type and demographic variables was significant, but only accounted for 1% of the variance in purpose scores. Older athletes scored higher on purpose than younger athletes, and males (M = 4.23) scored slightly, but significantly, lower than females (M = 4.31). Neither sport contact level nor years competed were significantly related to purpose scores.

The model including our primary predictor variables added significantly to the Step 1 model, accounting for an additional 24% of the variance in purpose scores. All variables predicted positively to purpose scores except fear of failure which was a significant negative predictor. Examination of the β values and partial η^2 suggests that athletic identity contributed the most unique variance to the prediction of purpose, followed by the partnership contesting orientation.

DISCUSSION

Substantial evidence supports the contention that having a sense of life purpose is a key component of, and contributor to, many aspects of well-being, and can be a potent character asset (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2008). Researchers have also identified emerging adulthood as a critical time for developing a sense of purpose, as the young person seeks to establish and sustain significant relationships, develop a value-oriented internal sense of coherence, and find direction and meaning (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Eccles et al., 2008). Despite its benefits, only about a third of emerging adults report having a purpose in life (Damon, 2008). Given its relative scarcity

and its potential to contribute to positive development, a critical task for character educators is to identify and nurture pathways to purpose.

In this investigation, we focused on emerging adults who experience one specific type of environment—U.S. intercollegiate athletics—and a set of related person factors that may interact with the affordances offered by sport to promote a sense of purpose. We found that sport participants' sense of purpose is related to two aspects of identity, their conceptual map of competition, their degree of empathic concern, and the extent to which they experience a fear of failure.

In the regression model, the most significant predictor of purpose was athletic identity, with moral identity also significant (though only weakly). In general, the connection between identity and purpose is hardly surprising. Ever since Erikson's pioneering work (1968, 1980), researchers have recognized that the development of identity and purpose are closely associated processes of adolescence or emerging adulthood (e.g., Bronk, 2014; Côté, 2002; Damon et al., 2003). The linkages between moral identity and purpose are relatively straightforward (Damon, 2008). As morality becomes more important to people and more deeply integrated into their identity, they are likely to develop purposes that reflect those moral commitments (Damon, 2012). As Erikson (1968, 1980) noted, fidelity to a core set of values anchors identity and provides direction to life.

An important contribution of the present study to theory and research on the purpose-identity link is the role of athletic identity. Since very few college athletes view themselves as becoming professional athletes, the connection between athletic identity and purpose is not as transparent as identity-purpose linkages more generally. One potential explanation of the athletic identity-life purpose link centers on what we might call transitional purposes. We use the term *transitional purpose* to refer to a quasi-purpose that (a) shares most of the major features of a life purpose except that it is geared to a medium-horizon, instead of a far-horizon, goal, and (b) scaffolds the development of attitudes, values, competencies, and/or dispositions useful to the identification of, and commitment to, a long-term, life-directing purpose. Athletic identity may be correlated with purpose because those who have developed a strong athletic identity tend to organize their time, relationships, and activities around athletic pursuits (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000), and these organizations of life experiences and commitments around athletic goals scaffold similar processes of life purpose development. A similar scaffolding process may explain, for example, why higher athletic identity is also predictive of self-efficacy in career decision-making (Cabrita, Rosado, Leite, Serpa, & Mousa, 2014). The following two paragraphs elaborate on this possibility.

Athletic endeavors at the intercollegiate level are highly demanding in terms of time and focus, so it is not surprising that "being an athlete" is an important component of identity for many students who compete at this level. The commitments involved in high level sports facilitate the formation of close friendships focused around common interests (Smith, 2007), provide adult mentors who encourage particular values and goal pursuits (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007), and promote joint activities (practices and competitions) that are emotionally engaging and recur over extended periods of time. Just such dynamics have been recognized as important processes prominent in purpose formation (Bronk, 2014; Shamah, 2011).

As students come to develop their identity as an athlete, sport can provide a nexus within which sport-transcending purposes can grow. Sport manifests risks, opportunities, and challenges; it requires a balancing of egoism and self-transcendence; it presents a host of small and large challenges to moral reasoning and action; and it is imbued with stories and traditions that connect the sport experience to life far beyond the playing fields. As has been recognized by many sport philosophers and social scientists (e.g., Coakley, 2009; Segrave, 2000;

Shields & Bredemeier, 2011a), sport provides a large set of analogies and metaphors for broader social processes, and it may be that such performance character capacities as teamwork, resilience, goal setting, pursuit of excellence, and leadership can be nurtured in sport and extended to other domains (Hodge, Danish, Forneris, & Miles, 2016; Shields & Bredemeier, 2008). Again, sport mirrors similar dynamics that accompany identifying and acting on purpose beyond the bounds of sport. Thus, sports may provide a setting where an athletic identity may reciprocally relate to a budding sense of purpose, even if that purpose is not directly tethered to athletic goals.

A second major finding of the present investigation is that a person's contesting orientation is also significantly predictive of their sense of purpose, though the effect size is modest. While both the partnership and war contesting orientations were found to relate positively to purpose, the partnership orientation was a much stronger predictor than the war orientation. Thinking of opponents as "partners" in a mutually beneficial quest for enjoyment and excellence may create within the social networks of sport an environment more conducive to purpose formation. One reason this may be true is because the partnership orientation reduces the tendency to dehumanize, degrade, or diminish competitors (whether opponents or teammates vying for position or playing time) and, instead, fosters openness to the needs, interests, and perspective of others, thus allowing shared purpose-related interests to surface.

This interpretation fits with two other research findings on contesting orientations, one from this investigation and a second from previous research. In the current study, we found that empathic concern was correlated negatively with a war orientation, but positively with both the partnership contesting orientation and purpose. The relatively high correlation between partnership orientation and empathic concern suggests that those high in partnership are not as closed off from the experiences of others and, consequently, may more easily build relationships that can nurture purpose. Second, previous research by Reed and Aquino (2003) has indicated that those who score higher in moral identity are more prone to include outgroup members in their "circle of moral regard." In sports, opposing teams may be thought of as "outgroups," so the consistent link found between the partnership orientation and moral identity (Shields et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2016c, 2018b) suggests that a more inclusive network of positive athletic associations may be one mechanism explaining the connection between the partnership contesting orientation and a greater sense of purpose.

Finally, fear of failure emerged as a negative, though again not particularly strong, predictor of purpose. A fear of failure attaches outsized significance to not doing well, anticipating shame and embarrassment, a devalued sense of self, more restricted future opportunities, and disappointment and/or loss of interest from significant others. Since forming an enduring sense of purpose is supported by a reasonable level of self-efficacy, perceived social support, and a future-orientation, it is not hard to see how fear of failure is a hindrance to focusing on purpose, especially self-transcending goals.

If these findings are sustained through further investigations, they carry important implications for coaches and other character educators working with student-athletes. Previous research has demonstrated that purpose is malleable (Parks, 2011), and character educators can help young adults develop their sense of purpose even through such brief interventions as a 45-minute interview (Bundick, 2011). Coaches are often trusted and influential mentors (Turnnidge, Evans, Vierimaa, Allan, & Côté, 2016), and can encourage and facilitate dialog about what it means to be an athlete and how being an athlete can benefit the pursuit of long-term goals. Bridging athletic and moral identity, as can be done with nuanced approaches to sportspersonship (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011b), may not only encourage more ethical sport behavior, but

purpose-formation as well. Most likely, this will be happen especially if athletes are given ample opportunity to talk about how their values can be expressed not only on the playing field, but in other domains of activity as well.

The findings also suggest that coaches can create an atmosphere that affords opportunities for developing purpose if they promote a mindset about competition rooted in the partnership metaphor. Once again, doing so is likely to both increase ethical sport behavior (Shields et al. 2018b) and encourage reciprocal person-context interactions that are more conducive to purpose formation. Coaches can create purpose-supportive sport cultures by encouraging appreciative attitudes toward opponents, respecting officials, advocating for adherence to the spirit as well as the letter of the rules, upholding the best traditions of the sport, and emphasizing the pursuit of excellence over the pursuit of victory at all costs.

Developing a partnership approach to competition not only has advantages within sport, it may help athletes discover personally meaningful and socially beneficial goals in domains other than sports. Contesting orientations are not just about sport competition; they pertain to any setting (e.g., school, business, law, politics) where social interaction is structured by, or influenced by, competition (Bredemeier & Shields, in press; Shields, 2013; Shields & Bredemeier, 2010). Finally, engaging the team in community service and social justice work, whether sport related or not, may encourage a partnership culture that can help athletes discover how the character qualities that they are developing within sport can transfer to beneficial aims beyond themselves (Gould & & Carson, 2008).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the current investigation offers important new insights about purposefulness among intercollegiate athletes, it also has numerous limitations that need to be recognized and addressed in future research. Perhaps most importantly, the present investigation, like much research on purpose, assessed only the extent to which an individual has a sense of purpose and not the content of that purpose. It did not, for example, capture whether a person's sense of purpose incorporated a positive beyond-the-self orientation, nor did it assess whether a person's purpose was oriented toward internal self-goals or more external political, religious, familial, or community goals. Future researchers may wish to consider drawing from recent advances in measuring, for example, the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose (Gitima, Mariya, & ZiYoung, 2018).

Given its cross-sectional design, the study also presents only a snapshot of the relationships it addressed. While purpose is often defined as having enduring qualities, it is also something that evolves through the life cycle (Bronk et al., 2009). It is certainly possible that what gives collegiate student-athletes a sense of purpose may change, and possibly even disintegrate, as they move beyond their early college and athletic careers. Future researchers may wish to incorporate a longitudinal design to address these and related issues, as well as incorporate mixed methods and qualitative approaches.

Finally, the study was limited by sample characteristics and assessment methods. Results from the study cannot be generalized to other ages, competitive levels, or cultural contexts. Future researchers may wish to test the generalizability of our findings by assessing additional populations with other measures. Despite these limitations, the study provides strong evidence that appropriately guided sport experiences may support an important developmental task of emerging adults: commitment to purpose.

Acknowledgment: The authors wish to extend appreciation to Kristin Gillette and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for their invaluable assistance with data collection, and to Brenda Light Bredemeier

for valuable comments on an earlier draft of the article.

REFERENCES

Aquino, K., & Reed, A., II. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*, 1423–1440. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1423

Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school, and community*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Benson, P. L. (2006). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Benson, P. L., Clary, E. G., & Scales, P. C. (2007). Altruism and health: Is there a link during adolescence? In S. G. Post (Ed.), *Altruism and health: Perspective from empirical research* (pp. 97–115). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bigler, M., Neimeyer, G. J., & Brown, E. (2001). The divided self revisited: Effects of self-concept clarity and self-concept differentiation on psychological adjustment. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 20*, 396–415.

Bredemeier, B., & Shields, D. (in press). Social justice, character education and sport: A position statement. *Quest.*

Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 24,* 237–254.

Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Petitpas, A. J. (2000). Self-identity issues in sport career transitions. In D. Lavallee & P. Wylleman (Eds.), *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives* (pp. 29–43). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Bronk, K. C. (2012). A grounded theory of youth purpose. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 27*, 78–109. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0743558411412958

Bronk, K. C. (2014). *Purpose in life: A critical component of optimal youth development.* New York, NY: Springer.

Bronk, K. C., & Baumsteiger, R. (2017). The role of purpose among emerging adults. In L. M. Padilla-Walker, L. J. Nelson, & L. J. Nelson (Eds.), *Flourishing in emerging adulthood: Positive development during the third decade of life* (pp. 45–66). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bronk, K. C., Hill, P. I., Lapsley, D. K., Talib, T., & Finch, W. H. (2009). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *Journal of positive psychology, 4,* 500–510.

Bundick, M. (2011). The benefits of reflecting on and discussing purpose in life in emerging adulthood. *New Directions for Youth Development, 132*, 89–103.

Cabrita, T. M., Rosado, A. B., Leite, T. O., Serpa, S. O., & Mousa, P. M. (2014). The relationship between athletic identity and career decisions in athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 26*, 471–481.

Cieslak, T. (2004). Describing and measuring the athletic identity construct: Scale development and validation (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

Cieslak, T., Fink, J., & Pastore, D. (2005). Measuring the athletic identity construct: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 27*(Suppl.), S48.

Coakley, J. (2009). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies* (10th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Conroy, D. E. (2001). Progress in the development of a multidimensional measure of fear of failure: The Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI). *Anxiety, Stress & Coping: An International Journal*, *14*, 431–452. doi:10.1080/10615800108248365

Conroy, D. E., & Elliot, A. J. (2004). Fear of failure and achievement goals in sport: Addressing the issue of the chicken and the egg. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping: An International Journal*, *17*, 271–285. doi:10.1080/1061580042000191642

Conroy, D. E., Metzler, J. N., & Hofer, S. M. (2003). Factorial invariance and latent mean stability of performance failure appraisals. *Structural Equation Modeling*, *10*, 401–422. doi:10.1207/S15328007SEM1003_4

Conroy, D. E., Willow, J. P., & Metzler, J. N. (2002). Multidimensional fear of failure measurement: The performance failure appraisal inventory. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 14,* 76–90.

Côté, J. E. (2002). The role of identity capital in the transition to adulthood: The individualization thesis examined. *Journal of Youth Studies, 5,* 117–134.

Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. (1964). An experimental study in existentialism: The psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of noogenic neurosis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *20*, 200–207. doi:10.1002/1097-4679(196404)20:2<200::AID-JCLP2270200203>3.0.CO;2-U

Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. (1969). *Manual of instructions for the Purpose in Life test.* Abilene, TX: Viktor Frankl Institute of Logotherapy.

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7(3),* 119–128.

Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*, 113–126. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113

Debois, N., Ledon, A., & Wylleman, P. (2015). A lifespan perspective on the dual career of elite male athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *21*, 15–26.

Eccles, J., Brown, B. V., & Templeton, J. (2008). A developmental framework for selecting indicators of well-being during the adolescent and young adult years. In B. V. Brown (Ed.), *Key indicators of child and youth well-being: Completing the picture* (pp. 197–236). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity youth and crisis.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Finkenberg, M. E., & Moode, F. M. (1996). College students' perceptions of the purposes of sports. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *82*, 19–22.

Flowers, L. A. (2002). Developing purpose in college: Differences between freshmen and seniors. *College Student Journal*, *36*, 478–484.

Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

French, S., & Joseph, S. (1999). Religiosity and its association with happiness, purpose in life, and self-actualization. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture, 2*, 117–120.

Funk, C. D., Shields, D. L., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2016). Contesting orientations, self-determined motivation, and sportspersonship: Further validation of the Contesting Orientations Scale. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise, 27,* 66–77.

Gitima, S., Mariya Y., & ZiYoung K. (2018). Sense of Purpose Scale: Development and initial validation. *Applied Developmental Science, 22,* 188–199.

Gould, D., & Carson, S. (2008). Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 1,* 1–14.

Hill, P. L., Sumner, R., & Burrow, A. L. (2014). Understanding the pathways to purpose: Examining personality and well-being correlates across adulthood. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 9*, 227–234. doi:10.1080/17439760.2014.888584

Hodge, K., Danish, S., Forneris, T., & Miles, A. (2016). Life skills and basic psychological needs: A conceptual framework for life skills interventions. In N. L. Holt (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport* (2nd ed., pp. 45–56). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Jackson, B., Gucciardi, D. F., Hodge, K., & Dimmock, J. A. (2017). Commitment in sport and exercise: Implications for individual, group, and organizational functioning. In C. R. D. Wagstaff (Ed.), *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and practical applications.* (pp. 11–32). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Jowett, S., & Poczwardowski, A. (2007). Understanding the coach-athlete relationship. In S. Jowett & D. Lavallee (Eds.), *Social psychology in spor*t (pp. 3–14). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Lakoff, G. (2014). Mapping the brain's metaphor circuitry: Metaphorical thought in everyday reason. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, *8*, 958. doi:10.3389/fnhum.2014.00958

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Landau, M. J., Keefer, L. A., & Meier, B. P. (2010). A metaphor-enriched social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin, 136,* 1045–1067. doi: 10.1037/a0020970

Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E. P., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive youth development

and relational-developmental-systems. In W. F. Overton & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science: Vol. 1. Theory and method* (7th ed., pp. 607–651). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Malin, H., Liauw, I., & Damon, W. (2017). Purpose and character development in early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 46,* 1200–1215.

McAdams, D. P. (2009). The moral personality. In D. Narvaez & D. K. Lapsley (Eds.), *Personality, identity, and character: Explorations in moral psychology* (pp. 11–29). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Okasaka, Y., Nobuaki, M., Nakatani, Y., Fujisawa, K. (2008). Correlation between addictive behaviors and mental health in university students. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, 62*, 84–92.

Parks, S. D. (2011). *Big questions, worthy dreams: Mentoring emerging adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith* (Rev. ed). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pizzolato, J. E., Brown, E. L., & Kanny, M. A. (2011). Purpose plus: Supporting youth purpose, control, and academic achievement. *New Directions for Youth Development, 132,* 75–88.

Prapavessis, H., & Carron, A. V. (1997). Sacrifice, cohesion, and conformity to norms in sport teams. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, *1*, 231–240.

Reed, A., & Aquino, K. (2003). Moral identity and the expanding circle of moral regard toward out-groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *84*, 1270–1286. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.84.6.1270

Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. (2008). Know thyself and become what you are: A eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 9*, 13–39.

Schulenberg, S. E., Schnetzer, L. W., & Buchanan, E. M. (2011). The purpose in life test-short form: Development and psychometric support. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *12*, 861–876. doi:10.1007/s10902-010-9231-9

Segrave, J. O. (2000). The sports metaphor in American cultural discourse. *Culture, Sport, Society, 3,* 48–60. doi:10.1080/14610980008721862

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourishing: A visionary new understanding o happiness and well-being.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Shamah, D. (2011). Supporting a strong sense of purpose: Lessons from a rural community. *New Directions for Youth Development, 132,* 45–58.

Shek, D. T. I., Ma, H. K., & Cheung, P. C. (1994). Meaning in life and adolescent antisocial and prosocial behavior in a Chinese context. *Psychologia, 37*, 211–218.

Shields, D. (2011). Character as the aim of education. *Phi Delta Kappan, 92(8),* 48–53.

Shields, D. (2013, February 22). A more productive way to think about opponents. *Harvard Business Review.* Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2013/02/a-more-productive-way-to-think-about-opponents?autocomplete=true

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (1995). *Character development and physical activity*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (2008). Sport and the development of character. In L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 500–519). New York, NY: Routledge.

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (2009). *True competition: A guide to pursuing excellence in sport and society.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (2010). Competition: Was Kohn right? *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*(5), 62–67.

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (2011a). Contest, competition, and metaphor. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport, 38,* 27–38.

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (2011b). Why sportsmanship programs fail, and what we can do about it. *JOPERD: Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 82*(7), 24–29.

Shields, D. L., Funk, C. D., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2015a). Contesting orientations: Measure construction and the prediction of sportspersonship. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 20*, 1–10. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.03.008

Shields, D. L., Funk, C. D., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2015b). Predictors of moral disengagement in sport. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *37,* 646–658.

Shields, D. L., Funk, C. D., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2016a). The moral frameworks and foundations of contesting orientations. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 38,* 117–127.

Shields, D. L., Funk, C. D., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2016b). Testing contesting theory: Conceptual

metaphors and prosocial behavior. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 27,* 213–221.

Shields, D. L., Funk, C. D., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2018a). Can contesting orientations predict grittier, more self-controlled athletes? *Journal of Positive Psychology, 13,* 440–448.

Shields, D. L., Funk, C. D., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2018b). Relationships among moral and contesting variables and prosocial and antisocial behavior in sport. *Journal of Moral Education, 47,* 17–33.

Smith, A. L. (2007). Youth peer relationships in sport. In S. Jowett & D. Lavallee (Eds.), *Social psychology in spor*t (pp. 41–54). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Turnnidge, J., Evans, B., Vierimaa, M., Allan, V., & Côté, J. (2016). Coaching for positive youth development. In N. L. Holt (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport* (2nd ed., pp. 137–150). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Whitty, M. T. (2003). Coping and defending: Age differences in maturity of defense mechanisms and coping strategies. *Aging and Mental Health, 7,* 123–132.

Wren, T., & Mendoza, C. (2004). Cultural identity and personal identity: Philosophical reflections on the identity discourse of social psychology. In D. K. Lapsley & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Moral development, self, and identity* (pp. 239–266). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Yeager, D. S., & Bundick, M. (2009). The role of purposeful life goals in promoting meaning in life and schoolwork during adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 24*, 423–452.