



Life Purpose in the Age of the Smartphone: Reflections from Comparative Anthropology

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate whether there exists in different societies something analogous to the idea of 'life purpose.' Drawing on examples from across the entire range of ASSA project field sites, the paper is organised as a spectrum, starting from the case of Japan where *ikigai* is the most explicit example of having a life purpose and is a commonly used expression. We then argue that, in some regions, such as Palestine, the idea of life purpose is entirely subsumed within religion. This is followed by several cases where social reproduction seems to dominate life purpose, often based on securing the success of future generations. We then turn to more implicit examples of life purpose, starting with Xinyuan Wang's study of the relationship between the Cultural Revolution and the smartphone revolution in Shanghai. We then examine the case of Ireland where life purpose is extrapolated from a more general expansive cosmology. We end the paper with the possibility that some people in England may see an advantage in not having any sense of life purpose. In the conclusion, we argue that, just as we now recognise that social cohesion does not require the moral guidance of religion, so too is there no need to have a category of life purpose. But, either implicitly or explicitly, most cultures do have a variety of ideals that we might equate with life purpose.

Keywords: Ageing; Smartphone; Religion; Life purpose; Explicit

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Introduction

“We'll see what happens next year; maybe I'll die. Am I thinking about death? I am a believer; I believe in God. Whatever comes will come. This is our religion.” (Palestine)

“The empty nesters are out enjoying themselves, fit as fiddles, travelling, walking by the sea, being by the sea, the sense of freedom.” (Ireland)

There is an inherent contradiction within comparative anthropology. If we recognise that the topic we wish to compare is an expression of cultural values, then we face the problem that this topic may or may not be present – and, if present, it may be understood very differently across regions and societies. So, how do we practice comparative anthropology? One response is to impose an analytical concept, irrespective of whether the population uses it. This would be the case in anthropological studies of ‘the life course,’ a term we do not assume the population we study uses themselves. But through the use of the term, we can then investigate the cultural context of what we mean by ‘life course’ (e.g., Fry 1990; Hockey and James 2003). With respect to ‘life purpose,’ we might privilege a particular component, such as ‘happiness’ (Kavedžija and Walker 2016), or ‘the good enough life’ (Miller 2023). In this paper, we take a different approach by investigating whether there exists in different societies something analogous to the term ‘life purpose.’ We show that, while one population in Japan may have an explicit concept of life purpose, in another population in Palestine, life purpose is really about people’s religious beliefs, while in some populations in Ireland life purpose refers to what people want to do with their lives. We end this paper with reasons why, in certain contexts, there can be advantages to repudiating any such idea of life purpose.

The topic of life purpose arose from the decision within the ASSA project to focus on people who considered themselves neither young nor old. In several field sites, this resulted in research with populations who were either retired or considering retirement. When people find themselves no longer spending most of the day working or bringing up a family, they are faced with time itself as something that needs to be more explicitly crafted. What should they do with this time? Moreover, it is around the period of retirement that many people – particularly in field sites such as Ireland – experience the death of their parents. We found that this moment was a catalyst for some research participants to think about life’s purpose. The problem was that, in most of our field sites, life purpose was rarely discussed explicitly. In this paper, as we compare the various project field sites, we suggest that there is considerable diversity in the presence/absence or explicit/implicit character of an idea such as life purpose.

In most of the field sites, since there was no explicit discussion of life purpose, we extrapolated something analogous to life purpose from other evidence, such as religion or everyday life, such as what people choose to do with their life in retirement. If life purpose is not necessarily explicit, then we cannot simply ask people about life purpose; for example, in Ireland, where this is not a concept that people generally use. If we study life purpose through an analysis of life *practice* – that is, how people spend or want to spend their time – then almost anything in life might be relevant. For a given

individual, this might be playing sports, or painting, or expressing their religious faith. These practices may in turn differ according to gender, class, ethnicity, age, and other parameters. Feelings about life purpose may also evolve over time. As the main purpose of this paper is comparative, in practice, we have selected the dominant fields that seemed most salient for that population to the question of life purpose. This paper is therefore structured as a spectrum, moving from more explicit to more implicit examples of life purpose.

As mentioned, many societies avoid discussing any explicit category of life purpose. However, within academia, the topic of life purpose in relation to ageing is much discussed in fields such as psychology (Robak and Griffin 2000), gerontology (Reker et al. 1987), and, of particular relevance to this paper, in terms of religiosity (Dufton and Perlman 1986). There are many other approaches to the topic of life purpose, such as anthropological discussions around ‘successful ageing’ (e.g., Lamb 2017; including Danely 2017; Lamb, Robbins-Ruszkowski, and Corwin 2017; see also Lynch 2000). There has also been an increased interest within anthropology in the ideal of ‘a good life’ and how this conflates the goal of happiness with that of virtue or a greater purpose in life. This interest has been prompted partly by a desire amongst anthropologists to see how our ethnographies might contribute to a discussion of the ancient Greek term *eudaimonia* (the condition of ‘good spirit’ or ‘living well’), which was central in the birth of Western philosophy (Freeman 2016; Kavedžija 2016; Miller 2023).¹

Explicit Life Purpose

The case of Japan is unique within our project. It is the only field site in which – irrespective of religion or secularisation – there is a well-established and explicit concept of life purpose within the wider Japanese cosmology. While not every research participant in the Japanese context was directly concerned with this concept, the idea is very familiar to them. There, life purpose is called *ikigai* and is the subject of a chapter in Laura Haapio-Kirk’s forthcoming monograph (in press), building on the prior work of Iza Kavedžija (2019). *Ikigai* is sometimes considered an essential component of a healthy later life but, as Haapio-Kirk suggests, the pressure to ‘find’ one’s life purpose is often linked with wider narratives of an individual’s responsibility towards society. As a result, finding one’s *ikigai* can be experienced as something of a burden, although it also helps characterise some of the wonderful crafts and other work to which older people may become devoted. In Japan, people assume that having a clear *ikigai* will directly contribute to longevity itself; an individual may already have discovered their *ikigai* when still in their twenties. Addressing this concept is essential if one is to understand how people in Japan comprehend well-being generally.

More specifically, Haapio-Kirk’s analysis reveals how, in practice, there is considerable creativity and change as people find ways of shifting this concept to fit developments in their lives and the world around them. The context for these changes has been a historical shift in Japan from a homogeneous and normative understanding of *ikigai* – to which people might have had to adhere more rigidly in the past – towards a greater diversity of self-crafting, in which people bend their idea of *ikigai* to adhere to the way their lives have developed. Haapio-Kirk’s work is replete with examples that pay attention to these kinds of individual difference. But there is also analytical work on more general tendencies. For example, Haapio-Kirk highlights gender differences, as some men continue to link *ikigai* with their previous work experiences around which their personal identity was largely constructed, while women are more inclined to see *ikigai* in terms of personal relationships, such as caring for others. We learned that Japanese women are creative in their use of smartphones to express and achieve this goal.

Religion as (Explicit) Life Purpose

Our comparative discussion starts with an example from Laila Abed Rabho and Maya de Vries’ Palestinian field site of Dar al-Hawa, a settlement in Al Quds. Not long ago, it was assumed that life purpose was largely determined by religious faith (McGuire 2008); this certainly pertains to the Palestinian settlement where their study was conducted. The beliefs, practices, and norms of the people

in this settlement are dominated by notions of how life is an opportunity for each individual to perform good deeds and religious duties as a Muslim. However, religion is not just a set of beliefs; it can also be people's everyday practice with its rules, obligations, and customs. At the community center where much of Abed Rabho and de Vries' research was conducted, older women practice their daily Islamic duties. For example, every Thursday, they hear a lesson from the local Imam of Dar al-Hawa. The Imam is there to give guidance from and interpretation of the Quran and the Shariaa upon which life purpose should be based. People's religious duties are dictated by their mosque including funerals, holidays, and prayers.

For this population, kinship bonds are highly normative; anyone who reprehensibly severs the bonds of kinship or whose actions are not congenial to their relatives is shamed (Dimiyati 1983, 252). The *hadith* (i.e., reports of statements or actions of the prophet Muhammad) associates the articles of Muslim belief with maintaining and upholding the bonds of kinship, such that negligence or such severing of family ties is major sin (Bensaid and Grine 2014). One expects to care for their elderly parents "as they did care for me when I was little" (al-Israh: 24). At the same time, as an individual ages, there is an increased desire to put children and grandchildren first. As Abed Rabho and de Vries' research participant Yasmin, age 77, put it, the meaning of life for her is to "care, I take care of my grandchildren." Typically, older women would first mention this care for children and grandchildren, but there is also a sense that increasing age should be the occasion for increased piety as one approaches death. A greater emphasis is placed upon good deeds as one turns to face the afterlife. Everything should follow *Shariaa* law, which is why most people do not feel the need to make a will. Whatever they consider life purpose to be, the assumption is that what actually happens is a reflection of God's purpose. This belief is used as comfort in difficult situations, since it reduces or minimizes one's responsibility, placing it instead in "God's hands," such as securing medical treatment, or even questioning why one has an illness such as cancer (Azaiza and Cohen 2008; Baron-Epel et al. 2004). Individual life purpose is subsumed within this holistic religious faith and its associated social and cultural obligations. These might include going on *Haji* (i.e., a religious pilgrimage to Mecca), giving one's children a good education and then seeing them get married, buying a house where one feels more secure and has peace of mind, or spending time with relatives and friends in order to prevent loneliness.

Older age itself should be understood as part of the Islamic conception of a 'circle of life.' The main stages are childhood (in Arabic: *Al-Tufula*; مرحلة الطفولة), youth (*Al-Shabab*; مرحلة الشباب), adulthood or middle age (*Kahel*; كهل), and seniority (*Sheikhuha*; شيخوخة), which typically corresponds to a person over age 60. The word *Sheikh* has a positive meaning in Arabic, and refers to someone who has extensive knowledge due to their extended life experience. For men, it may have connotations of retirement but most of the women in Abed Rabho and de Vries' research (their fieldwork was mainly with women) were not formally employed. There is also potentially a last stage of life: *Ardel al-Omar* (أردل العمر) refers to the possibility of senility, which may require that a person be looked after by their family based on the person's needs.

This description of the final stages of life is a normative account of being 'elderly' but Yasmin shows how an individual can be different. Inside her apartment, next to the bedroom and near the window, there is a white plastic chair with a Qur'an. There are no other books in the little living room. This is the chair Yasmin uses for praying, sitting rather than standing. At this stage, she has to think about leaving her house, which is reached by 20 stairs. Having lost two husbands and having no children, she cannot experience this stage of life as complete. She is not surrounded by kin in the same way as others, even though she does meet up with her sisters and friends. While most people in the area live with and are constantly surrounded by their kin, Yasmin can be lonely. Still, as she said:

We'll see what happens next year; maybe I'll die. Am I thinking about death? I am a believer; I believe in God. Whatever comes will come. This is our religion. The way we

look at life in Dar al-Hawa is almost always done through the religious prism. God is the one who determines and determines our destiny. He sees and knows everything.

One important consequence of life purpose based on religion is that it may become a point of social solidarity rather than just an individual pursuit. Islam includes the ideal of a pledge that each person makes to be the guarantor of the Muslim community itself, and which should bind the insolvent and the rich, the strong, and the weak. It is exemplified in the way the individual should be supported in need by their family and friends, as argued by many Muslim sources that discuss the rights and obligations of kin (e.g., Al-Baqarah: 83; Al-Isra: 26). It is also manifest in the ideal of *zakat*, which refers to giving a proportion of one's wealth as alms to those in need.

An important part of the ASSA project was to show that religious principles are also practices that can be found in the deployment of mundane devices such as the smartphone. Abed Rabho and de Vries studied how older people struggled to learn to use smartphones in order to avoid forms of exclusion that would have breached these religious ideals. They also investigated the ways in which people incorporated Islam into the technology – ranging from apps that ensure people do not miss the call to prayer to using the smartphone to coordinate care for those in need and to bond the Senior's Club through WhatsApp. Another research participant, Rebab, age 73, had been finding it too physically taxing to volunteer but now uses her smartphone to maintain her work caring for more frail people. Faiza, age 65, established a 'good friends' WhatsApp group to organise regular meetings with her female friends. The smartphone also facilitates keeping in touch with relatives in Jordan and the wider diaspora, and this helps to explain the degree to which, despite its negative aspects (such as potential digital exclusion), the smartphone is more often regarded as a blessing.

Dar al-Hawa was not the only field site where religion played a prominent role in life purpose. ASSA field sites in Cameroon, Chile, and Uganda included devout Christians who would also have viewed their life purpose as essentially being the fulfilment of their religious obligations and ideals. But in response to historical fears that the end of religion would leave some kind of gap or loss of life purpose, there is good evidence to the contrary from our field sites in Italy and Ireland. While born into a highly authoritarian Catholicism to which they were originally devoted, many people in the Milan field site (Walton 2021) and the Irish field site (Garvey and Miller 2021) had become remarkably secular. Shireen Walton argues that, insofar as the decline of religion could lead to a loss in an ethical sensibility, most people express quite the opposite sentiment. Many research participants in the Italian and Irish field sites, in retrospect, now regard traditional religious devotion as having been mainly a ritual practice; a routinisation of praying and festivals within which ethics is simply subsumed. With this perspective, we argue that modern life can then be regarded as a literal enlightenment (i.e., coming to see the light).

In both Milan and Ireland, people often used exactly the same expression – that they were born Catholic but are now Christian. This means that, while they remain nominally Catholic, the emphasis of the Church itself has now turned from strict adherence bolstered by an emphasis on sin to more generic concerns with being a good person, which leaves people freer to focus on more general ethical ideals such as life purpose. For migrants to Milan, this was associated with increased access to secondary and tertiary education, which gave them resources to see so much more in and of the world, aided by the new capacities of the smartphone. As Daniel Miller found in his study, Cuan (a pseudonym for a town of 11,000 people in Ireland) was remarkable for its degree of social solidarity, altruistic volunteering, and devotion to sociality. There was no sense that the decline of religion had resulted in any feeling of anomie or alienation or even individualism (Miller 2023). The Palestinian example shows how effective religion can be in providing life purpose. But we also found that its absence has not resulted in any kind of functional replacement.

Social Reproduction as Life Purpose

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One feature of life purpose that could certainly be ascribed to growing older is an increased concern with social reproduction. This is made clear in Patrick Awondo's work with mainly middle-class research participants in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. When people age here, they often become increasingly concerned with ensuring compliance with customary values and ideals. As they approach the stage in which they hope to become a revered ancestor, they may become more concerned with rituals such as funerals, alongside a more explicit devotion to religion and ideas related to the afterlife. This may also imply securing the inheritance of the next generation; e.g., in finding workarounds to taxation on inheritance. Awondo suggests this is also a time when older people see their role as ensuring the reproduction of culture itself and trying to engage the younger generation in traditional practices. By cajoling their children or grandchildren to participate in and show respect for the traditions that they themselves have inherited, cultural continuity thereby becomes a personal responsibility. There is a segmented structure to this societal reproduction. It starts with the individual and their family, but then goes upwards to include responsibilities to the person's clan, then their ethnic and national identity, then a concern with the traditions and culture associated with Cameroon. Finally, there is a responsibility to being African, which is becoming increasingly important as a category of cultural reproduction. People now talk quite explicitly about a fear of losing culture and their role in ensuring its survival.

The tie between societal and kin reproduction is often quite intimate. Consider Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera's (1990) discussion of rural populations in Columbia. Here, the primary identification is with one's family as manifested by their landholding. The value of one's life is largely judged by the degree to which one is able to increase that landholding, rather than see it diminished over one's lifetime and as an inheritance for one's children. If the patrimony grows, then life purpose has been achieved. When Miller (1985) conducted research for his Ph.D. in an Indian village, he came across a similar concern as a priority in life purpose. For farmers, the primary identification was not with religion, or the village, or being Indian – it was that one's family be represented by the amount of land that they farmed. In Alfonso Otaegui's (2023) research with Peruvian migrants in Santiago, Chile, he explains why these Peruvians continue to work as long as they can, rather than considering retirement: as immigrants, they are concerned with ensuring a good foundation for their descendants. Seen comparatively, we can view this continued devotion to work as another example of the desire to increase family patrimony; in this case, as would suit a population of urban migrants in Chile rather than Indian farmers. But still, life is judged by the degree to which the welfare of their family has been increased by their work. The case of Brazil is similar but with a twist. While the Peruvians studied by Otaegui are largely continuing their work and not retiring, the problem for the older Brazilians studied by Marília Duque (2022) is that, in many cases, they are formally retired. Duque's central point is about the concern these older Brazilians have *after* their retirement – they do not want to lose a sense of the identity that they accrued through a lifetime of work. They may therefore try to find alternative projects that give them a sense of continuity with work as something that had been central to their idea of life purpose.

As people have migrated from farming to working in cities, a concern with land as long-term security for one's children has often been replaced by the idea that education is a more effective investment into the future. This was the case in Charlotte Hawkins' research on a population in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Here, families focused on sending as many of their children as possible to one of the boarding schools that have proliferated in Uganda. Hawkins could see how perhaps the major cause of stress in these families had become the need to cover school fees, even when parents know that education is no guarantee that their children will find jobs. Yet, almost any sacrifice was considered worthwhile if it secured an education for one's children. It makes sense then to see school fees alongside the continued work by Peruvian migrants or the size of one's landholding for the Columbian farmers studied by Gudeman and Rivera (1990) as concerns that transcend any simply pragmatic aim; they all can be seen as material manifestations of the wider sense of life purpose as societal reproduction.

In his research, Awondo foregrounds an idiom used by his participants in Yaoundé that reflects an explicit form of life purpose. Central to his study is the concept of struggle. As Awondo notes, the most common responses to the simple question of ‘how are you?’ are phrases that use the term ‘fighting,’ as in: “We are fighting, you know the story” or, for older people, “We fought as best we could.” Even when older, the focus is on how to get by in the present; how one confronts the difficulties that they are confronting here and now. This presumes certain goals in life, such as living with dignity and respectability, and not just economic survival. Because both are religious societies, we found considerable overlap between Awondo’s research participants in Yaoundé and the situation amongst the Palestinians in giving the divine a prominent role within this struggle. The idea that God is by your side in this battle to ensure a decent life means that one is fighting not just for oneself but for the family that one is responsible for as well as for societal reproduction, first through societal survival.

Implicit Life Purpose

The idea of implicit life purpose corresponds to one of the core traditions of anthropology, perhaps best articulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1968) in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Bourdieu showed how the primary means for securing social continuity need not be conscious or explicit life purpose. Rather, it derives from the mundane practices of everyday life and the underlying structures that make these into a propensity towards living a particular kind of life. Individuals are socialised into these structures when still children and will naturally attempt to reproduce them, even when it comes to dealing with an entirely unprecedented phenomenon such as smartphones. Explicit life purpose may be subject to challenge, while life purpose through these practices are regarded as merely customary rather than ideological, and we may not be conscious of them at all.

This argument corresponds closely to Xinyuan Wang’s (in press) study of older people in Shanghai, but with a twist. Instead of these normative practices being inculcated as part of growing up within social norms, the Cultural Revolution in China effectively tore people from their roots and replaced any original socialisation with a deliberate re-engineering of the entire Chinese population. This forced citizens to subsume any personal ambition into the state’s wider plans for constructing a revolutionary state. People were then subjected to such unremitting pressure that these plans became their given outlook on life. As Wang describes, this worked partly because the ideals of the Cultural Revolution were so fully embodied in the requirement for each and every individual to take upon themselves a continual ‘self-reform’ in order to become the ‘new person’ required by the state. Citizens had to become the microcosm to the state as macrocosm, as every individual was prescribed this duty to reproduce the Communist state.

In her analysis, Wang demonstrates how all of this ultimately has had consequences for something that at first glance bears no relation whatsoever to the situation of the Cultural Revolution: an ethnography devoted to an entirely different revolution, that of the smartphone, several decades later. Wang explains how the manner in which the current generation of older people responded to the capacities created by the smartphone can only be fully appreciated in light of those underlying structures inculcated by the Cultural Revolution. The habitus, as a perception of their world, behaviours, tastes and preference, is expressed also as part of a self-revolution became the route by which older people reinvented themselves in a revolutionary way around the new technology. What started as an explicit life purpose of revolution became over time an implicit habitus that Wang extrapolates from the way this population responded to the smartphone.

In Ireland, some new ethical ideals are emerging that contribute to an implicit sense of life purpose. Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller (2021) describe how older people work to secure their own continuity through a focus upon personal health – e.g., watching their diet, developing routines around walking or the gym, and other ways of keeping fit. But, at the same time, older people have taken the lead in

promoting a crucial new set of values concerned with the health and continuity of the planet. Here, a conspicuous concern with environmentalist issues has become the dominant marker of status and respect. Older people are better equipped to divest themselves of their material possessions than young people who often have more family responsibilities. Older people also have more time to join voluntary groups dedicated to environmental causes. If environmentalism is the new status and new life purpose in Ireland, then older people are in an ideal position to avail themselves of these opportunities. The term that unites the individual drive to healthy ageing and this larger concern with planetary continuity is ‘sustainability.’ The older generation’s desire to maintain personal sustainability dovetails quite neatly into a concern for planetary sustainability through, for example, eating organic foods or cultivating their allotments.

Yet, the Irish case is also the clearest example of a population that has largely repudiated the purposes of life within which they were originally socialised, having been brought up in a particularly strident version of Catholicism, comparable to the situation in our Palestinian field site. During this generation’s lifetime, Catholicism experienced a series of scandals that has led to a revolution almost as dramatic as that of China. Today, the Irish context is typical of the secularism that dominates much of Europe (O’Toole 2021). One casualty of that change is that many (though by no means all) older people have had a decline in their faith of an afterlife – or indeed, any claim to a life purpose that transcends what science has taught us about the basis of human life in biological terms. As in the Italian case, there was no sense that a population that has lost its belief in the afterlife becomes more fearful. People in Ireland spoke more of the earlier concern with sin and hell as inculcating fear.

While the retired population participating in Miller’s Irish fieldwork were not given to discussing an abstract idea of life purpose, it was possible to discern an underlying cosmology extrapolated from a combination of general ethnography and some more direct questions. In *The Good Enough Life* (2023), Miller examines what can be learned about what life could and perhaps should be, based on his ethnography of the retired people of Cuan. He compares this with 2,500 years of Western philosophy, juxtaposing chapters from the ethnography with chapters about philosophy. One pair of chapters compares the idea of life purpose amongst the classical Roman Stoics with the cosmology of his research participants. Stoics such as Seneca (2008) and Marcus Aurelius (2020) advocated a kind of shrinking world. As people approached the end of life, they should withdraw from the sensual and experiential world, and any direct engagement with the world should be replaced by pure contemplation. Not surprisingly, many philosophers valorise a life whose culmination should resemble something like philosophising.

In addition to participant observation, Miller also conducted interviews, and these sometimes included a question about what research participants still wanted to do with their lives. To his surprise, given that he had never mentioned travel, the answers were dominated by a kind of ‘bucket-list’ imagination of the places these participants still wanted to visit. It was not essential to visit these places before they died, but simply that they might like to. They judiciously weighed up the potential depth of such experiences against breadth: for example, going back to the same place in France every year might be better than trying to get to China. The importance of travel was confirmed by those who mentioned that they delayed the time of their retirement until they had saved enough money, not just for living expenses but especially for travel. On its own, this was a strange finding. However, it aligns with our main research topic, which was to investigate the use and consequences of smartphones. These retired Irish people were concerned with mastering the smartphone partly because they were already expanding their use of the internet in multiple ways; these were people in their seventies listening to the music of the 1970s, seeing the potential of WhatsApp to bring back the extended family. They were frequently sharing photos, exploiting what we call the *perpetual opportunism* (Miller et al. 2021, 103-32) of the smartphone, and constantly looking up information, such as googling about health issues. In short, they saw the internet as an expanding universe with cheap entry costs that they could explore

just as they could explore the offline world as tourists. The expansion of travel and the internet has come neatly together in a short film made by Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller featuring the Ireland field site (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwKCZoyYiUc&t=22s>) about a man in his seventies who knew that, at this stage of his life, he would never get to travel to certain regions of the world. Thus, he decided to use virtual-reality goggles to 'visit' them instead.

After travel and smartphone use, a third example from our field sites in Ireland came from observations about being a grandfather (Miller and Garvey 2022). One impact of the feminist movement was that some older men now felt that they had missed out on the experience of being a father, at a time when the emphasis was largely on the role of the mother. When it came to grandparenting, while some women were wary of having to return to the 'hard labour' of childcare, men mostly welcomed this as an opportunity to engage in the experiences on which they had previously missed out. Overall, we found that the labour of grandparenting was now largely gender equal, an entirely different situation from their earlier parenting. In short, once this expanded involvement in being a grandfather was presented as a possibility, largely as a result of feminism, it was immediately taken up by these men.

All three of these examples speak to a cosmology based on the ideal of expanding the possibilities of life in one's later life. That people wanted, where possible, to increase their experience of a sensual and involved life. The internet also helped them become aware of new hobbies or how to return to previous interests. It was in this spirit that they were keen to explore swimming with dolphins, walking the pilgrim trail of the Camino de Santiago (but for walking in the sunshine more than for praying), or some new activity such as taking up a musical instrument. They sought to craft and develop themselves through growing their experiences of the world, whether knowing more about the plants they would see on a walk or using their 'age 66 and over' free travel pass to further explore Ireland. They indicated that, given they only had one life to live, it was important to make that life as fulfilling as possible through deep social relations and interesting experiences. It seemed as though they wanted to reach death with a sense that, even if they had not achieved a wealth of experience during their life, it was not for lack of trying.

This ideal of life purpose stands in almost exact opposition to the Roman Stoics. The one thing Irish retirees had no particular desire to do was to sit around and philosophise about the meaning or meaninglessness/futility of life and retreat to a world of contemplation. They had no reason to articulate an explicit life purpose. Instead, they had developed a general expansive cosmology and habitus that characterised their relationship to everything around them. As in the sub-title of Garvey and Miller's (2021) *When Life Becomes Craft*, it is the possibilities of life that are being crafted in retirement. The ethnography made clear that, to the older Irish population, an explicit ideal of life purpose would be deemed pretentious and unnecessary.

The examples from China and Ireland reveal how life purpose may remain implicit within everyday life rather than explicit. But the opposite end of our spectrum that started with the explicit life purpose of Japanese *ikigai* comes through the direct repudiation of life purpose itself. The clearest example came from the "Why We Post" (2012–2017) project, also led by Miller, which preceded the ASSA project. As part of this project, Miller undertook a study of English hospice patients; the intention was to provide advice to the hospice about the potential of new media. As part of the methodology, he talked to people about their entire network of social relations and the different types of communications media they used. The results were published as *The Comfort of People* (2017). There is a crucial difference between this population and those studied within ASSA. The hospice patients knew that they were at the end of their lives, so any reflections they might have would necessarily be largely retrospective.

In starting this research, Miller had a rather vague expectation that, because these people knew they were likely to die soon, this would result in considered reflections on the subject of life purpose. He

expected that this would be a time of profound introspection. This expectation has been fostered by many philosophical texts, including those of the Stoics, often influenced by Plato's (1993) description of the reflections of Socrates at his impending death. However, as described in *The Comfort of People* (2017), the evidence suggested something entirely different. First of all, Miller noted that the hospice director spent some time suggesting to the new patients that they should regard 'the end of life' as a life stage as valid as any prior stage. If hospice patients wanted to get married or have an art exhibition, they would be supported in doing this. The hospice was exemplary in that respect.

Most significantly, Miller observed that the hospice patients did not seem at all interested in a discussion about life purpose, insofar as it would have seemed insensitive to have taken questions about this topic any further. The hospice patients were more likely to be interested in what was on television that evening than to pontificate on some ultimate meaning of life. They preferred to discuss the everyday things of the life around them; a visit by a grandchild, finding an old recording of an opera, or going through their photographs to edit those that would be inherited.

Miller suggested an explanation for this finding. To suddenly decide there was some greater or other purpose in life would be to, in effect, repudiate the life one had led. That would hardly be a comfort at the end of life. It made more sense to affirm one's actual life by retaining the interests and concerns one had always had as part of day-to-day life. This argument suggests that, for this particular population, there seemed to be good – in fact, profound – reasons not to have anything analogous to the term 'life purpose,' which would inevitably imply a model against which an actual life might be judged. As they confronted their own death, it is entirely understandable why they may have preferred to just continue with the experience of life as they had been living it.

Conclusion

All of the volumes from the ASSA project contain a chapter about life purpose in which many different examples are discussed. For the purposes of this paper, we have reduced this to a characterisation of each field site by using a single example in order to give space for comparison between the field sites. This allowed for a structure of presentation based on the spectrum. We started with the case of explicit life purpose as found in Japanese *ikigai*. Dar al-Hawa then illustrated the consequences for life purpose based on religious beliefs and ideals. In several other field sites, ideals of life purpose were extrapolated from what seems to have become people's mission in life, such as to secure a better education for their children in Kampala, to improve the prospects of their family for Peruvian migrants in Santiago to retaining a prior work identity in São Paulo, or to taking responsibility for the reproduction of African cultural and ancestral traditions in Yaoundé. We then considered how we might extrapolate an implicit sense of life purpose through the response of older people to the smartphone in Shanghai and as an expansive cosmology in our Irish field site. We ended with the reasons why some people in an English hospice might want to repudiate any form of life purpose.

In conclusion, life purpose cannot be presumed to be a salient category. If there is any conceptual analogy to this term, it will vary considerably from one field site to another. This was evident from the methodological problem as to how to initiate an appropriate enquiry into this topic – something quite straightforward when the Japanese have a concept of *ikigai*, but not at all clear when it came to the Irish and English field sites. This conclusion helps to extend the way anthropology has repudiated any functionalist theory of religion. Contrary to the fears of post-enlightenment philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant (cited in Wood 1970) or early sociologists such as Émile Durkheim (1912), the decline of religion did not result in a kind of gap that had to be filled by some alternative idea of life purpose. In some cases, such as in Palestine, the rise of modernity has not resulted in any decline in religion itself (Aburaiya, 2009). But in places where religion has steeply declined, such as in Italy, Walton (2019) argues that her research participants saw secularisation more as an opportunity to develop a form of personal enlightenment.

The same argument applies to situations where there has been a decline in the idea of life purpose (e.g., Engelke 2016). Once again, there are those who have claimed this might cause a life crisis. There is a common colloquial term that has become part of the Western lexicon, the idea of an *existential crisis*. The phrase derives from the fears of left-bank Parisian playwrights and existentialists of the 1940s and 1950s who were also concerned that the decline of religion as life purpose would lead to a kind of nihilism. This fear was expressed in writings spanning from the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre to the playwright Samuel Beckett. However, these assumptions are repudiated by the evidence provided here. If anything, the example with which we started, that of Japan, showed that where there is a relatively clear concept of *ikigai* as life purpose, it can become burden. But it can also facilitate adaptation to new circumstances. Similarly, the example of the English hospice suggested that an explicit life purpose against which an actual life might be judged can become a burden. The concept of life purpose may be expressed through an idiom such as societal reproduction, or environmental and personal sustainability. But, as we found in the ASSA research, there is no more a functional requirement to possess a life purpose than there is to possess a religion. People may have cosmology and habitus, but these need not be formulated as ‘life purpose’ either explicitly or implicitly. The example of the English hospice patients showed that people have every right to be more concerned with what is on television that evening – a conclusion which is surely of profound importance in and of itself. But, ultimately, this paper has shown that the English example is just one end of a spectrum that has included societies that continue to take life purpose from religion, populations that have an explicit term for life purpose, and many populations where anthropologists can extrapolate implicit life purpose from the dominant concerns of those populations. Acknowledging that spectrum is the outcome of a genuinely comparative approach.

Notes

1. With regard to the materials presented in this paper, for more detailed discussions, the reader may refer to the monographs that are being published; most of these include a chapter on the topic of life purpose (e.g., Garvey and Miller 2021, 179-203; Walton 2021, 142-160).

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