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Derived identity, self-esteem and meaning in middle aged housewives

Barbara Van Schaik

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DERIVED IDENTITY, SELF-ESTEEM AND MEANING
IN MIDDLE AGED HOUSEWIVES

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State College
San Bernardino

by
Barbara van Schaik

June 1975

Approved by:

Chairperson

6-2-75

Date
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Psychology

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ABSTRACT

A new construct, derived identity, thought to be related to psychological distress in middle age, was defined. Central to the study was the development of a derived identity (DI) Scale for measuring this construct. The relationship of derived identity to self-esteem and meaning, two variables commonly associated with depression in middle-aged women, was investigated. The subjects were 64 randomly selected married women, half of whom were identified as housewives-at-school and half as housewives-at-home. A single questionnaire, consisting of the DI Scale, Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale and the Purpose-in-Life Test, was administered to the subjects. A t test statistical analysis showed: Housewives-at-home had significantly higher derived identity, lower self-esteem and lower meaning than housewives-at-school. Significant positive correlations were obtained for the total sample between derived identity and self-esteem and derived identity and meaning; a significant negative correlation resulted between self-esteem and meaning. Further statistical analysis also suggested that relationships between the three variables significantly departed from linearity. Implications for further research were discussed.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

According to Lopata (1971), Rossi (1965), and Rose (1961), the main occupational role of most American women is that of housewife. Housewife, as defined by Lopata, is a woman responsible for running her home, whether she performs the tasks herself or hires other people to do them. However, the middle-aged housewife, like middle-aged people in general, has been largely ignored by social scientists.

Women of all classes and races constitute the majority of the psychiatrically involved population in America (Chesler, 1972). Adult women currently comprise two-thirds of the patients in community mental health centers (Taube, 1970), and more women than men are involved in private therapy (Schofield, 1964; Bahn, 1965; Ryan, 1969). There is a higher rate of depression and hospital admissions for depression among housewives than among single or working women (Hagnell, 1966; Bart, 1971). Farberow (1961) states that 50% of all women who commit suicide and 45% of all women who attempt suicide are housewives. Seventy percent of the minor tranquilizer users and 58% of the major tranquilizer users are housewives (Braken, 1973). Thus current statistics suggest that women, and particularly housewives,
are vulnerable to psychological distress.

**Psychological Distress in Terms of Role Discontinuity**

The psychological distress is typically depression which is the most common psychiatric disorder of middle-aged housewives (Bart, 1971) and is generally manifested by feelings of sadness, loss of motivation, increased dependency, object or relationship loss, negative self-concepts, and feelings of worthlessness (Beck, 1961). Although sociological and psychological research on the middle-aged housewife is very limited, there seems to be at least some consensus regarding causal factors of housewife depression. Sociologists generally agree that our American culture is characterized by built-in discontinuities which make the socialization experience in one age period of little use in the next (Horton & Hunt, 1972; Phillips, 1970; Berger, 1963). The traditional woman is one who has been socialized to view the role of housewife as the only rewarding role for a woman (Horton & Hunt, 1972). The formative years of today's middle-aged housewife were at a time when marriage and maternity were considered the exclusive female occupation, and the extended family was the rule. The system provided the woman with the necessary role models and the continuing source of esteem and affirmation even though significant others, primarily children, dropped out. In the complex, rapidly changing society
of today, the housewife is caught in the narrow nuclear family with no continuum of roles when children leave home and housekeeping responsibilities diminish. Moreover, this traditional middle-aged housewife has no prior learning to assist her in the transition from one status to another; she has no audience for her continuing performance and, as a result, there is little to sustain her identity. The discontinuity of appropriate roles is what Becker (1964) claims to be the root of anxiety in the middle-aged housewife, while Bart (1971) ascribes depression to total identification with the maternal role and subsequent loss of esteem. Monsour (1963) emphasizes the middle age identity crisis and attributes the crisis period to loss of significant roles, followed by loss of self-confidence.

Psychological Distress in Terms of Role Dissatisfaction

In addition to role discontinuity, housewife depression has also been studied from the standpoint of role satisfaction. For example, Hauenstein (1972) in a study of role satisfaction between housewives and working wives, found that stress was related to role dissatisfaction in housewives, whereas the stress in working wives was related to job attitudes. This finding was supported by Weissman, Pincus, Radding, Lawrence and Seigel (1973) who found that work performance was less impaired for depressive women employed outside the home than for those women who were
housewives. In Bossard and Boll's (1955) study of large families, a significant decrease in satisfaction was found in the middle-age group as opposed to the younger age group. This was further supported in later research by Blood and Wolfe (1960) and Blood (1967) where findings indicated that the middle periods in the life cycle were characterized by decreases in satisfaction. Satisfaction in the latter three studies was defined as a subjective condition in which an individual experiences a certain degree of attainment of a goal or desire. In Seidenberg's (1973) study of corporate wives, it was the middle-aged wife who constituted his psychiatric population rather than the younger women. Thus, the literature consistently indicates that depression occurs more frequently in the middle-aged housewife than in employed housewives of any age group, and that this depression is related to role satisfaction.

**Psychological Distress in Terms of Object Loss**

Another way in which housewife depression has been studied involves depression viewed in terms of object loss. The depressive effects of loss were early observed by Freud (1925) and Abraham (1927), but these traditional psychoanalytic views of object loss were generally associated with death. However, more recent investigations have been concerned with loss of relationships and, more specifically, loss of significant others. Concomitant with loss
of significant others appears to be loss of self-esteem, which Rose (1961) calls the "mutilated self."

One of the most frequently documented losses of significant others is the condition resulting from the "empty nest" syndrome, defined as the temporal association of clinical depression with cessation of child rearing (Deykin, Jacobson, Klerman and Solomon, 1966). The empty nest syndrome was also found related to depression by Bart (1971) who found 82% of her sample of middle-aged depressed housewives experiencing maternal role loss, with loss of self-esteem repeatedly documented in her interview data. Bart described her sample as over-identified mothers, the "complete mothers," who have total identification with the maternal role and whose identity is derived from a limited number of significant others. In a later study of social adjustment in women, Paykel, Weissman, Prusoff and Tonks, (1971) compared depressed women with a nondepressed population and found that feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness were significantly higher for depressed than normal women on the Social Adjustment Scale.

Research findings indicate that the depressive effects of loss of relationship is also experienced when the middle-aged corporate wife is increasingly left alone by her career-involved travelling husband (Seidenberg, 1973). Feelings of rejection, loneliness, and worthlessness characterize her depression and can become even more acute if
she is a suburban dweller where she can experience considerable social isolation. It is interesting to note that similar conditions seem to exist in other countries as well. Recent studies in Japan indicate sharp increases in suicide among suburban housewives whose husbands are absent much of the time (Shailer, 1972). While some depression is associated with absentee corporate husbands, depression can also be caused by the frequent and inevitable move and transfer demands placed on families by business corporations (Seidenberg, 1972). Whereas frequent moves of successful businessmen generally enhance the male's identity, inequities exist in transferring credentials for the wife as a result of social conditions. The result can be her shattered identity. Additional evidence attesting to the crippling effects of moving is given by Weissman and Paykel (1972) who suggest that the middle-aged housewife's identity is continuously challenged when she loses community status and is separated from friends.

In summary, therefore, many housewives are seen clinically in their third to fifth decade, chronically depressed and frequently addicted to tranquilizers and barbiturates. The main occupation of most women is that of housewife, and it is also traditionally viewed as the only rewarding role for women. Some depressed women appear to have total identification with this role, and they are women whose identity appears to be derived from a limited number of significant
others. Furthermore, there appears to be some general agreement that the possible loss of these significant others constitutes an important causal factor for housewife depression, although the data reviewed here are mainly correlational. It would appear at least possible, however, that the housewife's loss of significant others, followed by loss of her most valued role, results in identity crises and losses of self-esteem which under the existential framework are concomitant with loss of meaning or purpose in life.

**Concept of Derived Identity**

What current research findings seem to indicate is that middle-aged housewives share the characteristics of over-identification with a limited number of significant others. Their sense of self seems to be not only dependent upon, but derived from these significant others. The literature is replete with references to identity derived from others, but nowhere has it been objectively observed or measured. The first purpose of this research, therefore, is to develop a measure of derived identity which will be defined as a type of identity in which one's sense of self is maximally dependent upon, and transcended by, the behavior and accomplishments of a limited number of significant others. Most current conceptualizations of mental health include the notion of autonomy and a sense of self not
derived from significant others. While there is no direct evidence that derived identity is related to self-esteem, a consistent trend seems to suggest an association (Deykin et al., 1966; Bart, 1971; Seidenberg, 1973; Weissman, 1973). The second purpose of this research, therefore, will be to look into the relationship between derived identity and self-esteem and meaning. While previous investigators have compared the employed housewife with the housewife at home (Hauenstein, 1972; Monsour, 1963; Paykell et al., 1971; Weissman et al., 1971), comparisons in this study will be made between housewives at school and housewives at home.

Research Hypotheses

As the foregoing discussion has indicated, several findings from earlier research seem sufficiently favorable to serve as a basis for making the following hypotheses in this study:

Derived identity will be significantly higher for housewives at home than for housewives at school.

Self-esteem will be significantly lower for housewives at home than for housewives at school.

Meaning will be significantly lower for housewives at home than for housewives at school.
METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 64 women, 32 of whom were housewives attending San Bernardino State College. The remaining 32 were women living in Riverside, California.

The mean age of the subjects was 43.64 years and their mean educational level was 15.10 years. Each subject had an average of 3.01 children whose mean age was 16.70 years. A summary of these and other descriptive characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Subjects at School

Subjects at school were obtained from two sources: Women students enrolled in four community health courses from the School of Nursing and women students enrolled in four basic foundations courses from the School of Education, California State College, San Bernardino.

Subjects were then selected as housewives at school by the following criteria: (1) Attend school four or more hours per week, (2) currently married, (3) between 35 and 55 years of age, and (4) one or more children who are either in school, finished school and living at home, or finished school and living away from home.

The final 32 subjects-at-school consisted of all
Table 1
Descriptive Characteristics of Housewives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Sample Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=32)</td>
<td>(N=32)</td>
<td>(N=32)</td>
<td>(N=32)</td>
<td>(N=32)</td>
<td>(N=32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40.62</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>40.62</td>
<td>21.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>21.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>21.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>21.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53.12</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>53.12</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.12</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>28.12</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>56.25</td>
<td>59.37</td>
<td>56.25</td>
<td>59.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>9.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
those women who met the above criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

Subjects at Home

Subjects at home were obtained from a population consisting of 1600 households from two residential areas in the city of Riverside, California. The areas covered 2 1/2 square miles, constituted approximately five percent of the city's population and were classified as upper-middle class by the city's Board of Realtors.

Ten households on each of ten streets were randomly selected from the two residential areas. From these 100 households, women were identified as housewives at home by the following criteria: (1) Not employed for 12 or more hours per week and not attending school for four or more hours per week, (2) currently married, (3) between 35 and 55 years of age, and (4) one or more children who are either in school, finished school and living at home, or finished school and living away from home.

The final sample of 32 subjects-at-home consisted of the first 32 women who met the above criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

Materials

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was constructed which consisted of three instruments designed to measure the following.
Derived Identity

Derived Identity was measured by the Derived Identity Scale (DI) which consisted of 20 items developed specifically for this study as a measure of identity which is maximally dependent upon, and transcended by, the behavior and accomplishments of a limited number of significant others. There were seven possible responses to each statement: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Mostly Agree, (3) Somewhat Agree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat Disagree, (6) Mostly Disagree, and (7) Strongly Disagree. Half of the items were stated in such a way that agreement indicated derived identity (positive items), whereas the remaining half of the items were stated in such a way that agreement corresponded to autonomous identity (negative items). Table 2 presents the ten positive items, whereas Table 3 presents the ten negative items.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SE), which is a ten-item Guttman scale aimed at measuring overall or global self-regard. High self-esteem, as measured by the SE scale, means that the individual respects herself and considers herself worthy, although she does not necessarily consider herself better than others. Low self-esteem individuals lack respect for themselves, reporting rejection and self-dissatisfaction (Rosenberg, 1965). Evidence for construct validity of the SE scale is
# Table 2

**Positive Items Indicating Derived Identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Most of my entertaining is limited to my husband's work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I believe that all a woman should ask for is a happy marriage, children, and a home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I often go to social affairs because I know they are important to my husband's career (morning coffees, wife's luncheons, cocktail parties, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I feel my husband is more knowledgeable about the world than I am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I would certainly stop some of my outside activities if they interfered with those of my family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>A woman should decide to work outside the home only if her husband thinks it's a good idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I feel important when people ask me what my husband does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Marriage has given me a great sense of security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I feel my husband's and children's interests are more important than mine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I feel the most important consideration about moving is whether it will advance my husband's career.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3
Negative Items Indicating Autonomous Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I enjoy taking weekend trips by myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I do not think of my husband's successes as mine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Being a wife and mother has not given me a sense of fulfillment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Only a few of my friends are the wives of my husband's business associates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>When I married, I had a sense of losing something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I don't feel sorry for the housewife who remains childless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I think kids' activities put unfair demands on my spare time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I don't think I should sacrifice my own interests for the sake of my children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I usually make time for my own special interests in spite of my family's demands on my time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I wouldn't mind going to a Convention (e.g., P.T.A.) without my husband.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
provided by Wylie (1974).

Meaning

Meaning was measured by the 20-item Purpose-in-Life Test (PIL) developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) as a measure of Frankl's "existential vacuum" concept (Frankl, 1969). Existential vacuum is a descriptive term for what results when an individual is unable to find a meaning in life or a meaning by which to give his or her life a sense of unique identity. Evidence for the construct validity of the PIL scale is provided by Crumbaugh (1968).

Procedure

On a voluntary basis and with informed consent, subjects-at-home were individually administered the combined set of instruments, whereas the subjects-at-school were group administered the questionnaire. All subjects were also asked to provide the following demographic information: Number of hours employed or going to school per week, marital status, age, number and age and status of children, and number of years of education.

Scoring

The SE and PIL scales were scored according to scoring procedures established by the test authors. The DI scale was scored by the following method. Items in the positive direction, indicating derived identity, were scored \( i \)
(Strongly Agree), 6 (Mostly Agree), 5 (Somewhat Agree), 4 (Neutral), 3 (Somewhat Disagree), 2 (Mostly Disagree), and 1 (Strongly Disagree). Items in the negative direction, suggesting autonomous identity, were scored in the reverse order. Strongly Agree responses receiving a weight of 1 and Strongly Disagree responses a score of 7. DI scores could range from 20 to 140.

The SE scale was scored in such a manner that a maximum score of 6 indicated a low self-esteem, and a minimum score of 0 indicated high self-esteem.

PIL scores could range from a maximum of 140, indicating a definite purpose in life, to a minimum score of 20, indicating a lack of clear purpose and meaning. The PIL also contained a set of seven sentence completion items, but subject responses to these items were not included in the statistical analysis.
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for the three variables under study for the total sample. As can be seen, the maximum range of possible scores was obtained for the SE measure, and the obtained PIL and DI scores are close to the maximum possible range.

Table 4
Total Sample Descriptive Statistics for Derived Identity, Self-Esteem and Purpose-in-Life Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity (N = 64)</td>
<td>77.01</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>19.38</td>
<td>39-129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem (N = 64)</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life (N = 64)</td>
<td>102.37</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>20.88</td>
<td>40-131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distributions for each of the three measures are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3. While the distribution of DI scores approximate a normal distribution, both the SE and PIL score distributions are markedly skewed. The
Figure 1. Frequency distribution of Derived Identity scores for 64 subjects.
Figure 2. Frequency distribution of Self-Esteem scores for 64 subjects.
Figure 3. Frequency distribution of Purpose-in-Life scores for 64 subjects.

\[ M = 102.37 \]
\[ SD = 20.88 \]
\[ Mdn = 108 \]
SE score distribution is positively skewed with 78% of the scores falling from 0-2, indicating high self-esteem. The PIL score distribution is negatively skewed with more subjects having high score (high meaning) than low scores (low meaning).

Tests of Research Hypotheses

Table 5 presents the results of the student's t test statistical analysis comparing housewives-at-school with housewives-at-home on the three variables under study. As can be seen, clear support was obtained for all three research hypotheses.

Table 5
Statistical Differences Between the Means of the School Group and Home Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td>64.59</td>
<td>13.98</td>
<td>89.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td>111.38</td>
<td>11.77</td>
<td>93.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* < .05
** < .0005 1 tailed, 62 df.

The mean DI score obtained by the housewives-at-home is significantly higher than that obtained by the
housewives-at-school group ($p < .0005$), supporting the first hypothesis which predicted that derived identity would be significantly higher for housewives-at-home than for housewives-at-school. The second hypothesis, which predicted that housewives-at-home would have significantly lower self-esteem than housewives-at-school, was also supported. Finally, the mean PIL score obtained by the housewives-at-home is significantly lower than that obtained by the housewives-at-school ($p < .0005$), supporting the third hypothesis, which predicted that meaning would be significantly lower for women at home than for women at school.

**Correlational Analysis**

Although no specific hypotheses were made regarding the interrelationships of the three variables under study, a Pearson Product Moment correlational analysis was conducted to determine the extent of linear relationship between all possible pairs of measures for the total sample and within each sample group. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6.

The significant positive correlations for the total sample between derived identity and self-esteem, and between derived identity and purpose-in-life indicate that high derived identity is associated with low self-esteem and high purpose-in-life. The significant negative correlation for the total sample between self-esteem and purpose-in-life indicates that subjects who scored low on self-esteem
Table 6

Pearson Product Moment Coefficients Between Derived Identity, Self-Esteem, and Purpose-in-Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Pair</th>
<th>Total (N = 64)</th>
<th>Home (N = 32)</th>
<th>School (N = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>.306*</td>
<td>.458**</td>
<td>-.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td>.400**</td>
<td>-.260</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.643***</td>
<td>-.630***</td>
<td>-.605***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001
also tended to score low on purpose or meaning in life.

**Additional Analyses**

The significant positive correlation between derived identity and purpose-in-life, indicating that women with high derived identity have high purpose, is contrary to what would be expected if derived identity is associated with low self-esteem, and low self-esteem is associated with low purpose-in-life. However, an examination of scattergrams for each variable pair suggested a more complex relationship between these variables which appear to be nonlinear. Therefore, zeta values (Arkin, 1964) for the total sample, the school group, and the home group were computed between derived identity and self-esteem and purpose-in-life. These results are illustrated in Table 7 and indicate nonlinear relationships between all three variables within each group and for the total sample.

The suggestion of nonlinearity warranted the computation of the Correlation Ratio (eta) in addition to the Pearson Correlation. Table 8 presents the Correlation Ratios between derived identity and self-esteem, derived identity and purpose-in-life, and self-esteem and purpose-in-life.

As can be seen, all but one of the correlation ratios computed were statistically significant, indicating that the relationships between the three variables may be
### Table 7
Zeta Values Among Derived Identity, Self-Esteem and Purpose-in-Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total (N = 64)</th>
<th>Home (N = 32)</th>
<th>School (N = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>.792*</td>
<td>.729*</td>
<td>.864*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td>.126*</td>
<td>-.058*</td>
<td>.770*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td>.508*</td>
<td>.483*</td>
<td>.612*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Nonlinear when zeta ≠ 0 (Arkon, 1964)*

### Table 8
Correlation Ratios Among Derived Identity, Self-Esteem and Purpose-in-Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total (N = 64)</th>
<th>Home (N = 32)</th>
<th>School (N = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>.941*</td>
<td>.969*</td>
<td>.955*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derived Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td>.535*</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>.878*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-in-Life</td>
<td>.960*</td>
<td>.938*</td>
<td>.989*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001, df 1,62*
curvilinear rather than linear.

To determine whether the covariance between the three variables under study is best approximated by a linear or nonlinear function would require a statistical trend analysis. Since the interrelationship between variables is not related directly to any of the research hypotheses, an additional trend analysis was decided to be beyond the scope of the present research.
DISCUSSION

Derived Identity

The major focus of the present research was the notion of derived identity, defined as that type of identity in which one's sense of self is maximally dependent upon, and transcended by, the behavior and accomplishments of a limited number of significant other people. A woman with high derived identity is, therefore, a woman whose self-concept is dependent upon the behavior and accomplishments of other people and, perhaps, more significantly, whose own sense of personal worth may also be derived from the accomplishments of others rather than her own achievements.

Because the traditional housewife role seems to be a role which encourages women to define themselves in terms of the accomplishments of husband and children rather than their own achievements, it was hypothesized that a group of housewives-at-home would manifest a significantly greater sense of self-reported derived identity than a comparable group of housewives-at-school because the latter group have supplemented their traditional housewife role with another role more relevant to the gratification of needs for autonomous accomplishment and self-fulfillment. This first hypothesis was clearly supported in that housewives-at-home,
as predicted, manifested significantly more derived identity than housewives-at-school.

As previously indicated, derived identity was measured by a 20-item scale specifically constructed for this study. The selection of items was guided by the notion of an identity continuum with derived identity and autonomous identity as the two extremes. It was thought that the woman who has totally internalized the singular role of wife and mother, would adopt values and behaviors associated with derived identity. On the other hand, women who subscribed to a plurality of roles, would view the traditional values as inappropriate and no longer applicable; they would reject the former and opt for autonomous identity. While it was thought that most women would embrace some aspects of both extremes, a 7-point scale was used to allow women several degrees of choice regarding each identity item. It is interesting to note here that the approximately normal distribution of scores for the total sample on the DI scale corresponds to previous research findings regarding the contemporary views of middle-aged women regarding their sources of identity because about 50% of women agree that occupations apart from one's role as wife and mother are necessary for personal fulfillment (Fand, 1955; Gump, 1972; Porter, 1967; Steinman, 1963).

An additional finding regarding DI scores for the
total sample is relevant here. Most subjects were informally interviewed after completion of the questionnaire to identify feelings and reactions elicited by the questionnaire and to answer any questions raised by subjects regarding the purpose of the research. While reactions to the questionnaire varied from subject to subject, there was a definite consistency in the comments of subjects to the questionnaire in general and derived identity scale in particular.

When the notion of derived identity was explained to these middle-aged women, they were quick to grasp its meaning and able to respond to it, sometimes rather poignantly. For many, it was a rare opportunity to express some private fears of "being passed by"; for most, it was a problem with no solution. The overall feelings were those of being caught between the values they had been raised with which seemed to be no longer applicable, and a new contemporary set of values for which they were groping; the words "double-bind" and "betwixt and between" were frequently used. It is significant to note that this underlying feeling of helplessness was expressed only by the women at home.

Some of the DI scale items, such as, "I enjoy taking weekend trips by myself," "I often go to social affairs because I know they are important to my husband's career," "I feel my husband's and children's achievements are more
important than mine," "I feel the most important consideration about moving is whether it will advance my husband's career," provoked what appeared to be repressed anger. The anger was usually followed by an eagerness to relate experiences pertinent to those and other subjects. One of the most frequent remarks was in the form of rewording an item, such as, "It's my husband and children who feel their achievements are more important than mine."

Comments by the subjects also suggested that their responses to the DI scale may have been more "honest" than their responses to the SE and PIL measures, which seemed to elicit more of a social desirability response set than did the DI scale. One woman requested to redo the questionnaire after the interview, with the comment, "This time I'll do that last part honestly."

**Self-Esteem and Purpose-in-Life**

The second and third research hypotheses under investigation predicted that housewives-at-home would manifest significantly lower self-reported self-esteem and purpose-in-life than housewives-at-school. Both hypotheses were strongly supported. Moreover, both of these findings are relevant to the previously cited research on depression, the most common psychiatric disorder of middle-aged housewives. Although no direct measure was used in this study, low self-esteem and a lack of purpose or meaning in life
are both characteristics or symptoms of depression. Thus, this study provides at least indirect support for the hypothesis that women who are restricted to the traditional housewife role are more vulnerable to the symptoms of depression than are their counterparts who have supplemented their traditional role with other roles not directly dependent upon husband or children.

**Relationship between Derived Identity and Self-Esteem**

While no hypotheses were formulated regarding how the three variables under investigation in this study would interrelate, the present research was guided by the underlying assumption that high derived identity would be related to low self-esteem and purpose-in-life. This assumption was made despite the fact that previous research, while frequently acknowledging that identity problems in middlecence may contribute to depression, has not directly studied the relationship between housewife identity problems and depressive symptomatology. However, a clear implication from previous research findings is that depressed middle-aged women share a common characteristic of overidentification with a limited number of significant others, suggesting a possible link between derived identity and depression.

When derived identity scores were correlated with self-esteem scores for the total sample and then separately
for each sample group, derived identity was found to be significantly related to self-esteem for both the total group and the home sample. Moreover, the direction of the relationship supported the assumption that higher derived identity is associated with lower self-esteem. This relationship was also highest for the sample of housewives-at-home which is interesting in view of Bart's (1971) findings that depression in middle-aged housewives is associated with the experience of maternal role loss. The findings of this study suggest that low self-esteem can apparently occur in the absence of maternal role loss because only 26% of the total sample had children who had already left home. Thus, diminished self-esteem, one symptom of depression, can clearly be experienced by housewives-at-home who have yet to experience the "empty nest" syndrome.

It should be noted here that the measure of self-esteem used in the present study resulted in a definitely negatively skewed score distribution for the total sample in that the majority of subjects' scores clustered in the score range indicative of high self-esteem. Two reasons can be suggested for the skewness of the SE score distribution. First, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale consists of only 10 items, and the SE scores can only range from 0-6. Because of the limited number of items and restricted score range, the Rosenberg Scale is apparently prone to a ceiling effect. Secondly, items that comprise the scales are
"obvious" rather than "subtle" measures of self-esteem, which means that anyone responding to the Rosenberg items should have no difficulty ascertaining what the items are measuring. When item content is "obvious" and when such content is stated in a negative direction as far as social desirability is concerned, the possibility exists that subjects will give the socially desirable response to the items rather than an accurate self-report. Informal interview comments obtained from subjects after completion of the questionnaire suggested that at least some of the women in the present sample were faking their responses to the SE scale in the socially desirable direction. It is possible, given these problems with the SE scale used, that the relationship between derived identity and self-esteem is somewhat attenuated in the present study.

A final note on the statistical relationship between derived identity and self-esteem concerns the finding of a significant nonlinear relationship between the two variables for the total sample and within each housewife group considered separately. Without further statistical analysis in the form of a step-wise multiple regression analysis, it is impossible to determine whether the relationship between derived identity and self-esteem is best accounted for by a linear or nonlinear function. However, the finding of a significant curvilinear trend does suggest that the relationship between these two variables may be more complex.
than a linear function. Theoretically, at least, it is possible that the relationship between derived identity and self-esteem is best described as an inverted-U function, which would mean that low self-esteem is associated with either high or low derived identity and that high self-esteem is associated with a moderate amount of derived identity.

**Relationship of Derived Identity and Purpose-in-Life**

Derived identity and purpose-in-life were found to be significantly related in the total sample only. Within each sample group, no significant relationship was found between these two variables. For the total sample, high derived identity was significantly associated with high purpose-in-life which is opposite to what was expected. While the reasons for this unexpected relationship are not entirely clear, two possible explanations should now be mentioned. First, when subjects were informally interviewed after completion of the questionnaire, their comments suggested that their responses to the Purpose-in-Life test may have been influenced by a motivation to present themselves favorably or in a socially desirable way. Moreover, this response set seemed to be most evident for the sample of housewives-at-home whose responses to Part 1 were often incongruent with their sentence completion responses to Part II of the PIL. An illustrative example here is one housewife-at-home who rated her personal
existence as highly meaningful on Part 1, but who then responded with, "I have no idea," to the sentence completion item "The whole purpose of my life is ____." Another example is a woman who indicated that she had achieved many of her life goals on Part 1, but in a sentence completion item this same woman wrote that "I have achieved nothing." Response discrepancies such as these suggest that subjects possibly were distorting their responses to Part 1 of the PIL, which could account for the failure to find the expected relationship between derived identity and purpose-in-life. A second possible reason for this unexpected finding concerns the fact that additional correlational analysis indicated a significant nonlinear relationship between derived identity and purpose-in-life for the total sample, as well as for each sample group considered separately. It is possible that the relationship between these two variables is curvilinear, although the shape of the function awaits further research.

**Relationship of Self-Esteem and Purpose-in-Life**

Self-esteem and purpose-in-life were found to be significantly related in each housewife group and for the total sample. Low self-esteem was significantly correlated with low purpose or meaning-in-life. This result is an interesting one because it is consistent with Crumbaugh and Maholick's (1964) findings regarding a relationship between low PIL scores and depression. It should be noted that 31%
of the housewives-at-home obtained PIL scores indicating a lack of purpose or meaning-in-life which, as previously discussed, is one symptom of depression. Moreover, only 3% of housewives-at-school obtained PIL scores suggesting a lack of meaning in life. If the PIL measure is a significant correlate of depression, then these findings again provide indirect support for the findings of previous investigators regarding depression and the traditional housewife role.

**Limitations of the Study**

The control of all extraneous variables was by no means achieved in this study. For instance, an accurate determination of the socioeconomic level of the women in school was difficult to establish, creating the possibility that socioeconomic differences existed between the two housewife samples. Secondly, housewives-at-home received an individual administration of the questionnaire whereas housewives-at-school completed the questionnaire in a group setting. While it is impossible to determine what effect this procedural difference had on obtained results, it is possible that the housewives-at-school felt more anonymous as part of a group than their at-home counterparts. If the group administration enhanced feelings of subject anonymity, this might possibly account for the greater amount of test-taking defensiveness observed in housewives-at-home.
Finally, interpretation of results should take into account the small sample size used in the present study, as well as the fact that housewives-at-school were enrolled in academic programs associated with traditional roles for women. Thus, the housewives-at-school cannot be considered representative of middle-aged women students, although the two disciplines do contain the highest percentage of middle-aged women students on the California State College, San Bernardino, campus.

**Implications for Further Research**

1. Further statistical analyses with the DI scale should be undertaken with the focus on step-wise multiple regression and item analyses, both split-half and test-retest reliability studies, and validity studies.

2. Comparison of derived identity with a more direct measure of depression.

3. Expansion of the present DI scale to include a comparable scale appropriate for middle-aged men, the use of which could then be incorporated into subsequent research pertaining to sex roles.

4. Comparisons of the degree of association between derived identity in women and men and other variables, e.g., masculinity-femininity, dependency, hostility, and satisfaction.

5. Comparison of degrees of association between the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and other measures of self-esteem.
APPENDIX

The following is a study which is being conducted by Barbara van Schaik, graduate student, Psychology Department, California State College, San Bernardino.

The study is concerned with women and it is hoped that your participation will contribute to our mutual knowledge of the American housewife, who is rarely researched.

The questionnaires are designed to measure how the woman pursues her occupation and how she feels while being actively engaged in that role.

The information required will take about 20 minutes of your time. In order to assure you complete privacy, please do not give any name, address or identification of any kind.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete the following items.

1. AGE _____ yrs. 2. CURRENTLY MARRIED: yes ______ no ______
3. # OF COMPLETED SCHOOL YEARS ______
4. DO YOU NOW ATTEND SCHOOL 4 OR MORE HOURS PER WEEK: yes ______ no ______
5. ARE YOU NOW EMPLOYED 12 OR MORE HOURS PER WEEK: yes ______ no ______
6. DO YOU HAVE 1 OR MORE CHILDREN: yes ______ no ______
7. AGES OF CHILDREN ______
8. # OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL ______
9. # OF CHILDREN FINISHED SCHOOL, LIVING AT HOME ______
10. # OF CHILDREN FINISHED SCHOOL, LIVING AWAY FROM HOME ______

For each of the following statements, circle the number which most nearly applies to you right now, today......just how it is for you. Because this is an exploratory type of survey, there certainly are no right or wrong answers. Please note that the numbers extend from one extreme to the opposite. 'Neutral' implies no judgement either way; try to use this rating as little as possible.

1. Most of my entertaining is limited to my husband's work associates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>mostly agree</td>
<td>somewhat agree</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>somewhat disagree</td>
<td>mostly disagree</td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>mostly agree</td>
<td>somewhat agree</td>
<td>agree</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>somewhat disagree</td>
<td>mostly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I enjoy taking weekend trips by myself.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I believe that all a woman should ask for is a happy marriage, children, and a home.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I do not think of my husband's successes as mine.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I often go to social affairs because I know they are important to my husband's career, (morning coffees, wife's luncheons, cocktail parties, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Being a wife and mother has not given me a sense of fulfillment.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I feel my husband is more knowledgeable about the world than I am.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Only a few of my friends are the wives of my husband's business associates.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I would certainly stop some of my outside activities if they interfered with those of my family.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>When I married, I had a sense of losing something.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>A woman should decide to work outside the home only if her husband thinks it's a good idea.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I don't feel sorry for the housewife who remains childless.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I think kids activities put unfair demands on my spare time.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I feel important when people ask me what my husband does.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 15. | I don't think I should sacrifice my own interests for the sake of
my children.

1. I feel my husband's and children's achievements are more important than mine.

2. I feel the most important consideration about moving is whether it will advance my husband's career.

3. I wouldn't mind going to a Convention (e.g., P.T.A., etc.) without my husband.


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1 strongly agree 2 agree 3 disagree 4 strongly disagree

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

2. At times I think I am no good at all.

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
   1  2  3  4

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
   1  2  3  4

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
    1  2  3  4

1. I am usually:
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   completely (neutral) exuberant,
   bored enthusiastic

2. Life to me seems:
   7  6  5  4  3  2  1
   always completely
   exciting routine

3. In life I have:
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   no goals or very clear goals
   aims at all and aims

4. My personal existence is:
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   utterly meaningless very purposeful
   without purpose and meaningful

5. Every day is:
   7  6  5  4  3  2  1
   constantly new exactly the same
   and different

6. If I could choose, I would:
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   prefer never to have been like nine more lives
   born just like this one

7. After retiring, I would:
   7  6  5  4  3  2  1
   do some of the loaf completely
   exciting things I the rest of my life
   have always wanted to

8. In achieving life goals I have:
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   made no progress progressed to
   whatever complete fulfillment
9. My life is:
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   empty, filled
   only with despair
   running over with exciting good things

10. If I should die today, I would feel that my life has been:
   7 6 5 4 3 2 1
   very worthwhile
   completely worthless

11. In thinking of my life, I:
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   often wonder
   why I exist
   always see a reason for my being here

12. As I view the world in relation to my life, the world:
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   completely
   confuses me
   fits meaningfully with my life

13. I am a:
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   very irresponsible
   person
   very responsible
   person

14. Concerning man's freedom to make his own choices, I believe man is:
   7 6 5 4 3 2 1
   absolutely free
   to make all life choices.
   completely bound by limitations of heredity and environment

15. With regard to death, I am:
   7 6 5 4 3 2 1
   prepared and unafraid
   unprepared and unafraid

16. With regard to suicide, I have:
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   thought of it seriously as a way out
   never given it a second thought

17. I regard my ability to find meaning, purpose, or mission in life as:
   7 6 5 4 3 2 1
   very great
   practically none

18. My life is:
   7 6 5 4 3 2 1
   in my hands and I am in control of it
   out of my hands and controlled by external factors
19. Facing my daily tasks is:
   7 6 5 4 3 2 1
   a source of pleasure and satisfaction
   a painful and boring experience

20. I have discovered:
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   no mission or purpose in life
   clear-cut goals and a satisfying life purpose

Make complete sentences of each of the following phrases. Work rapidly, filling in the blanks with the first thing that pops into your mind.

1. More than anything, I want
2. My life is
3. I hope I can
4. I have achieved
5. My highest aspiration
6. The most hopeless thing
7. The whole purpose of my life

I thank you very much for all your efforts in filling in these items. If you should be interested in any results, or if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.
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