



The Effect of Meaning in Life (MIL) on Academic Achievement

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Abstract

In an effort to improve academic achievement, we examined the effects of meaning in life (MIL) on grade performance. Prior research has found that MIL is associated with better adjustment to stressful life events. Fall semester freshmen in general psychology courses were asked to complete measures of MIL and academic adjustment. At the end of the semester, their grade point averages (GPA) were collected from the Registrars' office. The results revealed that higher meaning presence persons reported experiencing better academic adjustment to college. Higher adjustment was associated with increased end of the semester GPAs. No effects emerged in response to meaning search. These findings suggest that the presence of MIL in early college life could have important implications for academic well-being and achievement.

Introduction

Steger, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) define MIL as the significance and sense made of one's existence. Within their questionnaire, there is a subset of questions measuring presence of meaning and another assessing search. Presence of meaning is associated with how much someone feels they have a purpose in life, while search for meaning is how much someone tries to find a purpose. In relation to meaning in life, previous research has shown that presence of meaning is correlated with better adjustment to college (Trevisan, Bass, Powell, & Eckerd, 2017). Adjustment is an important factor to consider when looking at persistence and retention rates. For instance, prior work has found that almost 30% of college students drop out after the first year, and 75% of them never re-enroll (College Atlas, 2018). With the aim to improve academic success, we examined the associative link between MIL, academic achievement and college students' academic performance.

It was hypothesized increases in adjustment as a function of MIL would be associated with higher college success (i.e., end of the semester GPAs).

Method

- Participants were 86 first semester undergraduate freshmen students (64 female; 83% Caucasian; $M_{age} = 18.36$) recruited from general psychology courses.
- The students took a Qualtrics survey that measured presence (5 items: e.g., "I understand my life's meaning," "My life has a clear sense of purpose;" $\alpha = .85$) and search for meaning (5 items: e.g., "I am always looking for to find my life's purpose," "I am searching for meaning in my life;" $\alpha = .90$; Steger et al., 2006).
- Participants completed the Adjustment to College Scale (ATC; Bryan, 2014). Example items included, "I am handling the demands of college well" and "I am overwhelmed with my role as a college student." (23 items, $\alpha = .79$).
- Participants signed release forms to collect end of the semester grade information from the Registrar's Office. We only analyzed general psychology grades given variations in people's course schedules.

Results

- Analyses using PROCESS (Model 4) macro for SPSS (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) examined whether adjustment to college mediated the relationship between MIL (presence & search) and academic performance.
- The indirect effect for meaning presence on grade performance via college adjustment was marginally significant, Sobel $z = 1.78$, $p = .08$; 95% CI: $-.42, 3.06$.
- A mediational model including meaning search (i.e., search \rightarrow academic adjustment \rightarrow grade performance) was non-significant, Sobel $z = .34$, $p = .73$; 95% CI: $-.02, .05$.

Results

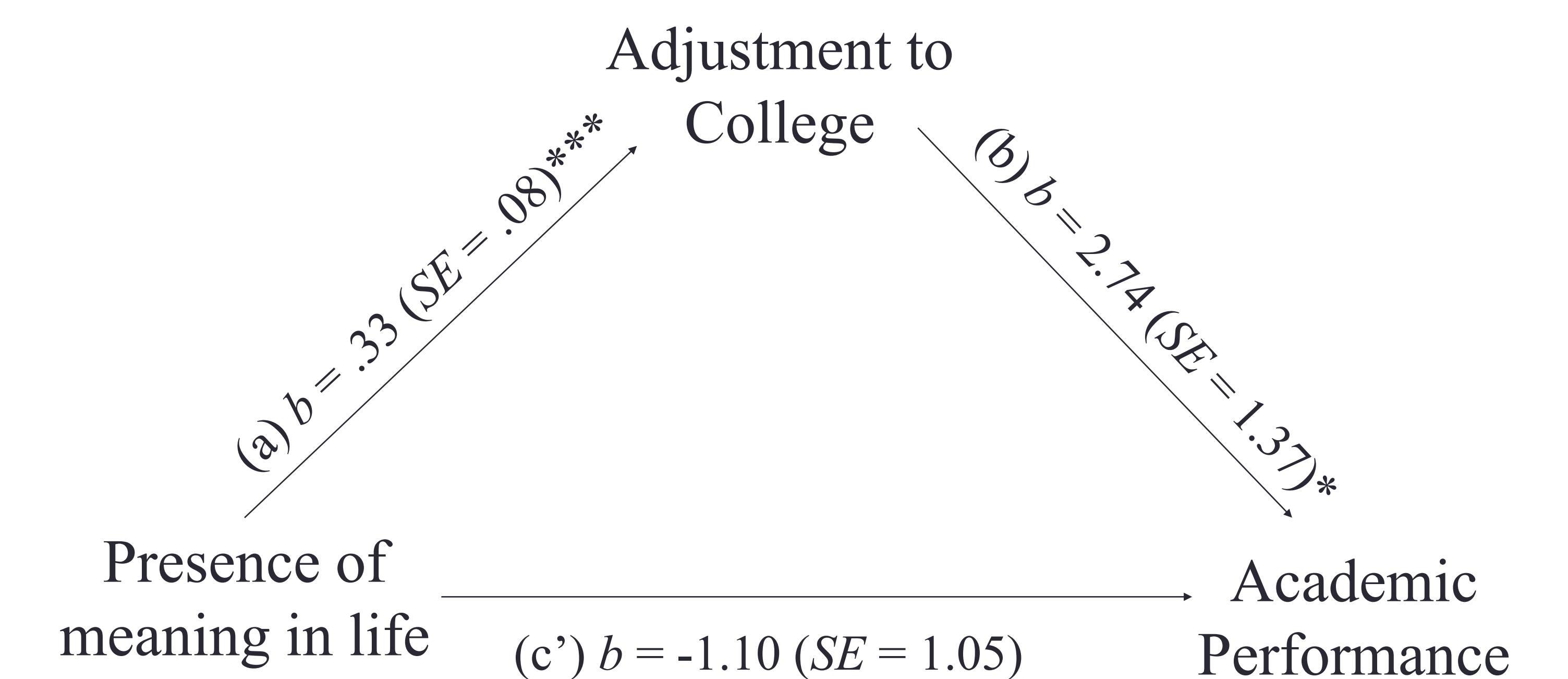


Figure 1. The indirect effect of MIL presence on final general psychology course grade through college adjustment. In the path model, * indicates significance at $p \leq .05$ and *** indicates significance at $p \leq .001$

Discussion

- The results revealed that persons' scoring high in meaning presence reported better adjustment to college in their first semester of their Freshman year. Higher adjustment, in turn was associated with better academic performance as assessed through their final grades in their general psychology course. A mediational model of the indirect effect was marginally significant. Additionally, there was no influence of meaning search in the obtained results.
- The present research suggests that MIL presence could serve as an important intervention to improve academic achievement, while also helping in new student's adjustment to college life.
- Future research should (a) include a much larger sample of participants in their study design, (b) see whether parallel effects emerge in response to a MIL manipulation as well as trait differences, and (c) test effects in regard to short (e.g., exam grade) and long-term (e.g., semester GPA) success in college.