Counselling as a calling: Meaning in life and perceived self-competence in counselling students

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Abstract
Both meaning in life (MIL) and perceived self-competence (PSC) have been linked to a sense of calling, and better well-being. To the authors' knowledge, no study has examined MIL or PSC in counselling students. Current counselling students (N = 292) were asked whether studying counselling brought them MIL, and completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and an adapted Perceived Competence Scale for Counselling Students (PCS-CS). Results showed that students with a higher sense of MIL had a higher level of PSC. Over 95% of participants found meaning in their study of counselling, implying that many found it to be a calling. The PCS-CS was found to be reliable, and implications include its potential usefulness in future research on PSC in counselling populations. With MIL and PSC being linked to better workplace well-being, this study implies that trainee counsellors have high levels of these protective factors, with further research warranted to establish whether this is also the case for counselling professionals.

KEYWORDS
calling, counselling students, meaning in life, perceived self-competence

Implications for practice
The adapted Williams and Deci (1996) Perceived Competence Scale to measure PSC in counselling students was successful, with the potential application of gauging PSC levels in counsellors and counselling students.

The study also demonstrated that counselling students derive MIL from their study of counselling, and this was correlated with having higher PSC. This suggests that these participants will go on to experience less burnout (Barnett et al., 2019) if they pursue a career in counselling. Practically, this likelihood could be enhanced through techniques such as MIL-focused mindfulness (Allan et al., 2015).

Younger students were more likely to be searching for meaning compared with older students. The practical implication of this is that younger counsellors may require help identifying meaning. This could be achieved through interventions utilising teacher feedback (Saveljeva & Rupšienė, 2016), or managing expectations of what being a counsellor will entail (Falgares et al., 2017).
**1 | INTRODUCTION**

There are differences between a job (working to earn money), a career (working to gain professional accomplishment) and a calling (Seligman, 2004). The latter is working for the work’s sake, contributing towards a greater good. A calling will be meaningful to individuals (Coulson et al., 2013). Many employees seek meaningful work, with some even valuing this over job security and pay (Steger, 2017). Higher levels of meaning in life (MIL) have been linked to increased well-being (Edwards & Van Tongeren, 2020), and perceiving work as a calling (Duffy et al., 2018).

People may pursue a career with MIL in mind or create meaning within their job (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). Work stress can impact MIL (Allan et al., 2016), though conversely MIL can buffer the effects of work stressors on performance (Harris et al., 2007).

Research suggests that providing emotional support to clients is a key source of MIL for counsellors (Cleary, 2019; Russo-Netzer et al., 2020). MIL has also been found to buffer against burnout in hospice nurses (Barnett et al., 2019), with counsellors also an at-risk group for burnout (Hardiman & Simmonds, 2013).

University students with strong senses of calling experience higher levels of MIL (Shin et al., 2018). For counselling students, MIL derives from delivering therapy, teaching and conducting research (Hill et al., 2015). However, no known study has focussed on whether studying counselling impacts MIL in counselling students.

An individual’s calling is likely to be expressed through their skills (Harzer & Ruch, 2016); therefore, careers utilising skill sets will be pursued. Perceived self-competence (PSC) is the belief of an individual that they can apply these strengths (Lippe et al., 2020), with higher levels of PSC linked to increased subjective happiness (Li, 2015) and improved work-life balance (Fotiadis et al., 2019). Competence in counsellors tends to focus on their ability to counsel certain groups (Jäderberg et al., 2020; Wada et al., 2019).

It is important for university students to feel competent in their chosen vocation, as this buffers against negative affect (Keptner & Rogers, 2019), such as stress levels (Partido & Owen, 2020), which can in turn impact academic performance (Larson et al., 2016). PSC has also been linked to increased MIL (Demirbaş-Çelik & Keklik, 2019).

In their study of death workers (professionals who frequently work with death), Chan et al. (2019) found that MIL was a moderating factor between depression and PSC. The study also found that higher compassion fatigue was related to lower MIL, while PSC was suggested to be an important resource in combatting compassion fatigue (Chan et al., 2020). These findings suggest that MIL and PSC are important protective factors for those at risk of compassion fatigue, including counselling students (Beaumont et al., 2016).

This paper aimed to address gaps in the literature regarding PSC and MIL in the counselling profession. Informed by previous literature, it is predicted that counselling will be a source of MIL to students, a calling; therefore, they will believe in their counselling abilities.

**2 | METHODS**

Ethical approval was received on 27 October 2020. Two hundred and ninety two students studying an undergraduate or postgraduate counselling course completed an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed on a closed UK Facebook group aimed at counselling students (Counselling Tutor) and through internal university emails.

Participants were 264 (90.4%) females and 25 (8.6%) males. Two hundred and two (69.2%) were undergraduate students and 88 (30.1%) postgraduates. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 73 years, with the average age 41.12 years (SD = 10.39). Participants who did not answer demographic questions were still included in analyses.

**3 | MEASURES**

**3.1 | Meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ)**

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006) is a 10-item scale, comprising of two subscales—Presence of Meaning (MLQ-P; e.g., ‘I understand my life’s meaning’) and Search for Meaning (MLQ-S; e.g., ‘I am searching for meaning in my life’). These subscales are made up of five items each, which are rated on a 7-point Likert scale. One item of the MLQ-P is reverse-coded. Each subscale produces a score between 5 and 35.

The MLQ has been found to be a robust, reliable measure (Naghiyae et al., 2020) across various cultures (Vela et al., 2020), including student populations (Lew et al., 2020).

**3.2 | Perceived competence scale for counselling students (PCS-CS)**

The present study adapted Williams and Deci’s (1996) Perceived Competence for Learning Scale to examine the PSC of counselling students specifically. For example, the item ‘I am capable of learning the material in this course’ from the original scale was modified to ‘I am capable of applying my counselling skills’ in the Perceived Competence Scale for Counselling Students (PCS-CS). This was done as no known measure for studying PSC in counselling students exists. The original scale has been adapted previously for high school students (Özer et al., 2016).

The PSC-CS consists of four items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Total scores ranging from 4 to 28 are produced. A Cronbach’s alpha test found the adapted measure to be reliable (α = 0.84).

In addition, participants were asked ‘Do you think that studying counselling is something that brings meaning to your life?’, answering either ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

**3.2.1 | Data analysis**

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 26) was used for statistical analysis. Scales were scored, including reverse
scoring one MLQ-P item. Data were screened for anomalies, with no issues observed. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data were normally distributed.

4 | RESULTS

Mean scores were calculated for MLQ-P (M = 27.39, SD = 4.95), MLQ-S (M = 24.43, SD = 6.64) and PCS-CS (M = 23.73, SD = 3.18). Table 1 shows how these scores differed across age and gender.

These means indicate that there is little variation between female and male participants across the 3 scales. The results of participants who identified as ‘other’ showed more variance on MLQ-P and MLQ-S; however, the sample size was 2. There was little variation in scores on the three scales between different age groups. An independent t test showed that MLQ-S was the only scale on which undergraduate and postgraduate students had significantly different scores (t = −2.12, p = .034) (see Table 2).

Pearson’s correlation indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between MLQ-P and PCS-CS (r = .40, p < .001). This was not a strong correlation, yet still positive and significant. However, there was no significant correlation between MLQ-S and PCS-CS (r = −.02, p = .80), suggesting no link between MLQ-S scores and PCS-CS scores in this sample. MLQ-P and MLQ-S also had no significant relationship (r = −.08, p = .17). Two linear regression analyses were conducted to examine which subscale of the MLQ was the better predictor of PCS-CS scores. MLQ-P was a significant predictor of PCS-CS (t(1) = 7.44, p < .001), while MLQ-S was not (t(1) = −0.26, p = .799). This suggests that MLQ-P is the MLQ subscale that can predict PCS-CS scores.

In terms of whether participants felt that studying counselling is something that brings meaning to their lives, 280 (95.9%) felt it did, compared with 12 (4.1%) who did not. Below, Table 3 shows the mean scores for each response.

A linear regression analysis showed that MLQ-S was a significant predictor of whether individuals felt that studying counselling brought meaning to their life (t(1) = −3.68, p < .001), whereas neither MLQ-P (t(1) = −1.11, p = .267) nor PCS-CS (t(1) = −1.56, p = .120) was. An independent t test found that ‘yes’ and ‘no’ participants only had significantly different scores on the MLQ-S scale (t = 3.68, p < .001). However, it must be noted that discrepancies in the sample sizes may affect this.

After conducting analyses to answer the research question, demographic data were analysed to see whether gender, level of study or age was linked to any of the measures.

Linear regression showed that gender did not predict MLQ-P (t(1) = −1.56, p = .120), MLQ-S (t(1) = −0.83, p = .409), nor PCS-CS (t(1) = 0.326, p = .745) scores. Level of study was also analysed with linear regressions, and was not found to be a significant predictor of MLQ-P (t(1) = 0.90, p = .370), MLQ-S (t(1) = 2.12, p = .035), nor PCS-CS (t(1) = −0.98, p = .330). Linear regression analyses found that age was not a predictor of MLQ-P (t(1) = 2.30, p = .022) and PSC-SC (t(1) = 0.41, p = .684) scores. However, MLQ-S (t(1) = −3.42, p = .001) was predicted by age, suggesting that the older the participant, the less they were searching for MIL.

A Pearson’s correlation was conducted to examine the interaction between the demographic variables and the MIL and PSC scales. The MLQ-S subscale showed significant correlations with level of study (r(289) = 0.124, p = .035) and age (r(289) = −0.173, p = .003), but not with gender (r(289) = −0.049, p = .409). This again suggests that the older the participants were, the less likely they were to be searching for MIL. It also suggests that those participants that were undergraduates were more likely to be searching for meaning than postgraduate participants were.

A multiple regression analysis was run to test whether gender, level of study and age were predictors of whether participants felt that studying counselling brought meaning to their lives—the model was not significant (F(3, 285) = 1.42, p = .237, R2 = 0.02). Examination

| TABLE 1 | Means and standard deviations of MLQ-P, MLQ-S and PCS-CS scores for gender and age |
|----------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Gender   | MLQ-P (Mean, SD)                  | MLQ-S (Mean, SD)              | PCS-CS (Mean, SD) |
| Female   | 27.47 (4.75)                      | 24.48 (6.46)                  | 23.75 (3.12)     |
| N = 264  |                                   |                               |                 |
| Male     | 27.44 (5.32)                      | 24.24 (7.67)                  | 23.96 (3.22)     |
| N = 25   |                                   |                               |                 |
| Other    | 16.50 (16.26)                     | 18.00 (18.39)                 | 24.00 (1.41)     |
| N = 2    |                                   |                               |                 |

| TABLE 2 | Means, standard deviations and independent t test results for MLQ-P, MLQ-S and PCS-CS scores based on level of study |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|         | Undergraduate (N = 202)                                                                                           |
|         | M          | SD         | M          | SD         | t         | p         |
| MLQ-P   | 27.22      | 4.82       | 27.78      | 5.21       | −0.897    | .370      |
| MLQ-S   | 23.94      | 6.82       | 25.73      | 6.04       | −2.120    | .035      |
| PCS-CS  | 23.86      | 3.07       | 23.47      | 3.39       | 0.976     | .395      |
| Postgraduate (N = 88) |                                                                                                                      |

| TABLE 3 | Mean scores and standard deviations for responses to ‘Do you think that studying counselling is something that brings meaning to your life?’ |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|         | MLQ-P (Mean, SD)                  | MLQ-S (Mean, SD)              | PCS-CS (Mean, SD) |
| ‘Yes’   | 27.45 (4.77)                      | 24.73 (6.43)                  | 23.79 (3.09)     |
| N = 280 |                                   |                               |                 |
| ‘No’    | 25.83 (4.95)                      | 17.67 (6.64)                  | 22.33 (3.18)     |
| N = 12  |                                   |                               |                 |

p = .001 was predicted by age, suggesting that the older the participant, the less they were searching for MIL.
of the individual factors showed that gender ($t = 2.06, p = .040$), level of study ($t = -0.07, p = .946$) and age ($t = 0.17, p = .866$) were not significant predictors.

5 | DISCUSSION

The main finding of this study is that the presence of MIL is significantly correlated with PSC of counselling abilities in counselling students. While previous literature has found links between MIL and PSC (Chan et al., 2019), this study is the first to examine these concepts in the context of students studying counselling. MLQ-P and MLQ-S scores were not correlated, which is consistent with other studies finding that the MLQ subscales interact unpredictably (Abu-Raiya et al., 2020).

Findings suggest that studying counselling is something that brings MIL to most participants. MLQ-P and PCS-CS were not predictors of answers to ‘Do you think that studying counselling is something that brings meaning to your life?’, which shows the question to be necessary as a distinct measure specifying whether participants derive MIL from counselling. MLQ-S, however, was a predictor of whether participants felt that studying counselling gave meaning to their life. Those who answered that counselling does not bring meaning to their lives were less likely to be searching for MIL, suggesting that they already found MIL from non-counselling sources.

The present study also supports previous literature linking search for meaning to age (Bodner et al., 2014). Age predicted scores on the MLQ-S ($t(1) = -3.42, p = .001$), with the oldest group of participants aged 56–73 ($M = 23.48$) scoring lower on the search subscale than the youngest group aged 18–25 ($M = 26.19$)—older participants were less likely to be searching for MIL.

6 | IMPLICATIONS

6.1 | Practice

The adapted Williams and Deci (1996) Perceived Competence Scale to measure PSC in counselling students was successful, with the potential application of gauging PSC levels in counsellors and counselling students.

The study also demonstrated that counselling students derive MIL from their study of counselling, and this was correlated with having higher PSC. This suggests that these participants will go on to experience less burnout (Barnett et al., 2019) if they pursue a career in counselling. Practically, this likelihood could be enhanced through techniques such as MIL-focussed mindfulness (Allan et al., 2015).

Younger students were more likely to be searching for meaning compared with older students. The practical implication of this is that younger counsellors may require help identifying meaning. This could be achieved through interventions utilising teacher feedback (Saveljeva & Rupšienė, 2016), or managing expectations of what being a counsellor will entail (Falgares et al., 2017).

6.2 | Policy

Findings suggest that counselling students see counselling as a calling. Since having an occupational calling can lead to increased happiness (Li, 2015) and work-life balance (Fotiadis et al., 2019), policymakers could take steps to ensure that a sense of calling is instilled in counselling trainees. This could be done using job crafting (Rudolph et al., 2017), which has been found to increase MIL and PSC (Hornung, 2019), and could therefore increase calling.

However, workers with an occupational calling may be at risk when workplace problems arise—having a calling can decrease well-being (Duffy et al., 2016). Jo et al. (2018) found that calling mediated between more burnout and higher PTSD, suggesting that occupationally fatigued individuals who perceive their work as a calling could be at risk of negative outcomes due to being over-invested in their work. This is important for counsellors (Beaumont et al., 2016), and any policy change should be mindful of this.

7 | LIMITATIONS

One limitation of the present study was that PCS-CS was an adaptation of a scale, so had not been previously validated. Ultimately, PCS-CS was found to have internal reliability, suggesting it was a suitable measure for this sample. Future studies could verify this in different populations.

The gender of participants was unbalanced, with 90% of participants being female. This makes it difficult to compare the scores of men and women in the study but it is representative of counsellor demographics. In the UK, 84% of registered counsellors are women (BACP, 2014). The average age of participants also appears high for a student population at 41 years. This could be because many counsellors come to the profession after a career change (Beatty, 2012). This average age is also remarkably close to the average age in the UK (40.5 years) (Plecher, 2020).

8 | SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A future study could modify the present study to include qualitative elements, such as asking participants what brings them MIL. This would give researchers insight into other sources of meaning to counselling students—in the present study, it is unknown where participants find MIL other than from counselling. Other MIL studies have executed mixed methods successfully (Duffy et al., 2017).

Future research could test the PCS-CS in a population of practicing counsellors, to see whether the results reported in the present study were due to participants being students.

The measures used in the present study could be combined with other instruments to examine the effect of calling on well-being. For example, the University Stress Scale (Stallman & Hurst, 2016) could be
used alongside MLQ and PCS-CS to assess what impact MIL and PSC have on university-specific stress.

Calling could also be studied in a more direct way, using a quantitative scale (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011) or qualitative interviews (Hunter et al., 2010).

9 | CONCLUSION

This study addressed a gap in the literature regarding MIL and PSC in counselling students. More work is needed to examine the role of these factors on those within the counselling profession, be it trainees or practising professionals. This study has provided groundwork for future research, adapting a measure of PSC to use with counsellors, and finding it to be a reliable instrument in a sample of student counsellors. For these participants, counselling appears to be a calling. The question remains—why is it a calling?

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