

Extracurricular engagement and meaning in life for undergraduates: Importance of meaningful activities

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Research Questions

What is the relationship between students' participation in extracurricular activities and their sense of meaning in life?
Is this relationship direct or indirect?

Background

- Meaning in life is a crucial component of wellbeing, and identifying the aspects of life that enhance it is an important endeavor (Roepke, Jayawickreme, & Riffle, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009)
- For undergraduate students, presence of meaning is associated with lower rates of alcohol use (Schnitzer et al., 2013), gains in wisdom, positive self-development (Webster et al, 2018).
- Engaging in meaningful activity contributes to fulfillment of students' psychological needs and sense of meaning in life (Eakman, 2014)

Methods

Sample

6291 undergraduate students from 16 colleges and universities

- 68% Female, 1% Other
- 0.4% American Indian/Alaska Native, 11% Asian, 6% Black/African American, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 0.1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 70% White, 5% 2 or more races
- Mean age = 20.26
- 242 participants excluded due to missing data

Measure

The Wellbeing Assessment is a self-report measure of undergraduate wellbeing, including dimensions like meaning, extracurricular engagement, purpose, academic engagement, belonging, friendships, mood, positive attitudes, and subjective wellbeing.

For this study, we looked at...

- Meaning:** Three 6-point, Likert-type items indicating agreement with statements like "My life feels meaningful to me"
- Engagement:** 1 multi-select item indicating involvement in types of activities (e.g., Intramurals, fraternity/sorority, performing arts, etc.) & 1 Likert-type item indicating agreement with statement "I am involved in at least one extracurricular activity that I find meaningful"

Procedure

- Students invited by email to complete Wellbeing Assessment in an online survey in 2018 spring semester. (Participation incentives varied by institution)
- Data rake-weighted to NCES 2016 national demographics
- Analyzed using MIMIC models in *Mplus* software version 8.1. Used multi-step process that first tested measurement models (Kline, 2015).

Results

- Participation in at least one meaningful extracurricular activity is associated with students' overall sense of meaning in life (standardized coefficient = .33; Figure 1).
- Varied strengths in path coefficients between activity types and activity meaningfulness (coefficients = .02 - .22; Fig. 1)
- Club/intramural (.20), varsity sports (.22), and fraternity/sorority (.19) showed strongest associations (Fig. 1)
- "Others" included political groups, media groups, and student govt. (coefficients $\leq$.1; Fig. 1)

Figure 1. Results of MIMIC examining meaningful activity participation and meaning in life.

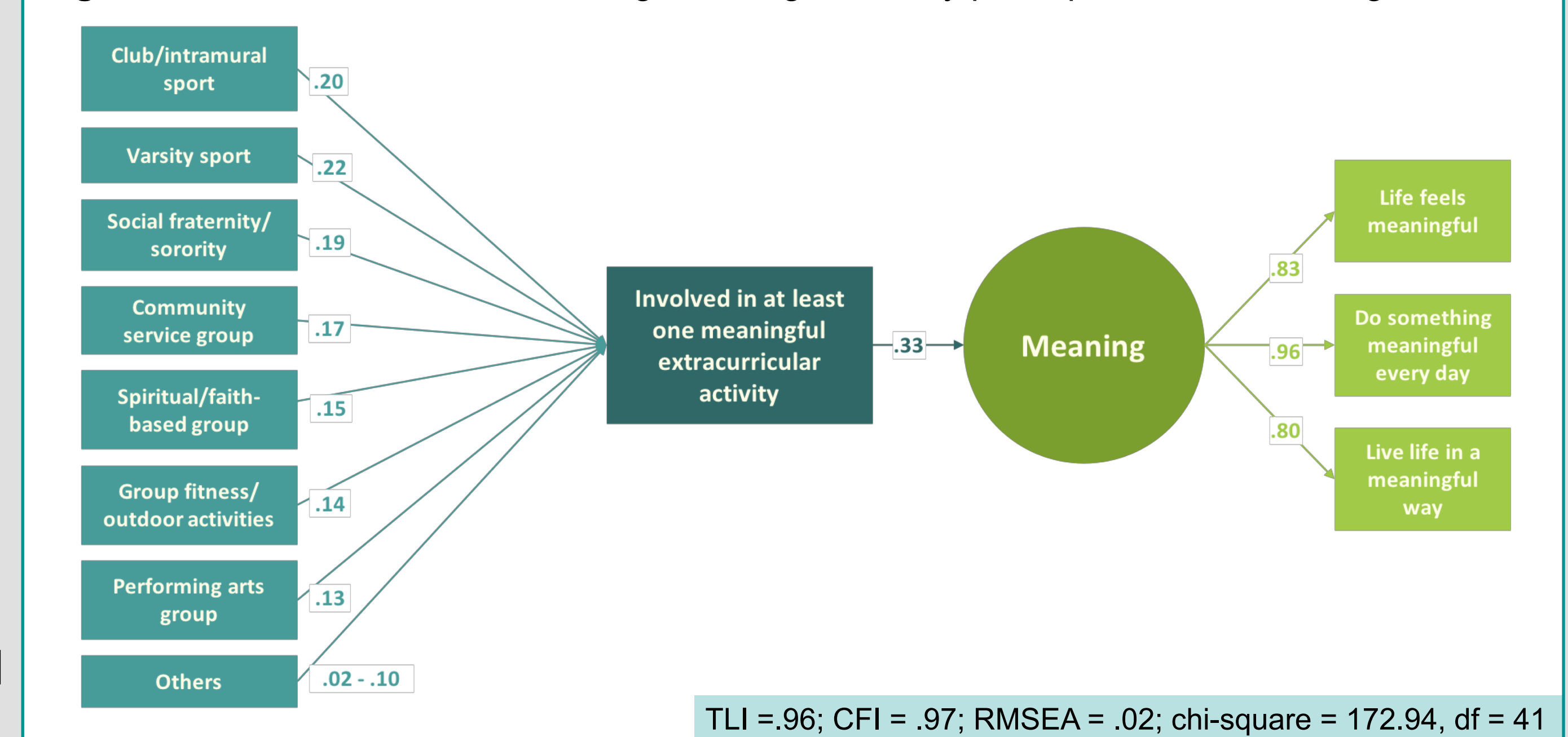
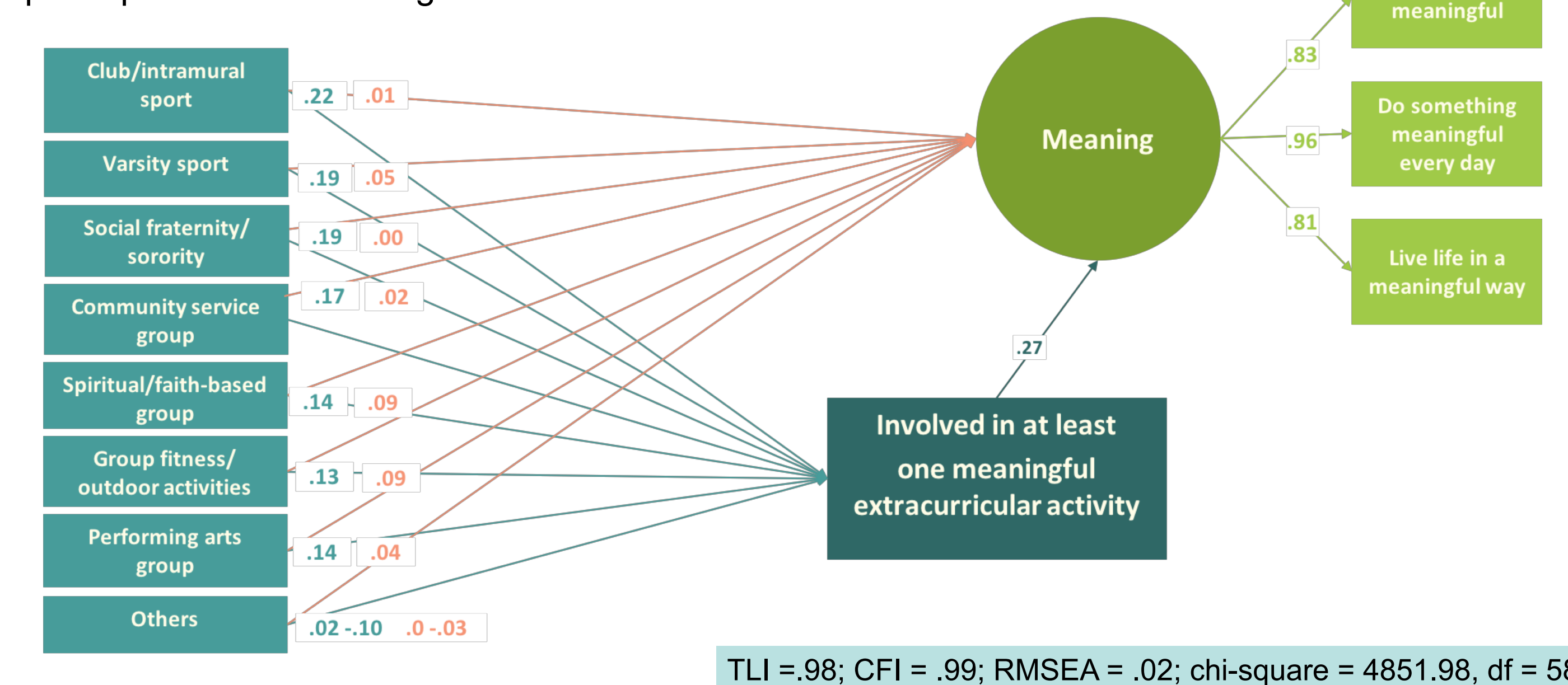


Figure 2. Results of MIMIC examining direct relationship between activity participation and meaning in life.



- Second MIMIC found no evidence of a direct relationship between type of activity and overall sense of meaning (coefficients $\leq$.09; Fig. 2)
- Instead, type of activity appears to be indirectly related to overall meaning via involvement in a meaningful activity (coefficient = .27; Fig. 2)

Discussion

- Students' overall sense of meaning is not determined by type of activities. Rather, it is a function of the fit between a student's sense of meaning and the activity.

Implications for undergraduate student programming:

- Offering or encouraging involvement in more types of programs is not necessarily better for students' sense of meaning
- It is more important to understand *what makes activities and programs meaningful for students* (e.g., what makes activities a good fit for students' needs, interests and values) and program accordingly

References

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