

# Sense of purpose might ease diversity anxiety

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(Medical Xpress)—Envisioning an increasingly diverse America – the Census Bureau predicts ethnic minorities, combined, will constitute the majority of the U.S. population by 2050 – causes anxiety for a lot of white people.

Except, that is, whites with a defined "purpose in life," a Cornell-Carleton University psychology study has found.

"People with a greater [sense](#) of purpose are not as bothered by projections of increasing racial and [ethnic diversity](#)," says Anthony L. Burrow, assistant professor of developmental psychology in Cornell's College of Human Ecology.

With graduate students Rachel Sumner and Maclen Stanley '14 and Patrick L. Hill, a psychologist at Ottawa's Carleton University, Burrow published findings in the September 2014 online journal, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, titled "Purpose in Life as a Resource for Increasing Comfort with Ethnic Diversity." The latest study builds on 2012 experiments by Burrow and Hill, showing that white passengers on Chicago Metro trains are more comfortable when outnumbered by persons of color if they have a sense of purpose.

The researchers recruited 205 white volunteers through Amazon's Mechanical Turk survey tool. Sense of purpose was gauged by asking participants whether they agreed with statements like "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them" and "I am an active person in carrying out the plans I have set for myself." And by

asking online volunteers, who were paid 50 cents apiece for taking the survey, to put their thoughts in writing.

"We also tried to determine whether whites prefer to live in ethnically homogeneous cities or ethnically diverse places," Sumner says. "Not surprisingly, most whites said they're more comfortable living amongst other [white people](#)."

"Except when we asked, before hand, that they write briefly about their purpose in life," Stanley notes. "After articulating sense of purpose, many white participants in the online experiment were significantly more likely to prefer the more diverse city."

Says Burrow: "The year 2050 might be distant for older adults, but our children are already getting a preview of an increasingly diverse America. The start of classes this month [September 2014] marks the first time in our history that white children are not the majority in U.S. elementary and secondary schools."

With the erosion of majority status, Burrow says, "there may be a tendency for individuals to perceive diversity as threatening. For some whites, increasing diversity could mean the demise of their social influence, their values and their place in the world. Even imagining a more ethnically heterogeneous future society increases whites' fear of and anger toward ethnic minorities."

The authors venture that a sense of purpose "may go beyond improving attitudes toward diversity and may even influence decisions and behaviors. ... A sense of purpose may alleviate motivations for self-segregation that might otherwise prevail."

Anything that bolsters individuals' psychological resources – anything that emphasizes a sense of value and self-persistence – "may increase

comfort with ethnic diversity by diminishing perceptions of threat associated with it," the authors believe.

Their findings, they say, "may have implications beyond that of major life choices, such as where people choose to reside, and might also influence the types of diversity-related decisions people make in everyday life, including which co-workers to befriend or simply where to sit on the subway."

Citing previous studies by other researchers, the Cornell authors define "purpose in life" as follows:

- A self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors and provides a sense of meaning.
- An indicator of psychological well-being, physical health and longevity.
- Purpose is thought to contribute to well-being by providing a guiding framework for actualizing [life](#) goals within a larger social system.
- Purposeful individuals are oriented toward connecting with the broader world around them.
- Purpose includes an intent to persevere until one's goals are brought to fruition.
- A greater sense of purpose may help individuals conceptualize what it takes to thrive in the context of a more inclusive and diverse future.

**More information:** Anthony L. Burrow, Maclen Stanley, Rachel Sumner, and Patrick L. Hill, "Purpose in Life as a Resource for Increasing Comfort With Ethnic Diversity." *Pers Soc Psychol Bull*, September 22, 2014. [DOI: 10.1177/0146167214549540](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214549540)

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