

Relationship Specific Meaning in Life (MIL) Buffers Against Fear of Mortality

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Introduction

Meaning in life (MIL) is defined as the feeling that one's life has coherence, purpose, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). In the context of close relationships, research has found that MIL is strongly associated with increased feelings of social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Those who experience social rejection, however, report feeling that their life is meaningless (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003).

From the perspective of terror management theory, close relationships are important as they serve as a way to imbue life with meaning by creating a buffer against existential threat (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002; Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). For example, following mortality salience, people are likely to initiate interactions with others, express heightened satisfaction and commitment in their romantic relationships, and express heightened levels of forgiveness with others.

The present research examined the associative link between mortality concerns, relationship MIL (Hadden & Knee, 2016), and satisfaction/commitment within people's romantic partners. It was hypothesized that increased death awareness would lead to a greater pursuit of MIL in people's relationships with their romantic partner. Heightened relationship MIL, in turn, was expected to increase positive couple outcomes (i.e., relationship satisfaction & commitment).

Method

- 369 participants (298 female) took part in the study. Ages ranged from 17-43 years old ($M_{age} = 19.34$).
- Participants were asked to complete a lexical decision task to assess death-related concerns (e.g., categorizing skull, kill, grave, etc. as being a "word" vs. "non-word"). Faster response times were indicative of greater death-thought accessibility (DTA).
- Everyone completed a 5-item measure of relationship-specific MIL, which was amended from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). For example, "When I am with my romantic partner, I understand my life's meaning" and "When I am with my romantic partner, I have discovered a satisfying life purpose" ($\alpha = .90$).

Method (cont.)

- Next, participants completed measures of relationship satisfaction (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship" and "Our relationship makes me happy;" $\alpha = .94$) and commitment (e.g., "I want our relationship to last for a very long time" and "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner;" $\alpha = .94$; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Results

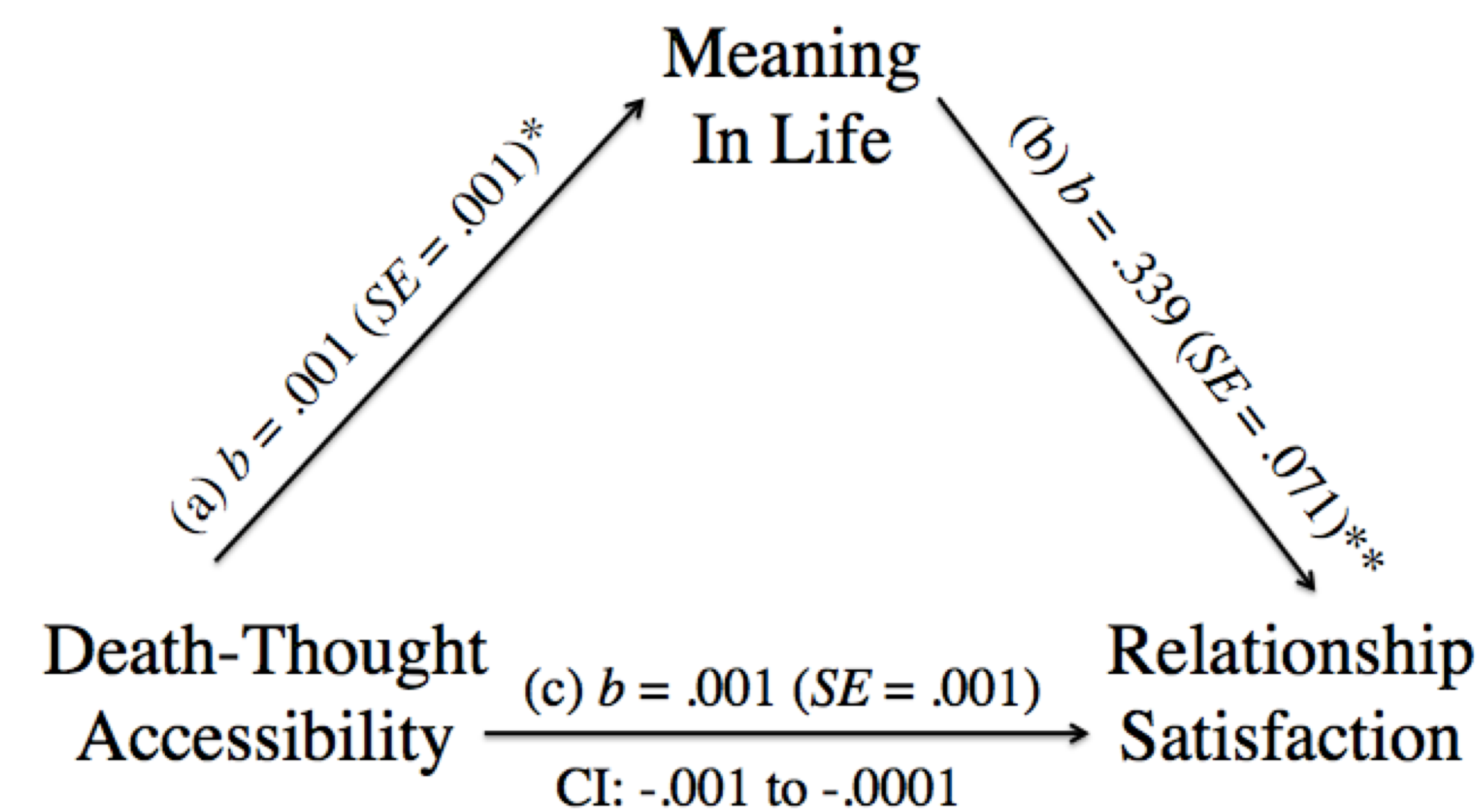


Figure 1. The indirect effect of DTA on satisfaction through MIL. In the path model, * indicates significance at $p \leq .05$ and ** indicates significance at $p \leq .01$.

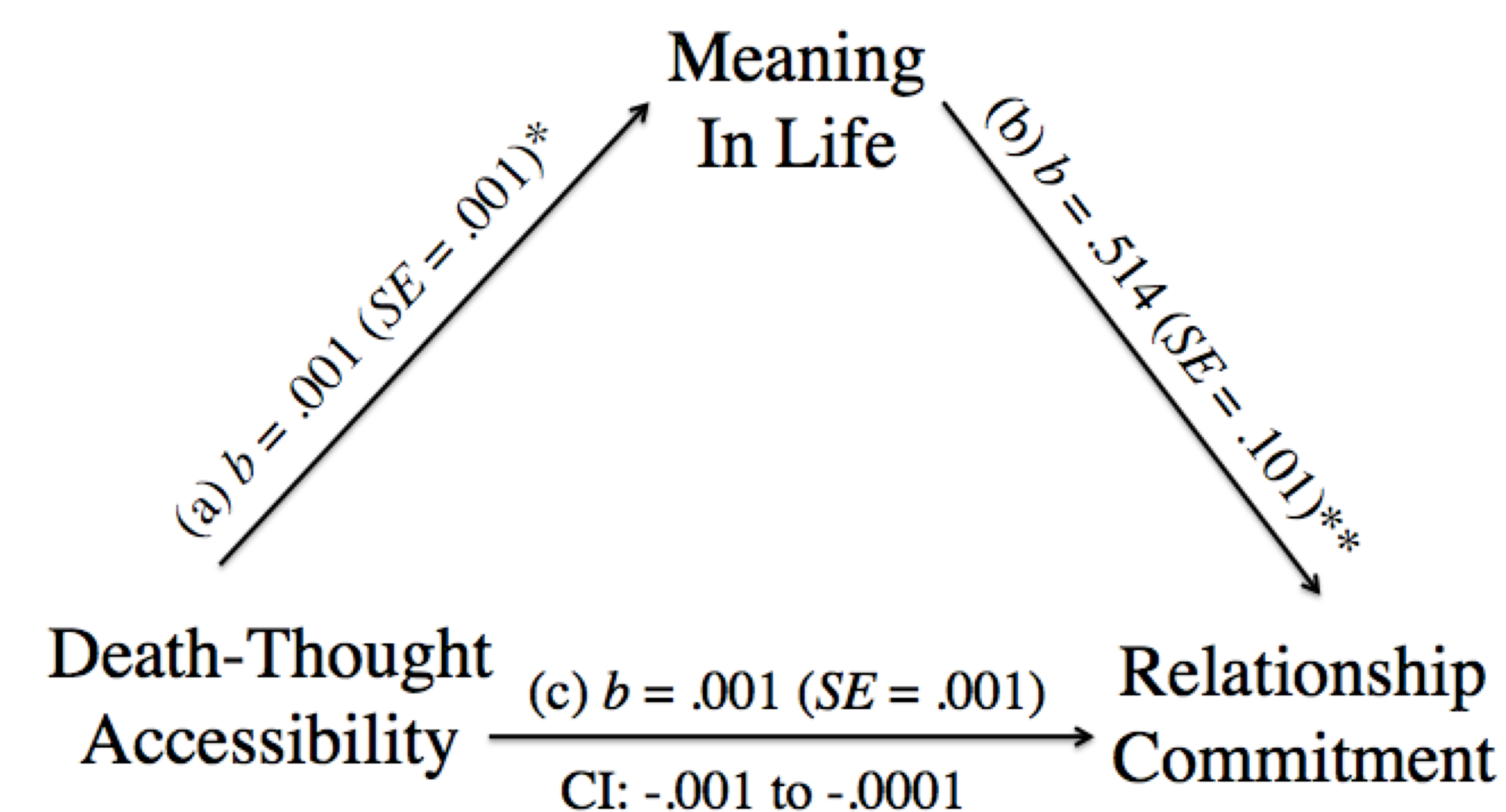


Figure 2. The indirect effect of DTA on commitment through MIL. In the path model, * indicates significance at $p \leq .05$ and ** indicates significance at $p \leq .01$.

Results (cont.)

- Analyses using PROCESS (Model 4) macro for SPSS (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) examined whether relationship-specific MIL mediated the relationship between DTA and relationship satisfaction and commitment.
- The indirect effect (i.e., 5,000 bootstrap resamples) for the influence of relationship MIL on couple satisfaction as a function of increased DTA did not contain zero (95% CI: -.001 to -.0001), indicating statistical significance.
- Heightened relationship MIL as a function of DTA on commitment also resulted in a significant indirect effect, 95% CI: -.001 to -.0001).

Discussion

- These results suggest that heightened mortality awareness is associated with individuals' pursuit of romantic relationships for meaning. Greater meaning, in turn, leads individuals to feel more satisfied with and committed to their romantic partner.
- These findings support terror management research demonstrating that close relationships serve an important role in buffering against death-related anxieties (Plusnin, Pepping, & Kashima, 2018).
- The present study also adds evidence to the idea that MIL plays an important role in people's motivations and perceived quality of their relationships with close others, in this case, romantic partners (Hadden & Knee, 2016).
- Whereas the current work utilized a measure of DTA to assess mortality awareness, future research should try to replicate these findings with a traditional death prime.
- Although the current results are specific to one member of the partner pair, it would be interesting to examine the dyadic nature of relationship pairs with implications for well-being (i.e., self, partner, communication styles, perceived support, etc.).
- Finally, this study has implications for persons lacking in relationship meaning (e.g., anxious & avoidant attachment) along with possible carryover effects to their health (e.g., social, emotional, psychological).