



Searching Versus Having a Purpose: Awakening, Awareness, and Altruism as Predictors of Career Exploration among Youths in South-East Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Sense of purpose is widely linked with positive development, yet it is multidimensional, and it is unclear which of its facets are associated with the information-seeking behaviour known as career exploration, particularly among youths in sub-Saharan Africa. To test how three dimensions of purpose, *awakening to purpose* (actively searching for one's aims), *awareness of purpose* (feeling clear about them), and *altruistic purpose* (aims directed beyond the self), relate to career exploration. In a cross-sectional survey, 293 youths aged 18–38 years in south-eastern Nigeria completed the Sense of Purpose Scale, the Career Exploration Survey–Revised, and the Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (used as a covariate set). Hierarchical regression was used. The three purpose dimensions together explained 10.9% of the variance in career exploration, $F(3, 289) = 11.84, p < .001$. Awakening to purpose was the only dimension that predicted exploration in both the purpose-only model ($\beta = .30, p < .001$) and the model that also controlled for stress integration ($\beta = .29, p < .001$; full-model $R^2 = .198$). Altruistic purpose was unrelated to exploration ($\beta = .08, p = .381$). Awareness of purpose was negatively correlated with exploration ($r = -.18$), was unrelated once other purpose dimensions were controlled ($\beta = -.08$), and became weakly positive when stress dimensions were added ($\beta = .18, p = .024$), a fragile pattern. Searching for purpose, rather than feeling that one has found it or holding other-oriented aims, is the purpose facet most consistently associated with career exploration. Purpose-development programmes for youths should treat the three facets separately.

Keywords: sense of purpose; awakening to purpose; career exploration; self-determination

1. Introduction

Having a purpose, understood as a stable intention to accomplish something that is meaningful to the self and consequential beyond the self (Damon et al., 2003), is associated with a wide range of favourable outcomes. Purpose in life has been linked with lower risk of Alzheimer disease and mild cognitive impairment (Boyle et al., 2010), reduced mortality across adulthood (Hill & Turiano, 2014), lower all-cause mortality and fewer cardiovascular events in a meta-analysis (Cohen et al., 2016), and better emotional recovery after negative stimuli (Schaefer et al., 2013). Conceptually, purpose is described as a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes goals and behaviour and supplies meaning (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Because purpose organizes behaviour around long-term aims, it is a natural resource for career development. Purpose-centered approaches to career counselling assume that helping youths articulate what matters to them improves how they choose and pursue careers (Kosine et al., 2008), and research on callings shows that work experienced as purposeful and other-oriented is closely tied to career meaning (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Career exploration, the purposive gathering of information about oneself and about occupations (Jiang et al., 2019; Stumpf et al., 1983; Zikic & Klehe, 2006), is the behavioural link through which purposeful aims can become concrete career choices. Meta-analytic evidence shows that exploration is associated with goals, self-efficacy, and support (Kleine et al., 2021), but purpose has received far less attention as a correlate of exploration.

Two gaps motivate this study. First, purpose is not a single quantity. The Sense of Purpose Scale distinguishes *awareness of purpose*, *awakening to purpose*, and *altruistic purpose* (Sharma et al., 2018), and these facets may relate to exploration in different ways. Second, evidence from Nigerian youths is sparse, even though youth labour-market insecurity makes exploration consequential: national statistics for the fourth quarter of 2020 reported unemployment of 42.5% among people aged 15–34 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The present study therefore asks which purpose dimensions are associated with career exploration among youths in south-eastern Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Self-determination theory holds that people are most engaged in activities that express autonomously held goals and satisfy needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A purpose that is personally endorsed should supply the kind of intrinsic motivation that sustains effortful information-seeking. Social cognitive career theory adds that goals organize and sustain behaviour, including career choice behaviour, in combination with self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013). Purpose can be seen as a superordinate goal structure from which more specific exploratory goals derive.

These perspectives imply that the facet of purpose most closely tied to exploration is the one that is *active*. Research on meaning in life separates the presence of meaning from the search for it (Steger et al., 2006), and the identity literature treats exploration and commitment as distinct processes, with commitment typically following exploration (Marcia, 1966). Applied to purpose, *awakening to purpose* ("I have started thinking about what I truly want to achieve") describes an active search and should align with exploratory behaviour, whereas *awareness of purpose* ("My purpose in life is clear") describes having arrived at a direction, which may reduce the felt need to explore. *Altruistic purpose* concerns the orientation of aims toward others (Sharma et al., 2018) and may shape *what* youths explore more than *how much*.

H1. Awakening to purpose will be positively associated with career exploration.

RQ1. How is awareness of purpose associated with career exploration?

RQ2. Is altruistic purpose associated with the amount of career exploration?

The dissertation from which these data come stated directional predictions for all dimensions. Because the dimension-specific pattern is exploratory, H1 is the only directional hypothesis here and the remaining questions are treated as open.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 293 youths from south-eastern Nigeria (Anambra, Enugu, and Imo States), recruited through cluster and accidental (convenience) sampling in schools, marketplaces, and workplaces. Participants were 71 men (24.2%) and 222 women (75.8%), aged 18–38 years ($M = 26.87$, $SD = 6.80$). Educational attainment was SSCE for 44.0%, OND/NCE for 9.6%, HND for 24.2%, B.Sc. for 15.4%, and M.Sc. for 6.8%; 52.9% were single, and 48.5% were employed. Trained research assistants helped administer anonymous questionnaires after written consent was obtained, and participants could complete them at home. Ethical approval: [insert institutional ethics committee name and approval number]. A sensitivity analysis ($\alpha = .05$, power = .80) indicated that the design could detect effects of $f^2 \approx .038$ for the three-predictor purpose block and $f^2 \approx .045$ for the five-predictor model.

3.2 Measures

Sense of purpose. An 18-item version of the Sense of Purpose Scale (Sharma et al., 2018; see also Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020) measured altruistic purpose (6 items; e.g., "I am striving to make a positive difference in society"), awareness of purpose (8 items; e.g., "My purpose in life is clear"), and awakening to purpose (4 items; e.g., "I am in the process of formulating my long-term goals") on a 5-point scale. Subscale scores are item sums. In a pilot sample ($n = 77$), Cronbach's α was .82 (altruistic), .75 (awareness), .69 (awakening), and .92 (total).

Career exploration. The 24-item Career Exploration Survey–Revised (Yusof & Jusoh, 2023), which builds on the Career Exploration Survey (Stumpf et al., 1983), includes systematic purposeful exploration (5 items), environmental exploration (14 items), and self-exploration (5 items), rated from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) and summed (pilot $\alpha = .91$).

Integration of stressful life experiences (covariates). The 16-item Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (Holland et al., 2010) provided *Footing in the World* (11 items) and *Comprehensibility* (5 items) subscale sums, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of statements describing disrupted footing and difficulty comprehending the event (pilot $\alpha = .74$ and .81).

3.3 Data analysis

Analyses were run in SPSS 23. After zero-order correlations, hierarchical linear regression regressed career exploration on the three purpose dimensions (Model A) and then added the two stress-integration dimensions (Model B). Model B coefficients are from the SPSS output; Model A estimates were derived from the reported correlation matrix and standard deviations (Cohen et al., 2003). Variance inflation factors (VIF; O'Brien, 2007) were examined, and two-tailed tests with $\alpha = .05$ were used.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 shows that awakening to purpose was positively correlated with career exploration ($r = .31, p < .001$), awareness of purpose was negatively correlated with it ($r = -.18, p = .003$), and altruistic purpose was not correlated with it ($r = -.03, p = .597$). Awakening and awareness were negatively correlated with each other ($r = -.34, p < .001$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Career Exploration and Sense of Purpose Dimensions (N = 293)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Career exploration	62.29	5.53	—			
2. Awakening to purpose	10.91	1.56	.31***	—		
3. Awareness of purpose	17.98	2.52	-.18**	-.34***	—	
4. Altruistic purpose	12.79	3.04	-.03	.15**	-.06	—

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). Scale ranges: career exploration 24–120, awakening 4–20, awareness 8–40, altruistic 6–30.

4.2 Regression analyses

In Model A (purpose dimensions only), the block explained 10.9% of the variance in career exploration, $F(3, 289) = 11.84, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .100$ (Table 2). Awakening to purpose was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .30, p < .001$; squared semipartial correlation = .077), whereas awareness ($\beta = -.08, p = .170$) and altruistic purpose ($\beta = -.08, p = .151$) were not. H1 was supported.

In Model B, adding the two stress-integration dimensions raised explained variance to 19.8%, $\Delta R^2 = .089, F(2, 287) = 15.79, p < .001$; the full model was significant, $F(5, 287) = 14.21, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .184$. Awakening to purpose remained a strong predictor ($\beta = .29, B = 1.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.56, 1.45], p < .001$; squared semipartial correlation = .055). Awareness of purpose became a small positive predictor ($\beta = .18, B = 0.40, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.75], p = .024$), and altruistic purpose remained non-significant ($\beta = .08, p = .381$). Figure 1 compares the coefficients across models.

Table 2

Regression of Career Exploration on Sense of Purpose Dimensions (N = 293)

Predictor	Model A B (SE)	Model A β	Model B B (SE)	Model B β	Model B 95% CI for B
Constant	—	—	34.20 (5.35)	—	—
Awakening to purpose	1.05 (0.21)	.30***	1.01 (0.23)	.29***	[0.56, 1.45]
Awareness of purpose	-.018 (0.13)	-.08	0.40 (0.18)	.18*	[0.05, 0.75]
Altruistic purpose	-0.15 (0.10)	-.08	0.15 (0.17)	.08	[-0.19, 0.50]
Footing in the World			0.73 (0.13)	.48***	[0.47, 0.99]
Comprehensibility			-0.73 (0.20)	-.44***	[-1.12, -0.33]
R^2	.109		.198		
Adjusted R^2	.100		.184		
F	11.84***		14.21***		
ΔR^2			.089***		

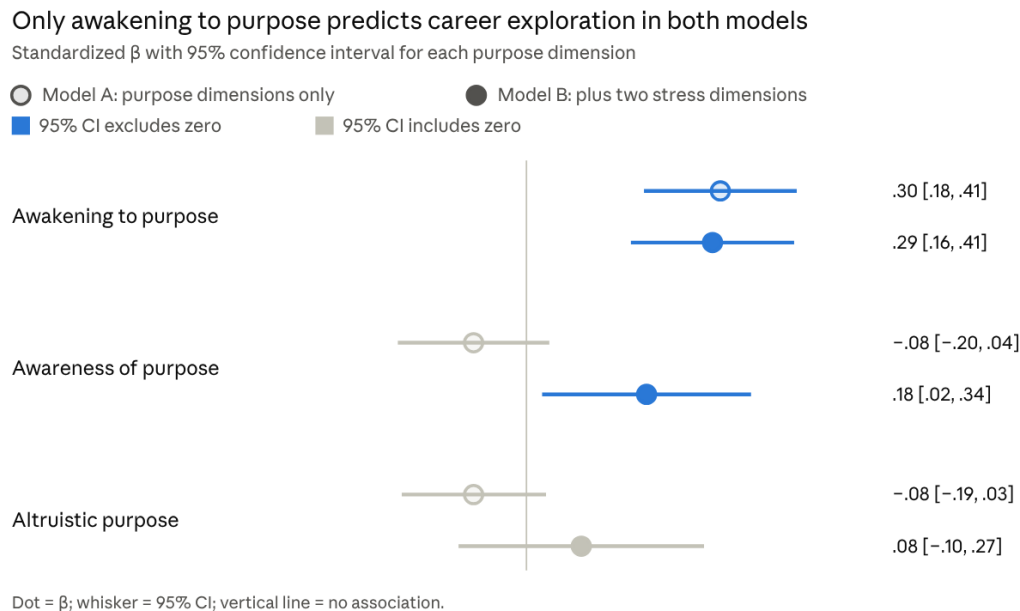
Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$. Model B estimates are from SPSS output; Model A estimates were computed from the reported correlation matrix and standard deviations.

4.3 Stability of the awareness coefficient

The sign of the awareness coefficient changed with the model: negative at the zero-order level ($r = -.18$), near zero once awakening and altruistic purpose were controlled ($\beta = -.08$), and positive once stress dimensions were added ($\beta = .18$). Awareness correlated .45 with Comprehensibility and $-.34$ with awakening, so its coefficient depends on which of these correlates is held constant; this is the pattern expected under statistical suppression (Tzelgov & Henik, 1991) and should not be read as evidence of a stable positive effect. VIFs in Model B ranged from 1.45 (awakening) to 5.34 (Comprehensibility).

Figure 1

Standardized regression coefficients (95% confidence intervals) for the three purpose dimensions



Model A computed from the reported correlation matrix and standard deviations; Model B from SPSS output (N = 293).

5. Discussion

Of the three dimensions of purpose, only awakening to purpose was associated with career exploration in every analysis. Youths who reported actively thinking about what they want to achieve and formulating long-term goals also reported more information-seeking about themselves and about occupations. A medium-sized zero-order correlation ($r = .31$) and a stable standardized coefficient across models ($\beta = .29-.30$) show that this is not an artefact of the covariates.

5.1 Why searching, not having, matters

The result fits both theoretical frameworks. From a self-determination perspective, an emerging purpose that the young person is forming for themselves is the kind of autonomous goal that sustains self-directed behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). From a social cognitive perspective, the process of formulating long-term goals is the precursor of exploratory choice goals (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013), and exploration is the action through which candidate goals are tested. The distinction between searching and having (Steger et al., 2006) and the sequencing of exploration before commitment (Marcia, 1966) suggest a complementary reading: youths who are still searching for a direction need information, while those who feel sure of their direction have less reason to look further. We offer this account cautiously. The negative zero-order correlation for awareness ($r = -.18$) is consistent with it, but the coefficient was unstable across models and the cross-sectional data cannot show that clarity *reduces* exploration.

Altruistic purpose was unrelated to exploration in every analysis. This does not imply that other-oriented aims are irrelevant to careers. Calling research suggests that prosocial orientation shapes the *meaning* attached to work (Dik & Duffy, 2009), and altruistic purpose may be better suited to predicting which occupations youths explore, or how they evaluate them, than how much exploring they do. The CESR total score cannot show this. Item means for the altruistic subscale were also low in this sample (approximately 2.1 on the 5-point scale), which, together with strong correlations between altruistic purpose and both stress-integration dimensions ($r = .66$ and $.67$), invites caution about response style (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

5.2 Practical implications

Purpose-centered career counselling (Kosine et al., 2008) is often framed as helping youths *articulate* a purpose. The present results suggest an earlier target: stimulating the awakening process itself, for example through guided reflection on what a young person wants to achieve and discussion with mentors and families, may be a more direct route to exploratory behaviour than assessing how clear the purpose already is. Programmes should also avoid assuming that high clarity signals readiness to explore. These are suggestions for testing; the design does not show that raising awakening would increase exploration.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The cross-sectional, self-report design prevents causal inference, and exploration could stimulate the search for purpose as much as the reverse. Sampling was non-probability, women formed 75.8% of the sample, and the age range extended beyond the 15–34 band used in national youth statistics (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Reliability coefficients come from a pilot sample, the awakening subscale had the lowest pilot reliability ($\alpha = .69$), and the CESR has limited published validation (Yusof & Jusoh, 2023). Model A coefficients were derived from the correlation matrix, so replication with raw data is advisable. Longitudinal studies should test whether awakening precedes exploration, and future work should link purpose facets to the *content* of exploration, including the occupations explored.

6. Conclusion

Among youths in south-eastern Nigeria, searching for purpose was the purpose facet most consistently associated with career exploration, whereas altruistic purpose was unrelated and awareness of purpose showed an unstable association. Purpose-development efforts that aim to promote career exploration should begin with the awakening of purpose.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and written consent was obtained from all participants. [Insert institutional ethics approval details.]

Data availability. The data that support the findings are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions. [Specify using the CRediT taxonomy.]

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