Changing the world: tolerance and creativity aspirations among American youth

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Having a purpose is a form of intrapersonal giftedness. An even rarer giftedness is motivation to positively change society or culture. This exploratory chi-square and ANOVA study reports the prevalence, age distribution, stability over time, and characteristics of two change oriented aims in American adolescents. In a sample of 270, 12%, who tend to be older and more other-oriented, have tolerant aspirations to bridge across group differences, focusing on peace, justice, racial unity, or immigrant inclusion to relieve suffering. Sixteen per cent, who tend to be more self-oriented and spread across ages, have creative aspirations to introduce new ideas, primarily through arts and media. Both aims are difficult to maintain over time without connections to structure engagement with the aim.

**Keywords:** creativity; tolerance; youth; purpose; change

**Moral giftedness**

Giftedness in the moral domain often focuses on how intellectually gifted students are sensitive to others (Silverman, 1994) or think about and judge moral issues (Rest & Narvaez, 1995; Sisk, 1982; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2007). These approaches emphasize how individuals understand situations and their moral implications: how does a person perceive and make sense of the environment? Fewer scholars have addressed giftedness in moral action directly (e.g., Michaelson, 2001). This approach circumvents psychometric tests of giftedness to explore talent in moral behavior (Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 1988; Hart & Fegley, 1995): how does a person take action within and perhaps upon the environment?

Moral giftedness centers on: (1) actions and consequences; and (2) the values and goals that produce those actions. It, then, emphasizes motivation. Motivation concerns what moves people, what individuals strive toward (Ryan, 1970). It addresses why a person behaves, such as through structures of external incentives or internal motives and needs. More recent motivational theories emphasize the interaction of the person’s needs and interests with the environment’s influences (e.g., Bandura, 1989; Harter, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Studies of moral exemplars sample people who have done something morally inspiring and try to explain those actions motivationally through examining values and goals — what people care about and consider important, and how they structure their efforts to align with those values. Some people think the moral dimension of situations
and actions is most important, and they build their identities and actions to exemplify that moral dimension (Colby & Damon, 1992). Whereas IQ-based giftedness is motivated by learning and achievement in scholastic endeavors (Dai, Moon, & Feldhusen, 1998), moral giftedness is motivated by ‘doing good’. Moral giftedness stresses volition to make a positive, prosocial contribution to society (Moran, 2009a; Renzulli, 2002; Winner, 2000).

For most people, what is deemed moral is based on a formal or informal code of behavior that a group of people accept and perpetuate. The rules are known, and people can be judged on how well they abide by or apply those rules, such as to be kind, helpful, and honest. People reproduce their culture’s moral code through their attitudes and actions. Yet, moral exemplars tend to be those few individuals who see beyond the current rules to moral possibilities for increased inclusion in society or for new cultural forms of thought or behavior (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992; Michaelson, 2001). They emphasize a change in how people relate to each other, either directly through social interaction or indirectly through cultural products. They produce new manifestations of morality in their cultures, such as outlawing slavery or introducing social media.

**Purpose as gifted self-regulation**

Moral giftedness may take considerable time to manifest itself because sometimes the moral dimensions of a situation are not immediately apparent. For people to focus their efforts on the moral dimension, they must hold in mind the ‘should’ across situations and time periods to find opportunities to enact their values. The moral dimension becomes a goal.

Much motivational scholarship focuses on goals (e.g., Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Locke & Latham, 2002), but it is often short term so that outcomes can be measured. Researchers can determine whether, in fact, the person has reached the goal. Although there is variation in how motivated people are in these tasks, a focus on short-term goals creates a ‘ceiling effect’ when studying moral giftedness from a motivational perspective.

Moral giftedness involves purpose, which is more abstract and longer term than a goal. In the gifted literature, purpose has been associated with talent and high achievement. Personal talent involves ‘exceptional ability to select and attain difficult life goals that fit one’s interests, abilities, values, and contexts’ (Moon, 2003, p. 5). Torrance’s (1993) ‘beyonders’, who were high achievers throughout life, had in common a clear purpose.

Purpose endures potentially one’s entire life, and people may never fully realize their purposes or obtain clear feedback of steady progress. Thus, according to classic goal-setting theory (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002), purpose should have lower motivational force than more proximal goals. Yet, as stories of exemplars show, purpose motivates. Perhaps it is the ultimate form of motivational – as well as moral – giftedness in that having a purpose drives the individual to act in ways consistent with the purpose regardless of external circumstances. Purpose is an extreme of self-regulation. It becomes the ‘personal standard’ against which all behavior is compared (Marken, 1990). Purposeful individuals will persevere and invest great effort to maintain their purpose.

A purpose may focus on an activity that a person is intrinsically motivated to do; he or she enjoys the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000). But intrinsic motivation
may not be sufficient for a person to maintain direction and momentum toward an abstract, long-term goal. Intrinsic motivation is focused on the here-and-now of the experience. More likely, purpose arises from an understanding of how important the person’s actions are from a wider perspective (Damon, 2008); the person may engage in acts that he or she may not enjoy because the importance of the act is high, it has significant consequences to others or the world, and the person sees him- or herself as a critical actor. Purpose is a driver of agency in that it provides a symbolic representation of an ideal future self (Cross & Markus, 1991; Erikson, 2007) that gives meaning to current actions, helps people feel in control of their futures, and generates forethought for self-regulation (Bandura, 1989). Purpose also is analogous to the strongest form of extrinsic motivation, or integrated regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There is a mixing of identity and action (Colby & Damon, 1992) such that the act requires less conscious control and leads to less goal conflict (Koestner, 2008). Rather, purpose-related actions become a habit because it’s ‘who I am’ and ‘why I’m here’.

Purpose is personally meaningful, stimulates action, and contributes beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). As an internal moral compass, purpose provides self-generated reasons, rather than external stimuli, to control behavior; yet these personal reasons consider consequences beyond self-interest. Purpose provides individuals, as Aristotle would say, with something worthwhile to pursue, which is associated with good character. Purpose requires integration of three dimensions: intention, which separates purpose from mindless action; engagement, which separates purpose from dreaming; and prosocial reasoning, which separates purpose from self-oriented gratification (Moran, 2009a). People high on all three dimensions have purpose. Those low in one dimension have a precursor form of purpose (see Figure 1).

Purpose is not fully formed at birth, but develops. Adolescence may be a critical period for the foundations of purpose and youth are exposed to and must choose among a variety of ways-of-being (Damon, 2008). Purpose with all three dimensions integrated is not common – only 25% of young people have a purpose (Damon, 2008) – and it has been argued to be a form of intrapersonal giftedness (Moran, 2009a).

Figure 1. Forms of purposefulness based on prosocial reasons (vertical axis) and engagement (horizontal axis).
Developing a self-oriented life goal seems to be the well-supported cultural norm in the US (Moran, 2009a).

**Change oriented purposes**

Within the forms of purposefulness – from dreaming to integrated purpose – there is an even more ‘elite’ squad of morally gifted individuals. Purpose has a ‘content’ – a specified focus or object the person is motivated to achieve. Most people follow common goals supported by societal norms, institutions, and rules, such as find a well-paying job and start a family. Far fewer attempt change.

Aspirations to change require more of the individual, including the ability to see oneself and be agentic in yet-unrealized situations (Erikson, 2007), curiosity (Kashdan & Steger, 2007), and self-starting behavior (Fay & Frese, 2001). Change oriented aims require true self-regulation because the current situation provides little helpful external regulation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and often presents challenges (Putnam, 2007).

Change oriented aims are most often studied in terms of multicultural **tolerance** and social justice if they increase inclusion of more people accessing resources (Blum, 2010; Fowers & Davidov, 2006); or **creativity** if they transform the way people think in some symbolic domain (e.g., Simonton, 2000). Although not everyone with a change oriented aim may have all dimensions of purpose integrated, especially among adolescents whose purposes are under development, most historical examples of change agents were purposeful. Historical figures with purposes to increase tolerance include Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Gloria Steinem, Harvey Milk, and Cesar Chavez. Historical figures with creative purposes include Picasso, Isaac Newton, Thomas Edison, and Shakespeare.

There are cries from educators, government leaders, and business for increasing tolerance and creativity among youth. Gardner (2007) extended his theory of multiple intelligences to propose five ‘minds for the future’ that emphasize the purposes for deploying intellectual resources, which include the respectful mind to increase belonging and acceptance across social differences, the creating mind to expand and transform cultural knowledge, and the ethical mind to focus on the impact of one’s efforts on others. These three minds summarize the aims of youth featured in this study. Similarly, a survey of how multiple intelligences has been incorporated around the world focused on society-level purposes that included harmony among people and the inclusion of a wider variety of talents into the culture (Moran, 2009d). These aims emphasize the growing need and desire in many modern societies for flexibility, tolerance and cooperation, creativity and novelty – in short, for change.

Tolerance and creativity aims are particularly interesting because they make visible the cultural dynamics of morality. They can temporarily increase ambiguity before reformulating social and symbolic orders, thereby changing moral norms. For example, tolerance can show the boundaries of who or what is included and excluded in a moral code. Creativity reveals boundaries because often the moral implications of a creative product are not addressed until after the idea or product has been released. Thus, change oriented purposes motivate beyond the person’s own growth motives toward ‘becoming’ (Allport, 1955) to affect how a culture also ‘becomes’ through individual contributions.
Tolerance
Tolerance involves permitting, accepting, and respecting variation, plus forbearance to remove inertias in current categorizations of people (Blum, 2010). Multiculturalism, for example, is described as a ‘moral movement’ to value marginalized populations within the ‘common good’ and the ‘good life’ (Fowers & Davidov, 2006). Few people tend to confront majority opinions. Yet, those that do can have a tremendous impact, leading perhaps to the cascade of a social movement (Ganz, 2004; Kenworthy, Hewstone, Levine, Martin, & Willis, 2008; Moscovici, 1985).

Giftedness in tolerance has been studied through the relationship between academic giftedness and intercultural sensitivity (Holm, Nokelainen & Tirri, 2009), and moral judgment and intercultural experiences (Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003; Narvaez & Hill, 2010). Giftedness is related to more acceptance, flexible thinking, and a growth oriented mindset.

Creativity
Creativity is the introduction of something novel that is eventually accepted by others as appropriate and useful (Simonton, 2000). It has been examined as personal traits, process, product characteristics, and environmental affordances, as well as a continuum of effects: from mini-c personal learning, through little-c that influences only a few others, to big-C historical creativity that transforms the thinking of many people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Moran, 2009b; Simonton, 2000). Creativity has been much studied in relation to giftedness: as a counterpoint to IQ, through prodigies in the arts and sciences, and as the ultimate end toward which gifts should be applied (Moran & Gardner, 2006).

Despite its unpredictability, creativity remains an ideal to strive for in many schools (Moran, 2010a, b) and cultures (Lubart, 1999; Moran, 2009d) even though a deep social ambivalence about creativity’s goodness is pervasive (Moran, 2009b, c). Little research has breached the chasm between morality and creativity, although a few scholars have called for more attention to moral dimensions (Gruber, 1993; Runco & Nemiro, 2003). Few studies have examined youth. One qualitatively examined how adolescent scientists considered the impact on other people of their archeological dig in a gravesite (Tirri & Pehkonen, 2002).

Research aims
What has been less studied is how early in life tolerant or creative aspirations can be conceived, how those aspirations are pursued, and what types of individuals are drawn toward them. Thus, the aims of this study are to explore:

(1) What is the prevalence of change oriented aspirations among youth overall, across grades from middle school to college, and across forms of purposefulness?
(2) Do youth with change oriented aspirations differ in their subjective senses of purpose, meaning, or life satisfaction, compared to normative oriented youth?
(3) How do tolerant and creative oriented youth differ from each other, and what do the two groups have in common?
(4) How stable are change oriented aspirations over time?
Method

Sampling and sample description

This analysis is part of a larger, four-year study on youth purpose. The sample (see Table 1) comprised 270 youth interviewed in California, Tennessee, and Trenton/Philadelphia (overall age $M = 15.70$, $SD = 3.55$). Data collection in five high schools, middle schools, and colleges or community colleges (15 total) aimed to match the demographic makeup of the surrounding region. Participants equally span four grades from sixth to college approximately three years apart. The final sample was predominantly middle or upper middle class, gender balanced, and relatively balanced among Caucasians, Latino/as, and Asian-Americans. Across the change oriented aims, the mean age was higher for the tolerant category ($M = 17.96$, $SD = 3.35$) than for the creative category ($M = 15.90$, $SD = 3.61$). There was a higher percentage of females in the tolerance category (58%) than in the creative category (41%) and a preponderance (80%) of non-white individuals – primarily Asian (25%) and Latino/a (22%).

Data collection measures and procedures

Middle school and high school students were surveyed and interviewed at their schools, monitored by researchers. Parental consent was obtained prior to administration, and students assented on the first page of the survey. College students assented and completed the online survey on their own time without monitoring, and were interviewed at various locations.

The survey took a median time of 26 minutes to complete. This analysis drew from three sections that used a seven-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to assess how much participants feel they have found meaning (nine items such

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<th>Table 1. Sample description ($N = 270$).</th>
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<td>African-American</td>
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<td>Latino/a</td>
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<td>Asian-American</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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as ‘I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality’, from Ryff, 1989), identified a purpose (six items such as ‘I have discovered a satisfying life purpose’, partially from Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), and are satisfied with life (five items such as ‘the conditions of my life are excellent’, from Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

The interview took approximately 45 minutes. The protocol guides the interviewer to inquire about what is most important and meaningful to the participant and why, yet allows latitude to delve more deeply into the meanings of participant responses (Damon, 1977; Ginsberg, 1996). Six interviewers were trained in two sessions. Interviews were recorded then transcribed with identifying information removed.

**Data coding**

Qualitative content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) organized and reduced interview data. Three researchers coded transcripts using a codebook (Malin et al., 2008) to assign each interview a form of purposefulness (see Figure 1; Cohen’s kappa = .70; Fleiss, 1981). Coders independently read an interview twice to determine the most important thing the participant wanted to accomplish, which was labeled ‘potential driver’, then came to agreement before proceeding. Coders independently labeled action and reason statements related to the potential driver, assessed future plans engaging with the driver, and evaluated the prosocial reasons for the driver. Coders organized labeled statements in a spreadsheet and judged the appropriate form of purposefulness based on the presence or absence of statements related to intention, engagement, and prosocial reasoning. See Moran (2009a) for further details.

In addition, independent of the forms of purposefulness coding, one coder assessed the content of the potential driver for its change orientation. Drivers were categorized as normative (to assume goals that ‘fit in’ to current American societal expectations, such as for college, work, and family); tolerant (to enlarge what a group deems acceptable for member traits or behavior); or creative (to bring something new into being). For ease of analyses, we aimed for mutually exclusive categories. If someone gave both tolerant and creative reasons, or a potential driver could be coded either tolerant or creative, the interview was coded creative as the ‘stronger’ influence on culture. Creativity not only allows increased variation within a group, but introduces variation, which can be more destabilizing and, thus, potentially more potent as a change mechanism (e.g., Putnam, 2007).

**Statistical analyses**

Using STATA 10 software, frequency tables and chi-square tests were evaluated between the three change orientations and the four forms of purposefulness and the four grade levels. Of the 270 participants interviewed, 237 also completed the survey. This subset of participants comprised the sample for ANOVAs examining differences among change orientations in relation to quantitative measures of subjective senses of meaning, identified purpose, and life satisfaction. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, findings with p-values <.10 are reported, even though they are beyond the standard Type I error limit of p<.05, to inform researchers about associations that may be important but have measurement issues due to small sample sizes within the change oriented categories in the current study (see Cohen, 1992).
Results and discussion

Prevalence and age trends of change orientations

To answer Question 1 concerning the prevalence of change oriented aims, Table 2 shows the percentage of the whole sample with normative, tolerant, and creative aspirations, as well as the percentage in each grade level and forms of purposefulness. As expected, most aspirations (72%) were coded normative, adhering to cultural expectations (Malmberg & Norrgard, 1999). Nearly three in four youth plan to do well in school, get well-paying jobs, and support a family. Twelve percent were coded tolerant. These youth aim to promote more inclusive environments, addressing issues of peace, racial unity, immigrant inclusion, and alleviation of suffering for those ‘left out’. For example, one female theater/international studies major aims to translate for the United Nations to ‘help out people in different countries’ and to educate Americans about situations abroad. Sixteen percent were coded creative. They aimed to invent through symbolic media, such as art, fashion design, filmmaking, theater, and music. For example, an Asian-American college student aspires to design large Las Vegas hotels ‘to see people using that building… [and] people can see the aesthetic view of what I wanted to express’.

Table 2. Percentage of sample with each motivational orientation in each purposeful form and grade level.

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<tr>
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<th>Whole sample</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Tolerant</th>
<th>Creative</th>
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<td>N</td>
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<td></td>
<td>270&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>192&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>25&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Purposeful form&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-purpose</td>
<td>108&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>95&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
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<td>(25%)</td>
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<td>Self-oriented life goal</td>
<td>69&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>55&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(26%)</td>
<td>(12%)</td>
<td>(34%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beyond-the-self dream</td>
<td>26&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>20&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(10%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td>(12.5%)</td>
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<td>Purpose</td>
<td>67&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>43&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>15&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Grade level&lt;sup&gt;++&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>4&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>College</td>
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<td>(26%)</td>
<td>(24%)</td>
<td>(38%)</td>
<td>(24%)</td>
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Notes: Percentages rounded to nearest integer. (a) 21 interviewees could not be coded as normative, tolerant, or creative because their motivational orientations were not expressed or were too general. (b) Percent of row (whole sample). (c) Percent of column (normative, tolerant, or creative motivational orientation). (<sup>+</sup>) Chi-square analysis of purposeful forms across motivational orientations is statistically significant ($\chi^2=23.01$, $df=6$, $p<.01$). Chi-square analysis between tolerant and creative youth not including normative youth ($n=57$) is marginally statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.67$, $df=3$, $p<.09$). (<sup>++</sup>) Chi-square analysis of grade levels across all three motivational orientations is statistically insignificant ($\chi^2=9.89$, $df=6$, $p=.13$). Chi-square analysis between tolerant and creative youth only is marginally statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.84$, $df=3$, $p<.08$). See Cohen (1992) for discussion of p-values <.10 in exploratory studies.
Among tolerant and creative youth \((n = 57)\), differences arise in distributions across forms of purposefulness and grade levels. One-fifth of tolerant youth and one-fourth of creative youth are categorized as non-purposeful – they dabble in activities for fun with little intention of contributing in the future. Still, given that having a purpose is an unusual achievement (Moran, 2009a), it is impressive that 60% of tolerant youth have purpose. Creative youth, on the other hand, are split between self-oriented life goal (34%) and purpose (28%). About a quarter focus on fun and self-expression, disregarding how their creations may have prosocial effects. Thus, most youth who aim for change have not fully integrated their intention, engagement, and prosocial reasoning into full purpose. They also lack integrated self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in that they have not fully mastered themselves but rather still experience internal goal conflicts and need to rely on external supports to bolster their motivation. Since many current messages in the US focus on self-oriented life goals and individualistic pursuits, external supports may conflict with change oriented aims, inhibiting further development into purpose.

Tolerant youth tend to be older – 43% are high school seniors, 38% are in college. Creative youth were spread evenly across grades. This difference was marginally statistically significant \((p = .08)\). When examining within grade level, more sixth graders were creative than tolerant by a 2:1 ratio, all change oriented ninth graders were creative, and older students were equally split across the two change orientations. These grade differences most likely result from differences in how clearly and concretely schools or the media portray options to be tolerant or creative, and differences in opportunities to participate in tolerance-enhancing or creative ways. Many children are exposed to a variety of creative role models from history and entertainment. Yet, fewer children are exposed to tolerance-enhancing role models, as such, until perhaps high school or college. Furthermore, youth may be barred from authentic civic or political participation that affects tolerance because of laws or norms (Moran, 2007).

**Motivational orientation and subjective senses of meaning, purpose, and life satisfaction**

To answer Question 2 regarding whether there are differences between normative youth and change oriented youth in self-reported sense of purpose, life meaning, or life satisfaction, Table 3 summarizes the means and standard deviations for the self-report survey scales addressing sense of meaning, identified purpose, and life satisfaction. ANOVAs found no statistically significant mean differences. Knowing if youth have a change oriented aspiration provides little information about whether, on average, they feel they have a purpose or are happy about it.

However, given past studies showing that deviating from cultural norms is difficult (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Putnam, 2007), another explanation is that statistical insignificance stems from measurement issues: lack of power because of small subsamples for tolerant and creative aspirations, and ceiling effects on these scales that can’t distinguish among more morally and motivationally gifted youth. These measures only ask about purpose or meaning in general and do not acknowledge purpose content as relevant.

Despite lack of significance, the distribution of scores shows interesting patterns that a larger sample might further enlighten. Tolerant youth are evenly distributed across the higher scores of identified purpose, whereas creative youth are bimodal,
either ambivalent or with an exceptionally strong sense of identified purpose. Tolerant youth are ambiguous about meaning in life, whereas creative youth tend to strongly agree they have meaning. The way youth themselves talk about their purposes and how they are pursued may help explain these distributional patterns. Tolerant youth focus locally – on people they know or identify with – to alleviate suffering in their neighborhood or to promote their own culture, for example. Furthermore, cultural as well as religious messages in the US corroborate an emphasis on ‘helping others’ and ‘care about others’. So it makes sense that tolerant youth show a skew toward higher self-report scores on identified purpose because the general thrust of their aims is well supported in the environment. However, they may have to struggle more to find the personal meaning of the purpose. Creative youth, on the other hand, focus on symbolic objects and only indirectly on how those objects affect people. They are expressing personal meaning through their creations so it makes sense that meaning reports are high. But there is less support for a ‘creative identity’: Americans have mixed feelings about the moral implications of creativity (Moran, 2009b, c), which is reflected in youth’s self reports.

### Qualitative differences between tolerant and creative youth

To inform Question 3 regarding differences in how change oriented youth describe themselves and their purpose pursuits, a qualitative analysis was conducted. Differences in self-description between tolerant and creative youth emphasize orientations toward others versus oneself, people versus activity, and clarity of feedback. Tolerant youth orient to the group, emphasizing inclusion and bringing others into the community. They talk in terms such as ‘expose myself to cultures’, ‘why let people suffer?’,

### Table 3. Reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for sense of meaning, identified purpose, and life satisfaction.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Scale</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of meaning (Ryff, 1989)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Full sample</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.04</td>
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<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identified purpose (Steger et al., 2006)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Full sample</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>1.13</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>4.88</td>
<td>0.94</td>
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</table>

Note: None of the ANOVAs of differences in scale means across motivational orientations was statistically significant.
‘embrace’, ‘balance perspectives’, and a recognition that the person in need ‘could be me’. Creative youth emphasize self-expression, standing out, speaking their voice. They talk in terms such as ‘forcing beliefs on others’, ‘do what I want’, ‘leave a legacy’, ‘think what you’re thinking outward’, and ‘make it come out to where people understand’.

Tolerant youth are reactive to their own or others’ experiences, such as immigrant parents, being disrespected, or school cliques. They focus on the outcome, usually alleviation of suffering, by opening minds to wider options. Creative youth are proactive, with a need or passion to do the creative task. They enjoy the activity and want to keep their minds productively interacting with symbolic media. Their symbolic creations mediate their social interaction and impact.

The path to achievement is fuzzier for the tolerant than the creative. Even though tolerant youth may be generally supported for ‘helping others’, they feel they may never receive clear feedback on their particular efforts to change the social system. Their main obstacle is lack of control over others and uncertainty about how social dynamics will progress. Creative youth feel that feedback is critical. They found their talent, in part, because of what others told them they were ‘good at’. Their main obstacle is lack of time and conflicting commitments, especially with other tasks they are ‘supposed’ to be doing.

Still, there are several commonalities across the two groups. Both seek challenges, such as taking harder classes or joining extracurricular activities. They find or make opportunities to enact their aims. Whereas normative youth tend to answer the question, ‘Describe what your life will be like at age 40’, with ‘more of the same’ work and family, change oriented youth have a sense of adventure: ‘I’m not sure, who knows what’ll happen between now and then’, or ‘I’m gonna try to be ready for a variety of possibilities’.

Both tolerant and creative youth straddle the boundary of actuality and possibility. They exhibit a strong ‘counterfactual mindset’, or capacity to envision alternatives to what currently exists (Markman, Lingberg, Kray, & Galinsky, 2007). Tolerant youth seek prosocial cooperation and remove existing obstacles to make things happen. Creative youth introduce novelty, sometimes competitively, to make things happen.

**Stability of motivational orientations over time**

To answer Question 4 regarding the stability of change oriented purposes, interviews with these youth in 2006 and again in 2008 were compared. About a third \((n = 9, 36\%)\) of tolerant youth and just over half \((n = 18, 56\%)\) of creative youth were reinterviewed. A descriptive comparison of motivational orientations across two years suggests that tolerant and creative aspirations are difficult to sustain. Twenty-two per cent of reinterviewed tolerant youth stayed tolerant and 66% became normative. These youth became more ‘realistic’ about their own efficacy and society’s opportunities; they adjusted their expectations downward. One youth who maintained her tolerant purpose was a Latina global studies major who found nonprofit organizations through which she could ‘change people’s situations so they have a better chance’ and make herself ‘more aware that I’m in a position of power’. On the other hand, a male twelfth grader could not sustain his momentum because he lacked specific plans and faith, so obstacles overwhelmed him: ‘My ideas could change the world, but not in my time’.

Forty-four per cent of reinterviewed creative youth stayed creative, 11% changed to tolerant aims, and 38% became normative. Creativity seems stable if the adolescent
found a way to engage self-expression. For example, an African-American college student maintained his purpose to make films about social issues because he connected with an inner-city nonprofit organization that provided projects and resources.

Youth can relatively easily fall into the normative category if obstacles arise. The most common reason given in the 2008 interviews by those who dropped their change oriented aspirations was that they ‘need money’. A male twelfth grader saw his playing guitar as ‘more like dreams than possibilities’ because it depends on ‘if you make good money, but you don’t make it and, yeah…’.

Change oriented purposes are harder to maintain than normative goals because the normative is a strong attractor, bolstered by considerable institutionalized supports, opportunities, and roles. Less motivation is called for by the individual because the environment provides tremendous motivational influence through incentives, rewards, and punishments like ‘not fitting in’ socially if a person deviates. Youth whose foresight fails to anticipate positive outcomes adjust expectations in light of current circumstantial motives (Bandura, 1989). To use a metaphor, a too-strong magnet of normative environmental incentives may break purpose’s moral compass and its capacity to self-regulate. Another way to interpret this finding is in terms of ‘bottom-up’ means-goals relationships (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003): if means for striving toward one’s purpose are sufficiently lacking, then the environment doesn’t trigger activation of the purpose, which becomes less cognitively accessible and cannot self-regulate more striving. The environment’s priming of other goals through norms – such as ‘to make money’ – may obstruct a change oriented purpose.

**Conclusion**

This study explores how a few gifted youth aspire to change the world. Further research with a larger sample plus measures specifically designed for high-ability youth is needed to understand the dynamics of how experiences, supports, and challenges become meaningful, motivating and self-regulating through the development and pursuit of purposes.

Youth aiming to accept and introduce variation in ideas, perspectives, and behaviors are rare and courageous. Putnam’s (2007) sociological studies explain how tolerance’s and creativity’s long-term benefits tend to be felt at the community level through improved standard of living, but their short-term costs may be felt personally through social rejection. At a life stage when peers are struggling to fit in, these morally and motivationally gifted individuals take on the challenges of transformation. Some make it their life purpose. As societies become more democratic across a wider diversity of citizens, individuals with tolerant or creative aims may become more important in smoothing the process of dialogue, decision-making, and integration.

But before these youth can make these impacts on society and culture, they must first complete the process of integrating themselves. To keep conflicting potential goals or environmental obstacles from derailing their aims to improve some aspect of the world, they must become autonomous in their self-regulation (Koestner, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Since their purposes involve an imagined vision of creating a world different that what currently exists, rather than a perceived vision of fitting in to what exists now, the ability to autonomously self-select or self-design that purpose becomes an important motivator for selecting subsequent intermediate goals, opportunities, and environments to sustain that purpose. Supportive individuals and institutions that are
designed to support the development of self-regulation rather than just behavioral regulation are called for.

Some youth are more talented in this developmental process. Since, in general, youth do not seem to be ‘masters’ of themselves yet (Koestner, 2008; Moran & Gardner, 2007), but are rather still at least partially dependent on environmental cues, cultural norms and their incentives during the formative years of purpose may be particularly detrimental to the development of change oriented aspirations. Change oriented aims require the proactive, lifelong-learning-focused, internally generated development of self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2008). Even though development and motivation involve dynamic interactions between person and environment (Bandura, 1989; Zimmerman, 2008), with change oriented aims, the person must master both self and environment for the change to occur. Thus, its achievement seems limited to a few gifted individuals willing and able to sustain their motivational energy on their own or to piece together a disparate collection of supports and opportunity along the path. For change oriented purposes, the ‘path to purpose’ (Damon, 2008) is not paved.

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