

Finding Direction for Purpose Research in Hawai'i: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Purpose is an important construct across contexts and cultures, with evidence suggesting it is strongly related to health, health behaviors, discrimination, and experiences of trauma. In this narrative review of the research on purpose in Hawai'i, the authors identify, critically analyze, and synthesize the extant literature found through a comprehensive literature search. It then discusses important cultural considerations for engaging in purpose research in Hawai'i, broadly, and with the Indigenous people of Hawai'i (*Kānaka Maoli*). The review presents findings on how sense of purpose levels differ between Hawai'i and the continental United States and risk factors or strengths critical in shaping the development of purpose in Hawai'i. Potential future directions for this line of inquiry conclude this review, with a particular emphasis on the need for integration of *Kanaka Maoli* ontology and values.

Keywords

purpose, review, health, measurement, Hawaii, Native Hawaiians

'O ka makapō wale nō ka mea hāpapa i ka pōuli
If you have no direction, you will get nowhere
– 'Ōlelo No'ēau (Hawaiian proverb)

Finding a direction for life is a common motivation and well-being support across contexts and cultures, though it may take different meanings and forms depending on circumstances, community, and values. The scientific study of life direction, or more commonly described as purpose in life,^{1,2} has acknowledged that purpose development is necessarily contextual in nature.³ One cannot discount the importance of the person's multi-layered environment when determining how best to cultivate purpose. However, research often assumes that the measures and components of purpose are equivalent across contexts, without considering how purpose as a construct may be defined and expressed differently based on the culture. The current review article provides insights into previous research on purpose conducted with samples in Hawai'i, and moves on to consider how future research could improve upon this extant work by more fully integrating the unique cultural and ethnic context of the islands. The authors give special focus to *Kānaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiians), the Indigenous people of Hawai'i. To begin, the authors will briefly outline how purpose has been measured and described in the extant research.

Purpose Measurement in Psychological Research

Sense of purpose is a construct with a rich history across multiple research domains. Dating back to its roots in philosophy,⁴ it is thought that having a purpose is part of a "life well lived" wherein individuals are directed toward engagement in activities that are personally valuable and important to them. Purpose researchers often distinguish between *purpose in life* and *sense of purpose*, with the former referring to what an individual states and commits to as their actual purpose and the latter reflecting a sense or perception that one has a life goal or goals directing them through life.⁵ Although researchers have called for additional work that combines sense and contents of purpose,³ the authors will focus this discussion on sense of purpose because it constitutes most of the extant literature.

Multiple measures for sense of purpose have been developed over the years. Two of the most prominently employed in health psychology today are from the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being^{2,6} and the Life Engagement Test⁷ (LET). Their widespread usage comes in part because they focus centrally on sense of purpose, which runs counter to alternative measures that capture broader existential beliefs about the world and life, and those focused on understanding whether one feels life has meaning or coherence. Past work has demonstrated they are highly correlated with one another,⁷ and differences between the measures are fairly minor with respect to their emphasis. As the name suggests, the LET is slightly more focused on whether people frequently engage with important and worthwhile activities, whereas the Ryff subscale better captures one's sense or perception of directedness. Researchers have capitalized upon studying these central components of purpose when considering how the construct influences the health and wellbeing of people in Hawai'i.

A Narrative Review of Research on Purpose in Hawai'i

Unlike scoping or systematic reviews, narrative reviews employ a selective search strategy which synthesizes findings using a narrative summary with the overarching goals of summarizing prior knowledge.⁸ The authors searched PsycINFO, EBSCO

Psychology & Behavioral Science Collection, Web of Science, and PubMed for literature which included key terms: “purpose” AND (“Hawai‘i” OR “Hawaii”). They found that the literature on sense of purpose in Hawai‘i is scarce (5 publications were identified) but 3 questions have been posed with respect to purpose within these investigations. First, what are the health benefits associated with sense of purpose? Second, how do sense of purpose levels differ between Hawai‘i and the continental United States? Third, what risk factors or strengths may be more or less critical in shaping the development of purpose in Hawai‘i? Before presenting this narrative review, it is important to recognize that none of the evidence from the extant literature provides thorough answers, or even perhaps convincing ones. Each have their methodological concerns that will be presented throughout, in hopes that this narrative review provides a catalyst for future research rather than a definitive resolution.

What are the Health Benefits Associated with Sense of Purpose?

To start, sense of purpose has been widely acknowledged as a factor influencing physical health outcomes in the broader literature, with evidence that higher levels predict reduced risk for later physical limitations and disabilities,⁹ cardiovascular issues,¹⁰ and even early mortality.¹¹ A primary reason appears to be that purposeful individuals take better care of themselves,¹² presumably because good health will help scaffold their pursuit of long-term life goals. These findings have been partially upheld in work using a predominantly Hawai‘i-based sample as well. In 2001 the Hawai‘i Longitudinal Study of Personality and Health (HLSPH),¹³ researchers found that participants who scored higher on the LET⁷ also scored higher on self-reported health.¹⁴ While this study does not investigate the breadth of health indicators associated with purpose, it provides evidence that self-reported health is significantly associated with purpose in Hawai‘i. Self-reported health has been shown to reliably predict health status and mortality across ethnic groups.¹⁵ Moreover, analyses from the HLSPH study also found positive associations between sense of purpose and multiple health-supporting behaviors, including physical activity, sleep quality, vegetable intake, and flossing. This research showed how associations between purpose and health may be explained by a tendency for purposeful adults to integrate healthier behaviors in their lifestyles—one of the first published findings of this kind. Although this work is cross-sectional in nature, follow-up research using nationwide samples have found positive, longitudinal relationships between sense of purpose and objective indicators of health behavior and physical fitness.¹⁰ In sum, this initial purpose study from Hawai‘i has provided valuable advances to understanding how purpose may impact health, and in so doing, provides preliminary evidence that sense of purpose may hold similar benefits among Hawai‘i-based samples as it does across the United States.

How Do Sense of Purpose Levels Differ Between Hawai‘i and the Continental United States?

Research also suggests that adults in Hawai‘i report some of the highest levels for purpose across the United States.¹⁶ Using data from a 2021 nationwide Gallup survey, researchers were able to take a “bigger picture” approach to studying purpose, averaging across hundreds of participants’ responses to purpose-related items for each of the 50 states.¹⁶ Researchers found moderate differences across the states in their citizens’ reported sense of purpose, even though all states averaged moderate-to-high levels. Hawai‘i ranked fourth highest among states in average levels of participants’ sense of purpose. Critically, these state-level differences in purpose were associated with multiple population health and psychological wellbeing outcomes. For instance, states with higher purpose levels tended to experience lower rates of cardiovascular mortality, and those states had higher proportions of citizens who reported near-perfect physical health. These findings thus provide another perspective on why it is valuable to study purpose in Hawai‘i, given its potential benefits and apparent prevalence.

What Risk Factors or Strengths May be More or Less Critical in Shaping the Development of Purpose in Hawai‘i?

Using the HLSPH data,¹³ researchers have examined the role of 2 potential risk factors that would hinder the development of purpose. First, experiences of discrimination were negatively related to sense of purpose among study participants.¹⁷ Moreover, researchers found that this association was similar across different ethnoracial groups in Hawai‘i, suggesting that experiences of discrimination may prove a hindrance to feeling purposeful regardless of race and ethnicity. Second, researchers also examined whether early traumatic experiences portend issues for feeling purposeful later in adulthood.⁵ Of interest, the association between early trauma and later sense of purpose was negative, but not significant in the overall sample. Put differently, early traumatic experiences need not “doom” someone with respect to their journey for a sense of purpose, which also has been found in past nationwide samples.¹⁸ However, in this study, there were notable differences across racial and ethnic groups. Although *Kānaka Maoli* reported more early traumatic experiences than the White and Japanese participants in the study,^{5,19} the association between early traumatic experiences and purpose was only significant among the Japanese participants. One possible explanation is that, when it comes to sense of purpose, traumatic events may have less negative influence on adults who are more exposed to them, perhaps suggesting *Kānaka Maoli* were finding ways to cope and thrive in the face of these concerns. This interpretation aligns with recent work suggesting when and why traumatic and discriminatory experiences could catalyze one toward finding a purpose in life.^{20,21} Namely, these negative experiences may lead individu-

als to realize systemic issues, or the importance of healing and recovery practices, which in turn gives them a direction in life focused on addressing these processes. This may also be the case with the *Kanaka Maoli* group in this study, whereby a sense of purpose may have been informed by their unique experiences of historical trauma due to settler colonialism.

Future Considerations: Kanaka Maoli Ontology and Values

One critical element of context is how research with a Hawai‘i-based sample requires thoughtful consideration of the ideological perspectives of the population, which are borne largely from a wide array of cultural foundations. With rich diversity in ethnicity and large proportions of Asian and *Kanaka Maoli* individuals, Hawai‘i is somewhere in the middle on the spectrum of collectivism and individualism.²² The following section focuses on potential considerations for research on purpose with *Kānaka Maoli*.

A recently developed framework of *Kanaka Maoli* wellbeing, *Kūkulu Kumuhana*,²³ has embedded within its name *kumu*, grounds or reason for something.²⁴ Although *kumu* refers to purpose of an action (rather than purpose in life), the framework provides an elucidating consideration for purpose research with *Kānaka Maoli*. Developers of the framework name *koho‘ia*, defined as being chosen or given a calling you cannot refuse, as a crucial aspect of one dimension in the framework, *ke akua mana*—spirituality.²³ This suggests there may be a spiritual element to purpose—one that is not left to chance nor choice—that is given to an individual from one’s *akua* (god), *kumu* (teacher) or *kupuna* (ancestor).^{25,26} When an individual responds to a purposeful calling of this kind, to contribute to something that is greater than oneself, one’s spiritual power, *mana*, is also strengthened,²⁷ contributing to optimized wellbeing.

Building on this notion, what gives our lives purpose may be a spiritual calling as described above, a calling which provides for the individual *kuleana* (responsibility). Indeed, *Kanaka Maoli* purpose has been conceived of as, “a received sense of ancestrally-based responsibility”²⁸ which recognizes the inherent truth of interdependence. This notion of purpose imbued with a sense of *kuleana* from an *akua*, *kumu*, or *kupuna* illustrates the overarching relational and intergenerational *pilina* (connections) critical to *Kanaka Maoli* ontology. Another unique feature of *kuleana* from a *Kanaka Maoli* perspective, is its simultaneous implications for both responsibility and rights. Although these concepts might be defined as distinct from a Western point of view, in *Kanaka Maoli* ontology, rights and responsibilities are inextricably intertwined.²⁹ Here the authors see the recognition of interconnection between seeming opposites, the give and the take, the ebb and the flow, the responsibilities and rights—one cannot exist without the other. *Kuleana* is referred to in *Nānā I Ke Kumu* (a source book of Hawaiian cultural practices, concepts and beliefs) in the context of responsibilities of gods,

ali‘i (chiefs)²⁵, or the responsibilities *maka‘āinana* (common people) have to ‘*ohana*²⁶, family.²⁵ In a conceptual model of health and wellness for youth and young adult *Kānaka Maoli*, Trinidad³⁰ emphasizes how purpose comes from one’s *kuleana* to *mālama ‘āina* (ie, responsibility as a steward to and relative of the land). Modern *Kanaka Maoli* scholarship increasingly calls for *kuleana* to Hawaiian national consciousness,²⁸ language and cultural revitalization,³¹ and to the *lāhui* (collective or nation),³² reflecting present concerns around climate change and the continued vision of *ea*, sovereignty.

A second concept that may be vital to understanding purpose from a *Kanaka Maoli* perspective refers to doing what keeps balance in the interconnected ecology of existence: *pono*. Understanding what is *pono* provides guidelines for acting in a just manner and living a balanced life—for some, this is what gives *Kānaka Maoli* a sense of direction and purpose for living.³³ This notion connects to the cultivation of purpose as part of moral development and self-transcendence,³⁴ insofar that individuals may recognize how their purpose is interwoven with the people around them and requires reflection on the impacts they may have on others. For *Kānaka Maoli*, the responsibility to maintain balance (ie, *kuleana* to do what is *pono*) extends not only to other people, communities, and institutions, as suggested in the Western literature, but to ‘*āina* (which includes land, plants, sky, and waters that are also spiritual relatives) and ancestors. Indeed, Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua³² highlights *kuleana* as a “binding relationship of mutual interdependence between *kalo* [taro which grows from ‘*āina*] and *kānaka*.” Centering this relationship, she argues, supports a greater purpose for the *lāhui*: *Kanaka Maoli* independence and self-determination. As survivors of historical colonization and present-day settler colonialism, self-determination (*ea*) is a critical dimension in *Kanaka Maoli* wellbeing²³ and may be closely tied to sense of purpose for many *Kānaka Maoli*.

Future Considerations

What the authors have discovered about purpose in Hawai‘i thus far reveals only the tip of a great reef submerged in the boundless ocean of *mo‘olelo* and ‘*ike* (stories and knowledge) yet to be published for English-speaking audiences. In this review, the authors have begun to consider the unique culture of *Kānaka Maoli* in the context of purpose research, but have not addressed the unique conceptions of purpose inherent in other cultures strongly represented in Hawai‘i such as Chinese, Japanese, or Mixed-ethnicity perspectives. Qualitative or mixed-methods work could be a critical next step for researchers interested in this topic.

Conceptions of sense of purpose may differ across ethnic groups, age groups, socioeconomic status, urban versus rural background, or other intersecting contexts. Qualitative or mixed-methods research might seek to explore nuances in views of purpose that could be important for measurement or interven-

tion design in support of the health and wellbeing of Hawai‘i’s residents. Investigations of this kind might also ask participants about supports and barriers in the pursuit of purpose, and to what extent participants value purpose as a part of their wellbeing. Given the preliminary findings regarding the negative association between everyday discrimination and sense of purpose, future research might explore potential mediating factors. Extending this line of research may also examine to what extent the same finding holds true for other forms of discrimination. Research building on findings that strong sense of purpose was not associated with overall early life trauma exposure for *Kānaka Maoli* might examine to what extent sense of purpose for this group is associated with social justice motivations, perhaps specific to historical trauma or settler colonialism.

Measurement may be another important area for future research on this topic. Neither the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being nor the LET were developed with attention to the unique context of Hawai‘i. For instance, the LET was originally designed using nearly all White participants,⁷ and rigorous tests of measurement properties have not been conducted with populations similar to those found in Hawai‘i. Hawai‘i is a uniquely ethnically diverse landscape, with 36.8% of the population reporting as Asian, 25.3% White, 25% Two or More Races (most of which being part Asian or *Kanaka Maoli*), and 10.5% *Kanaka Maoli*.³⁷ Given that psychometric evidence about a measure cannot be assumed to generalize across dimensions of identity and culture,³⁸ work is needed to consider whether adaptations would improve the LET, allowing for stronger cross-cultural comparisons. To give an example, the LET asks respondents to rate their agreement with the statement, “I value my activities a lot.” From a *Kanaka Maoli* perspective, one may not personally value their own activities (eg, working 2 jobs), but recognize that these activities are valuable to others (eg, their family’s comfort), and therefore choose to engage in them to pursue a *kuleana*-based purpose. As such, it is worth considering whether this item (and the others) load similarly onto a purpose construct, across the racial and ethnic groups in Hawai‘i.

For researchers interested in questions focused solely on *Kānaka Maoli* health and purpose, it may also be useful to consider developing new inventories that capture *kuleana* and support cultural sustainability.³⁹ More generally, items on the LET may portray an individualist-leaning perspective on purpose, emphasizing the respondent’s view of purpose independent of any group related to the respondent (eg, “To me, the things I do are all worthwhile”). Given the centrality of a relational view in *Kanaka Maoli* culture, and a collectivist leaning in most Asian cultures (the largest race group in Hawai‘i), further inquiry into how purpose is described and pursued within a Hawai‘i context may be valuable for future research efforts.

Conclusion

In sum, purpose research in Hawai‘i has provided several initial discoveries around the relationships between purpose, health, health behaviors, discrimination, and trauma. These studies have been critical both for advancing purpose research and our understanding of health and wellbeing in Hawai‘i. However, most work to date has come from only a small number of studies, and future research is needed to consider three primary directions. First, researchers should replicate and extend previous work to more fully understand the mechanisms linking sense of purpose to health and wellbeing in Hawai‘i and whether these change across the various sociocultural contexts. Second, future research efforts should employ mixed-methods approaches to consider reasons underlying differential reporting in sense of purpose across groups, which may involve consideration of historical or personal trauma. Third, measurement studies are strongly encouraged, both to provide validation for existing measures within the Hawai‘i context, as well as consider Hawai‘i-specific measures that acknowledge how purpose may manifest in this context. Though challenging, we believe that the promise of understanding and developing sense of purpose to support the health and wellbeing of the people of Hawai‘i presents a clear rationale for future research endeavors at their critical intersections.

Conflict of Interest

None of the authors identify a conflict of interest.

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