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What Makes Life Meaningful?

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Abstract

It has been argued that the search for meaning is among the strongest drivers of human behavior. We ran a survey on a large representative sample to assess how important it is for people to lead a meaningful life, what makes life meaningful, what differentiates meaning from happiness, and whether people who find meaning important lead different lives than people who prioritize happiness. We collect three types of data: open questions, vignettes, and self-reported meaning and happiness. We show that people care strongly about both meaning and happiness and that the drivers of a meaningful and happy life differ in important ways. Moreover, we find interesting gender differences and a substantial underestimation by women of how much children contribute to men's meaning and happiness.

Keywords: Meaning; Happiness; Survey data; Vignette study; Large Language Models; Gender.

JEL Codes: D0; D9; I3

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1 Introduction

In ancient Greece, philosophers such as Aristotle and Epicurus tried to understand whether a good life is grounded in virtue, excellence, and the full development of one's potential (eudaimonism) or in the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain (hedonism). In the more recent literature in analytical philosophy, a consensus has emerged that meaning in life involves a degree of finding value that is distinct from finding happiness (Metz, 2026). Survey evidence in psychology shows that people commonly care about both meaning and happiness and that the search for meaning is a stronger motivator of some important behaviors than the search for happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013; King and Hicks, 2021). Economists have so far paid relatively little attention to people's striving for meaning.

In this paper, we use unique data from a large representative sample to study how much importance people attach to leading a meaningful life and leading a happy life. Moreover, we explore what makes life meaningful, whether there are differences in what makes life meaningful and what brings happiness, and whether there are important differences in this across demographic groups, in particular, men and women. We also study whether people who care a lot about meaning lead a different kind of life compared to people who prioritize happiness. Finally, we examine misperceptions: do men know what makes women's lives meaningful and happy, and the other way around?

We designed and ran a survey in January 2026 among a large representative sample of the Dutch population (N=2,608). Our survey starts by asking people how important it is for them to lead a meaningful life and to lead a happy life. We find that both are generally considered as very important. Almost half of the respondents find meaning at least as important as happiness. We also find that the vast majority of respondents state that their view of what makes life meaningful influences the choices they make in life. Many respondents also indicate that they share their view of what constitutes a meaningful life with others. Leading a meaningful life is considered important across all major demographic groups, but rated somewhat higher by women, young respondents, and those with higher education. Religious respondents tend to find leading a meaningful life much

more important and a happy life less important than non-religious respondents.

Next, we study the drivers of meaning and happiness using three different types of data. First, we let respondents speak their minds using open-ended questions about what they think is important for a meaningful life and what they think is important for a happy life. Similar to Geiecke and Jaravel (2026), we use large language models to extract common themes from these open-ended answers and quantify how many responses fit these themes. The most common themes for meaning and happiness differ, although there is some overlap. For meaning, top themes include helping others, contributing to society, and work. For happiness, respondents often mention being healthy, peace of mind, and financial security. Friendship and social bonds are considered important for both meaning and happiness. The themes are largely in line with the ancient Greek philosophers' definitions of hedonism and eudaimonism.

Second, we conduct a vignette study in which respondents rate the lives of three fictional people. The fictional people vary by gender, partnership status, parenthood, job sector, work dedication, and income. We chose these dimensions based on previous studies on the meaning in life in psychology, philosophy, and economics (Baumeister et al., 2013; Fuhrer and Cova, 2023; Geiecke and Jaravel, 2026). These dimensions also come up as important categories in the answers to our open-ended questions. We ask respondents to rate how meaningful they think the life of the fictional person is and how happy they think the person is. The random assignment of attributes in the vignette design reduces endogeneity concerns. We find large differences in the marginal impact of the attributes on meaning and happiness. Most notably, children bring meaning but no happiness and income brings happiness but no meaning. Having a partner brings both meaning and happiness, but the marginal effect on happiness is much larger. Compared to working in the industrial sector, working in healthcare and education brings much more meaning, but not much more happiness. Being strongly dedicated to the work one does is considered to substantially increase both meaning and happiness.

We further explore whether personal experience matters for the vignette ratings and find that respondents' often place more weight on vignette characteristics they share when rating meaning

of vignette persons, but not when rating happiness. For example, parents attribute more meaning to having children than non-parents do, and respondents who are strongly motivated at work attribute more meaning to having strong work motivation. We also find that respondents who work in education attribute more meaning to working in that sector than other respondents. Finance workers share the broader view that working in finance provides less meaning and less happiness than working in almost all other sectors (controlling for income).

Third and last, we ask respondents about their own happiness and meaning, and study how these relate to their own family, work, and income situation. Our findings are very similar to the results of the vignette study. Although this third approach is obviously vulnerable to omitted-variable bias and reverse causality, the similarity strengthens the robustness of the results and suggests that societal views of what makes life meaningful and happy align with people's own experiences.

Next, we explore whether people who find meaning at least as important as happiness lead different lives as compared to people who prioritize happiness. Based on the open questions and vignette results, we expect those who value meaning at least as much as happiness to be more likely to have characteristics that contribute more to meaning than to happiness. Mostly, this is what we find: they are less likely to have a high income, more likely to work in healthcare, and less likely to work in finance. Although the vignettes suggest that having children adds much meaning but no happiness, we observe that people who find meaning at least as important as happiness are significantly less likely to have children. A natural explanation is their lower likelihood of having a partner, which is commonly a prerequisite for having children. In terms of experienced happiness and meaning, we find that those who find meaning at least as important as happiness experience significantly higher meaning (7.3 instead of 6.9) and significantly lower happiness (7.2 instead of 7.5) as compared to people who prioritize happiness.

Lastly, following our preregistration, we explore gender differences. Interestingly, our vignette data allow us to explore men's views of the drivers of women's meaning and happiness, and vice versa. We find that women underestimate the role of having children in men's lives. They think children bring no happiness to men, a view that men strongly disagree with. Women also

underestimate how much having children adds to men's meaning in life. What men and women do agree on is that having children brings a lot of meaning but no happiness to women.

Our paper contributes to a voluminous literature in psychology and philosophy on meaning in life (see King and Hicks, 2021, for a comprehensive review). Our contribution is unique in three ways. First, we collect three types of data on both meaning and happiness on a large representative sample. Earlier studies typically collect only one type of data, focus only on meaning or happiness, and often use convenience samples (e.g., Fuhrer and Cova, 2023; Baumeister et al., 2013). With our extensive data collection, we aim to contribute to what King and Hicks (2021, p. 575) suggest is one of the “fundamental questions about the experience of meaning in life that await thorough empirical attention: acknowledging that there are many goods in life [...] [and] understanding how and when each matters”. Second, as compared to earlier work, our study collects relatively detailed data on how meaning and happiness relate to paid work, including work motivation, sector of employment, and earnings. As King and Hicks (2021, p. 576) note, “a better understanding of how our work influences our sense of meaning is warranted”, in particular regarding “the characteristics of the organization that help foster a sense of meaning in life”. Third, our results on gender differences – particularly those on misperceptions between genders – are novel. Such misperceptions are potentially important drivers of human choices. For instance, women underestimate the impact of having children on men's happiness and meaning in life. This finding may make women less likely to insist that men contribute equally to informal childcare.

In the economics literature, the search for meaning has been mainly explored in the context of paid work (Ariely et al., 2008; Cassar and Meier, 2018; Dur and Van Lent, 2019; Nikolova and Cnossen, 2020; Kesternich et al., 2021; Ashraf et al., 2025). The most recent research in economics has taken a broader perspective. Benjamin et al. (2025) let almost 900 respondents on MTurk make a series of binary choices between aspects of well-being, including several measures of meaning in life, finding that people value family, money, and health the most. Lagakos et al. (2025) explored the life narratives of older Americans written during the 1930s, finding that family relations, work, and community contributions appear especially important for leading a meaningful life. Geiecke

and Jaravel (2026) used open questions and AI assisted interviews in a sample of 466 respondents from the United States to explore what makes life meaningful. The three topics brought up most frequently were family involvement, parenting and child-rearing, and professional work. We build on Geiecke and Jaravel (2026) adopting a similar approach in analyzing the responses to the open questions using large language models. We differ in that we have a larger sample, consider not only meaning but also happiness, and use vignettes as well as open questions.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section we describe our data and empirical strategy. Section 3 presents the results. Section 4 concludes.

2 Data and empirical strategy

2.1 Data collection and sample

We collected data in January 2026 using the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel, which is based at Tilburg University, The Netherlands. The LISS panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register by Statistics Netherlands. Our sample is restricted to individuals of working age (20–65),¹ because many dimensions in which we are interested are related to work and those outside this age range may have difficulty relating to these dimensions. The preregistration for the study can be found in AsPredicted #265160 (<https://aspredicted.org/97ne3d.pdf>). The complete questionnaire and the full dataset will become available here: <https://www.dataarchive.lissdata.nl/study-units/view/1>.

LISS Panel invited a total of 3,652 people of which 73% responded and 72% fully completed the survey. Our sample consists of 2,608 respondents. Table A.1 in the Online Appendix reports descriptive statistics for our sample and the full working-age LISS Panel, which is representative for the Dutch working-age population. The two samples are similar in their demographic composition. In our sample, 56% of respondents are women and the mean age is 47. 75% have a partner, 63% have at least one child, and almost half hold a tertiary degree. In total, 82% are employed and their

¹We keep one respondent who turned 66 after invitation. As it turned out, not a single 20-year-old participated.

average monthly net income is about €2,500.

To gain insight into what makes life meaningful and whether and how it differs from a happy life, we collect three types of data: data based on open questions, vignettes, and self-reported meaning and happiness. We will discuss these three types of data in the next subsections. The questionnaire starts, however, by asking respondents how important it is to them to have a meaningful life on a scale from zero to ten. It then asked how important it is to them to have a happy life, also on a scale from zero to ten.²

2.2 Open questions

In the open questions, we ask respondents to describe what makes life meaningful and what brings happiness in their own words. We want to capture how respondents themselves understand these concepts, rather than imposing predefined definitions. The open questions also reveal whether respondents consider some dimensions important that we do not include in the vignette study. The exact phrasing of the two questions is (translated from Dutch): “*We would like to talk about what makes life meaningful. What do you find important for a life with meaning? You can mention as many things as you like.*” and “*We would also like to talk about happiness. What do you find important for a happy life?*”.

We analyze the answers to the open questions with the help of large language models (LLM) in two steps, similar to how Geiecke and Jaravel (2026) analyze longer qualitative interviews. We apply this two-step procedure separately to the question on meaning and to the question on happiness. In the first step, we extract the 10 most common themes of responses. We pass the full set of responses in a single LLM API call, instructing the model to act as an economics professor and identify the ten most common themes. The model returns each theme with a brief explanation and two to three examples. In a second step, we pass each response individually into a series of LLM API calls, one per theme, instructing the model to indicate whether the given theme is

²For succinctness, we ask one single simple question (one on the importance of meaning and one on the importance of happiness) rather than using the multi-item ‘meaning in life questionnaire’ developed by Steger et al. (2006). We follow a similar approach when we ask people about their experienced meaning and happiness, see section 2.4.

reflected in that response. This yields a binary indicator for each of the ten themes for meaning and happiness, respectively, for each respondent. We use OpenAI’s GPT-5.2 with high reasoning effort for the first step, as identifying themes across the full set of responses is a complex task. The second step uses the same model with no reasoning effort, since each call involves a simple yes/no judgment on a short respondent answer against a clearly defined theme. Geiecke and Jaravel (2026) show that using an LLM to assign binary yes/no indicators reduces output variability relative to human analysts.

2.3 Vignette study

Next, we run a vignette study. We draw on previous literature on meaning in life to choose the dimensions included in the vignettes (Baumeister et al., 2013; Fuhrer and Cova, 2023; Geiecke and Jaravel, 2026). We choose the dimensions: gender, having a partner, having children, sector of work, work motivation, and income. See Table I for a list of all vignette dimensions and attributes. The gender of the vignette person is indicated by their name.

The specific attributes within the dimensions, female or male for example, vary randomly within and between respondents. Before showing the vignettes, we informed respondents that all the vignette persons are fictional, 40 years old, and that the vignette persons are the same in all other dimensions not specified. Figure A.1 in the Online Appendix shows a screenshot of an example vignette.

Each respondent rates three vignette persons on:

- how meaningful the life of the vignette person is
- how happy the vignette person is.

A disadvantage of using a vignette design is that respondents may sometimes find it difficult to assess the meaning and happiness of a vignette person that is very dissimilar to them.³ A key

³At the end of the questionnaire, respondents answered several questions about the survey. Only 21% found the questions difficult to answer. 51% reported that the questionnaire “got them thinking about things.” 62% found the topic interesting. 58% enjoyed answering the questionnaire. See Figure A.2 in the Online Appendix for more details.

advantage of using a vignette design is that the random assignment of attributes reduces endogeneity concerns through confounders.⁴ A similar approach has been followed in several psychology and philosophy studies to analyze people’s concept of a meaningful life, see in particular Fuhrer and Cova (2023) and Prinzing et al. (2022).

Using the vignette data, we estimate:

$$Y_{iv} = \lambda + \alpha_q I_{qiv} + X'_{iv} \beta + \varepsilon_{iv}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{iv} denotes respondent i ’s rating of vignette v , either for meaning or happiness. λ is a constant, I_{qiv} is the income quartile of the vignette and X_{iv} contains the other vignette characteristics. ε_{iv} is the error term.⁵ Since each respondent evaluates multiple vignettes, standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. We repeat the regressions with respondent fixed effects as a robustness check.

Based on earlier studies, our preregistered hypotheses are that having a partner, having children, working in healthcare, education, or public administration, being strongly dedicated to one’s work, and having high income have a positive impact on meaning in life. Working in finance is predicted to have a negative impact on meaning in life. Given the public discussions about national security and serving in the army, working in the army could have either a positive or a negative impact on meaning in life. Regarding happiness, we preregistered the hypothesis that having children contributes less to happiness than to meaning. We predicted the opposite for income.

We also preregistered that we would study gender differences. The literature on meaning of work shows that women systematically value the meaning in life derived from social impact higher than men, and that women also sort into more meaningful jobs than men (Burbano et al., 2024; De Schouwer and Kesternich, 2025). However, there is little systematic research on whether other dimensions of life are considered to contribute differently to a meaningful life for men and women. Norms on the relative importance of work and family do differ greatly (Flèche et al., 2020).

To study gender differences, we estimate equation (1) separately for four combinations of

⁴The recent paper by Adrjan et al. (2026) shows that it does not completely eliminate these concerns.

⁵Throughout the paper we use income quartiles rather than the natural log of income (which was preregistered) to capture nonlinearities in the relation between outcomes and income in a more flexible way.

respondent gender and vignette-person gender: women rating women, women rating men, men rating men, and men rating women. We then test pairwise differences in the coefficients using a pooled model with full interactions between the vignette characteristics and these four gender combinations. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. This allows us to not only study whether male and female vignette persons are rated differently, but also whether male and female respondents rate male and female vignette persons differently.

Lastly, we preregistered to investigate whether the experience of the respondent matters for how they rate the vignettes. We hypothesize that respondents generally rate the meaning in life more positively for vignette persons that resemble themselves. For example, we expect that respondents working in finance will assign more meaning to vignette persons working in finance. We therefore extend equation (1) by adding respondent characteristics that correspond to the vignette dimensions, as well as interactions between matching respondent and vignette characteristics. This specification includes interactions for gender, partnership status, children, work motivation, income quartiles, and employment sector.

2.4 Self-reported meaning and happiness

Third, we ask respondents to rate how meaningful and happy their own lives are on a scale from zero to ten. The advantage of this type of data over vignette data is that respondents experience their life themselves and should therefore be in a good position to say how happy they are and how meaningful they find their lives. The disadvantage of self-reports is that respondents who care more about certain dimensions may have self-selected into these dimensions, and that there are other unobservables that are correlated with both the dimensions and the ratings. There may also be a higher risk of biased answers than in the vignettes, for instance because of social desirability bias.

Using self-reported meaning and happiness and other respondent-level data, we estimate:

$$Y_i = \lambda + \alpha_q I_{qi} + X_i' \beta + Z_i' \gamma + \varepsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where Y_i denotes respondent i 's self-reported rating for meaning or happiness. λ is a constant, I_{qi} denotes respondent net monthly income quartiles, and X_i contains the respondent characteristics that mirror the vignette dimensions: gender, partnership status, having children, work motivation, and employment sector. The vector Z_i contains additional respondent-level controls not included in the vignettes: age quartiles, a dummy for working outside the six sectors shown in the vignettes, a dummy for not currently working, and a dummy for part-time work, and a dummy for missing work motivation.⁶ The first income quartile, the first age quartile, and the industrial sector serve as reference categories.

In the last part of the analysis, we study whether people who find meaning at least as important as happiness live different lives. We do so by running regressions of a respondent's life characteristic on a dummy indicating whether the respondent finds meaning at least as important as happiness:

$$Y_i = \lambda + \alpha P_i + Z_i' \gamma + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

where Y_i denotes respondent i 's life characteristic. Life characteristics are whether the respondent has a partner, has children, work motivation, income quartile, sector of employment, whether the person is employed, and self-reported meaning and happiness. λ is a constant. P_i equals one if respondent i rates meaning as at least as important as happiness, and zero otherwise. We run a regression without any controls and a regression with a set of controls Z_i , including gender, higher education, age quartiles, feeling religious, and a dummy for missing values on feeling religious.⁷ We repeat the analysis using a stricter indicator for respondents who rate meaning as more important than happiness. As a robustness check, we estimate logit models instead of linear probability models for binary outcomes.

⁶Work motivation is missing for 1,177 respondents because it comes from a separate LISS module (Nikolova, 2024). We include a missing-value dummy to retain these respondents in the analysis.

⁷The binary variable feeling religious is based on a separate LISS module asking whether respondents feel religious. It is missing for 305 respondents, so we include a missing-value dummy to retain them.

3 Results

3.1 How much does meaning matter?

Our first key result is that meaning matters a lot to people. When asked how important it is to lead a meaningful life, our respondents rate it on average at 7.4 on a scale from zero to ten, and hardly anybody gives it a rating below the mid-point of the scale, see Figure I. Many respondents also say that the search for a meaningful life affects their choices and actions (73% of respondents agree with this) and that they share their ideas about what makes life meaningful with others (46% of respondents do this), see Figure II.

Asking the same questions about a happy life, we get more affirmative responses, but the differences are not very large. More specifically, people rate the importance of leading a happy life on average 8.4 on a scale from zero to ten. The percentage of people indicating that their ideas about a happy life affect their choices and actions and that they talk about these ideas, are also slightly higher, see Figure II.

Table II examines which demographic characteristics predict attaching higher importance to meaning and happiness, respectively. Being female, feeling religious, having higher education, and belonging to the youngest and oldest age group are all positively correlated with caring more about meaning, with religion being the strongest predictor. Feeling religious is negatively correlated with the stated importance of happiness, as is being older. Being female is positively correlated with the importance attached to happiness, but not as strongly as with the importance of meaning.

Figure III plots the joint distribution of the importance people attach to meaning and happiness. A majority (albeit a small majority) of 53% finds happiness strictly more important than meaning. 38% of the sample find meaning as important as happiness and 9% find meaning strictly more important than happiness. The last column of Table II shows the results of regressing a dummy that equals one if a respondent finds meaning at least as important as happiness on the demographic variables. The one variable that matters a lot is feeling religious, with a highly significant estimate of 20 percentage points. Further, women and the oldest age quartile are slightly overrepresented

among those who find meaning at least as important as happiness, although the coefficients are quite small and the age coefficient does not reach statistical significance at common levels. The main picture that arises from the regression is that a meaningful life is widely considered as important across all main demographic groups.

3.2 What makes life meaningful?

What makes life meaningful? And what makes for a happy life? We provide evidence on these research questions from three types of data: answers to open questions, the vignette study, and self-reported meaning and happiness. We present each of these pieces of evidence in turn, following the methodology laid out in the previous section.

Open questions

The most common answers to the open questions about what is important for a meaningful and happy life are shown in Figures IV and V. For a meaningful life, the three most common answers are: helping others and being of service (mentioned by 53% of the respondents), contributing to society and community impact (43%), and friendships and social connection (41%). Next are family and loved ones (36%) and meaningful work and useful daytime activity (32%). Goals and personal growth also make it to the top ten themes, but are mentioned by only 13% and 7% respectively. Faith, religion, and spiritual life just make it to the ten most prevalent themes, but only 3% of respondents mention this.

When asked what is important for a happy life, the top three answers are close relationships and social support (55% of respondents mention this), health (41%), and love and partnership (24%). The first and third item (close relationships and love) are close to what is rated third and fourth for meaning (friendship, family and close loved ones). However, reading the more detailed summaries of these categories (see Tables A.2 and A.3 in the Online Appendix) reveals some subtle differences, with people mentioning the ‘giving’ side of social relationships more often when writing about meaning and the ‘receiving’ side when writing about happiness. For instance, people mention

‘being present and supportive’ when they write about meaning, whereas they mention ‘having reliable support’ and ‘feeling loved and appreciated’ when they write about happiness.

Next on the list of most common themes for happiness are peace of mind (mentioned by 21%), financial security (20%), and ‘doing fun things’ (18%). Work is also mentioned (by 9%), but in a different manner than when writing about a meaningful life. Work should be ‘enjoyable’ and the work-life balance should be right for happiness, whereas work should be meaningful and useful to contribute to a meaningful life.

‘Meaning, personal growth, and being of value’ also makes it to the top ten of aspects contributing to happiness, with 9% of respondents mentioning this. This suggests that achieving a meaningful life can be a source of happiness as well, at least for some people. Likewise, some people (13% of respondents) mention ‘enjoyment, positive experiences, and making memories’ as a source of meaning, suggesting that happiness may contribute to meaning. Meaning and happiness thus seem closely linked for some people, but are determined by a rather distinct set of factors for most people.

The responses to the open-ended questions confirm the relevance of the selected dimensions for our vignette study. Many respondents mention love, relationships, and family when discussing meaning and happiness, supporting the inclusion of relationship status and having children in the vignette design. Work motivation and the sectors of work are relevant as many respondents mention meaningful work and helping others as important factors for a meaningful life. Income is mentioned by many as important for happiness.

Vignette study

Table III reports the main results of our vignette study. We report regressions of the rating for vignette meaning (first column) and for vignette happiness (second column) on all vignette dimensions.

For meaning, we find sizable positive effects of having children, having a strong work motivation, and several employment sectors. Working in the healthcare sector or education contributes most to

meaning, followed by working in the army. Working in finance contributes least to meaning, closely followed by working in the industrial sector (the reference category). Gender and having a partner have small but statistically significant effects. None of the income quartiles show up significantly, despite small standard errors. We can thus confidently conclude that income matters very little for meaning, if at all. Overall, the regression results imply that the most meaningful profile is that of a woman with a partner and children who works in healthcare and has high work motivation. The least meaningful profile is an unmotivated single man without children who works in finance or industrial production.

For happiness we find quite different results. Having children has no effect on happiness, and neither does gender. Effects of sector of employment are present but muted as compared to their effects on meaning. Instead, having a partner is considered much more important for happiness than for meaning, and the same holds for income. Work motivation is equally important for meaning and for happiness. Overall, the estimates imply that the happiest profile is a person with a partner and a high income, working in education, and having a strong work motivation. The least happy profile is an unmotivated single person with a low income who works in finance or industry. The vignette findings on meaning and happiness are robust to including respondent fixed effects (see Table A.4 in the Online Appendix).

Finally, we examine whether respondents' characteristics matter for how they rate the dimensions in the vignette study. Following our preregistration, we explore whether respondents rate a vignette dimension higher when they share it. To do so, we regress meaning and happiness ratings of the vignettes on vignette attributes, respondent characteristics, and interactions between matching characteristics. The results are reported in Table A.5 in the Online Appendix.

In many cases, respondents place more weight on shared characteristics when rating meaning, but not happiness. For example, respondents with a partner or children, strong work motivation, or a job in education place more weight on the corresponding vignette attributes.⁸ By contrast, finance

⁸Even though respondents without lived experience of the attribute at hand tend to rate that vignette attribute lower than 'experienced' respondents, it is interesting to see that the main effects of vignette attributes have the same sign and are statistically significant, pointing to a strong degree of consensus.

workers do not rate working in finance more positively than other respondents, suggesting that they share the broader view that working in finance provides lower meaning and delivers less happiness than almost all other sectors. Similarly, parents agree that children do not increase happiness, but they attribute twice as much meaning to having children than non-parents do.

Self-reported meaning and happiness

Our third and last type of data is on respondents' own experienced meaning and happiness. Figure A.3 provides a scatter plot, showing that the meaning and happiness of our respondents are generally well above the midpoint of the scale of zero to ten and positively correlated with a correlation coefficient of 0.64. Average happiness is 7.35, which is close to the 7.22 reported for the Netherlands in the latest World Happiness Report, which is based on Gallup data (Helliwell et al., 2026). Meaning in life is rated only slightly lower by our respondents, at 7.10 on average.

We regress the respondent's self-reported meaning and happiness on respondent's characteristics. To ease comparability, we include variables that are similar to the vignette dimensions. The results are in Table IV. Most results resemble the vignette findings and are in line with our preregistered hypotheses.⁹ Having children is strongly associated with meaning and less so with happiness. Income matters more for happiness, but is also weakly related to meaning. Workers in healthcare and education report more meaning than those in industrial production and finance, but not higher happiness. Workers in public administration report the lowest happiness. Having no job (a category that was not present in the vignettes) is associated with much less meaning and much less happiness. According to the self-reported meaning data, the most meaningful life is the life of an older woman with a partner and children who works in healthcare or education. The least meaningful life is that of a childless middle-aged man without a partner and without a job. The most happy life is the life of a mid-age woman with a partner and children, a high income, and a job that is *not* in public administration. The least happy life is the life of young man with low income,

⁹The main exception is work motivation. However, this may due to the fact that we use data on work motivation from a different wave in the LISS Panel (Nikolova (2024)), because we forgot to include it in our own. As a result, the definition of work motivation differs slightly and we have a lot of missing values (for 45% of the sample).

no job, no partner, and no children.

Evidence across data types

Table V summarizes the evidence about what makes life meaningful and what makes for a happy life across the three types of data: answers to open questions, vignette study, and self-reported meaning and happiness. For most of the variables, the data speak with one voice. Having a partner is consistently considered as contributing to meaning and, even more so, to happiness. For children, we consistently find strong positive effects on meaning, and smaller positive effects on happiness. There is also consensus that high income increases happiness, but is less or not important for a meaningful life. Regarding the sectors of employment, we consistently find strong positive associations between meaning and working in education, healthcare, and, to a slightly smaller extent, the army. Working in finance is generally considered as contributing least to a meaningful and happy life, together with working in industrial production.

3.3 Do people who find meaning important lead different lives?

In this section, we examine whether the respondents who find meaning at least as important as happiness (47.1% of the sample) live different lives than those who prioritize happiness. In Table VI, we regress several respondent characteristics on a binary variable indicating whether a respondent rated meaning at least as important as happiness. Column 1 reports the results without controls and in column 2, we control for gender, education, age quartiles, and religion. Table A.6 in the Online Appendix shows that the results are robust to using logit instead of linear probability models.

We expect characteristics that bring more meaning than happiness according to the results from the vignette study to be more prevalent among respondents that find meaning at least as important as happiness. That is indeed what we observe for several important variables. People who find meaning important are less likely to have a partner, more likely to work in healthcare, more likely to have high work motivation, and more likely to earn a low income. We also find that respondents who find meaning at least as important as happiness are less likely to work in finance (2 percentage

points).

In contrast to our expectations, we do not find that people who find meaning important are more likely to have children. Column 2 in Table VI even indicates that respondents who find meaning important are slightly less likely to have children by 4.1 percentage points. This is surprising, given that one of the strongest findings from the vignette study is that children add substantial meaning but no happiness. However, the puzzling finding becomes less puzzling when one realizes that a common prerequisite for having children is to have a partner, which is less prevalent among those who find meaning important. Indeed, when we restrict the sample to those who have a partner, the coefficient becomes zero and insignificant (see Table A.7 in the Online Appendix for the results when we restrict the sample to respondents with a partner).

Table A.8 in the Online Appendix repeats the analysis using whether respondents rate meaning as strictly more important than happiness as the dependent variable. While this naturally makes the estimates less precise, the magnitude of the estimates generally increases. For instance, the coefficient for finance is -4 percentage points.

Finally, in the bottom rows of Table VI we observe that respondents who find meaning at least as important as happiness experience higher meaning and lower happiness compared to respondents prioritizing happiness. More precisely, they rate their own meaning 0.34 higher on the scale from zero to ten, and their own happiness 0.35 lower. These results suggest a trade-off between happiness and meaning (although the nature of our data obviously do not allow us to draw strong causal conclusions). Moreover, the results speak against the well-known ‘happiness paradox’ (which originates from John Stuart Mill, 1873) that says that to become happy, one should strive for meaning, not for happiness (see Martin, 2008, for an interesting discussion of this and other paradoxes of happiness).

3.4 Gender differences

Are there any important gender differences in what makes life meaningful? Motivated by findings from earlier studies, we preregistered an exploration of gender differences.

Let us first look at the answers to the open questions. Here we see that men and women write very similar answers, with nearly identical category rankings (see Figures A.4 and A.5 in the Online Appendix). The only substantial difference we observe is that the share of women that mention the top three answers is somewhat larger than the share of men. This may indicate more consensus among women as compared to men. However, the result can also be explained by women writing longer responses than men (14.5 vs. 11.8 words).

When looking at the importance attached to a meaningful life and how much meaning respondents report having in their own lives, we have seen that women score higher on both (see Table II and IV). However, the same tables show that they also consider happiness more important and report being happier than men. When we look at who finds meaning at least as important as happiness, there is a slight overrepresentation of women (final column of Table II). Tables A.9 and A.10 report results of regressing self-reported meaning and happiness, respectively, on respondent's characteristics. Interestingly, there are only two statistically significant differences in coefficients: working in finance is associated with a statistically significant increase in meaning for men (+0.39) and a decrease in meaning for women (-0.21); working in education is associated with lower happiness for men (-0.39) and higher happiness for women (+0.04).

The vignette results suggest that, all else equal, women experience more meaning but are not happier than men (see Table III). However, further investigation reveals that this result stems mainly from men's responses. Using the vignette data, we test whether men and women rate male and female vignette persons differently in Table A.11. Men rate female vignette persons as having more meaningful and also slightly happier lives than male vignette persons. Women give higher ratings overall but do not rate female vignette persons as having more meaningful or happier lives than male vignette persons.

Finally, we use the vignette data to study men's views of the drivers of women's meaning and happiness and the other way around. Table VII reports regressions of vignette meaning ratings on vignette characteristics separately by respondent gender and vignette gender. Table VIII reports the same results with happiness ratings as dependent variable. In both tables, columns 1 and

2 show female respondents' ratings of female and male vignettes. Columns 3 and 4 report the corresponding estimates for male respondents. Tables A.12 and A.13 in the Online Appendix show the differences between all columns and their statistical significance from a pooled regression that includes gender interactions.

Men and women largely agree on what contributes to meaning and happiness in women's lives. The only exception is income. Women believe that being in the highest rather than the lowest income quartile increases women's meaning by 0.25 points, whereas men believe that income does not matter. Assuming women better understand what gives meaning to women's lives, men underestimate the role of income in their lives.

Men and women also largely agree on what contributes to meaning and happiness in men's lives, with one major exception: having children. When rating meaning of male vignettes, women rate having children as increasing men's meaning by 0.15 whereas men rate the increase at 0.47 points, more than three times as large. The difference is even larger in the happiness ratings. Women think that men become less happy when they have children by -0.11 points, but men think having children makes men happier by 0.27 points. These misperceptions persist when restricting the sample to parents (see Tables A.14 and A.15 in the Online Appendix to understand how mothers and fathers rate male and female vignette persons differently. We report the column differences for these tables in Tables A.16 and A.17). Fathers believe that having children adds substantially to men's meaning and happiness, whereas mothers believe that it adds some meaning to men's lives, but does not make men happier.

4 Conclusion

We have shown that people find leading a meaningful life very important and that it affects the choices they make in life. We have also seen that there are important differences between the factors that contribute to a meaningful life and those that contribute to a happy life. This means that, in practice, people will often need to make a tradeoff between meaning and happiness. In

line with this, we have found that people who prioritize happiness over meaning reach on average higher happiness and achieve less meaning than people who find meaning at least as important as happiness. We have also detected interesting gender differences, and found that some of those gender differences are unknown to the opposite gender.

A limitation of our study is that we do not provide causal estimates on how exogenous changes in life circumstances change levels of meaning and happiness. We hope that our results will inspire researchers to broaden their set of outcome variables to include meaning when doing causal studies. We envision that future natural and field experiments will study the causal effects of important labor market outcomes, family circumstances, and other potential drivers on meaning. An important question is whether people's meaning shows a similar tendency to return to some baseline level as people's happiness tends to do, at least in response to some types of shocks, as in Clark et al. (2008).

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Tables and figures

Table I: Dimensions and attributes

Dimensions	Attributes
Name	Daan, Lucas, Olaf, Emma, Sophie, Julia
Relationship status	Has a partner, has no partner
Children	Has two children who are 8–12 years old, has no children
Sector	Healthcare, education, finance, public administration, industrial production, the army
Work motivation	Strongly dedicated to the work she does, main reason for working is to earn a living
Own income	Drawn from a truncated log-normal distribution (with minimum income equal to the minimum wage when working 15 hours)

Table II: Importance ratings by respondent demographics

Dependent Variables:	Importance meaning	Importance happiness	p-value	Importance meaning ≥ happiness
Respondent demographics				
Female	0.41*** (0.07)	0.19*** (0.06)	0.001***	0.04* (0.02)
Feels religious	0.48*** (0.08)	-0.17** (0.07)	0.000***	0.20*** (0.02)
Higher education	0.33*** (0.07)	0.09 (0.06)	0.000***	0.02 (0.02)
Age quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (37-48)	-0.19** (0.10)	-0.13 (0.08)	0.539	-0.02 (0.03)
Q3 (49-58)	-0.25** (0.10)	-0.18** (0.08)	0.481	-0.01 (0.03)
Q4 (59-66)	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.27*** (0.08)	0.020**	0.04 (0.03)
Constant	7.02*** (0.09)	8.44*** (0.08)	0.000***	0.38*** (0.03)
Adjusted R ²	0.04	0.01		0.03
Mean dependent	7.41	8.36		0.47
SD dependent	1.72	1.42		0.50
N (respondents)	2,608	2,608		2,608

Notes: Age quartile Q1 spans 22-36 years. Regressions include a binary indicator for missing values on feeling religious (305 observations). The final column is a linear probability model for whether importance of meaning is greater than or equal to importance of happiness. All covariates are binary. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. The p-value column reports p-values for meaning-happiness coefficient differences, with significance levels based on a pooled regression $Y_{it} = \alpha + \mathbf{X}_i\beta + (\mathbf{X}_i \times D_t)\gamma + \varepsilon_{it}$, where $t \in \{\text{meaning, happiness}\}$. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table III: Vignette ratings by vignette person characteristics

Dependent Variables:	Vignette meaning	Vignette happiness	p-value
Vignette person characteristics			
Female	0.10*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.023**
Has a partner	0.12*** (0.04)	0.32*** (0.03)	0.000***
Has children	0.30*** (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.000***
Has work motivation	0.58*** (0.04)	0.53*** (0.04)	0.091*
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.05 (0.06)	0.18*** (0.05)	0.004***
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.06 (0.05)	0.25*** (0.05)	0.000***
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.07 (0.06)	0.29*** (0.05)	0.000***
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	0.67*** (0.07)	0.16*** (0.06)	0.000***
Education	0.60*** (0.06)	0.22*** (0.06)	0.000***
Public administration	0.12* (0.07)	0.12** (0.06)	0.932
Army	0.43*** (0.06)	0.10* (0.06)	0.000***
Finance	-0.07 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)	0.093*
Constant	6.07*** (0.08)	6.04*** (0.07)	0.637
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.05	
Mean dependent	6.96	6.78	
SD dependent	1.72	1.50	
N (vignette persons)	7,824	7,824	
N (respondents)	2,608	2,608	

Notes: The lowest net income quartile spans 2,201-2,861 euros. Vignette net income quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. All independent variables are binary. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. The p-value column reports p-values for vignette meaning-happiness coefficient differences, with significance levels based on a pooled regression. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table IV: Self-reported meaning and happiness by respondent characteristics

Dependent Variables:	Respondent meaning	Respondent happiness	p-value
Respondent characteristics			
Female	0.42*** (0.07)	0.34*** (0.07)	0.218
Has a partner	0.28*** (0.08)	0.65*** (0.07)	0.000***
Has at least one child	0.36*** (0.07)	0.19*** (0.07)	0.009***
Age quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (37-48)	-0.12 (0.09)	-0.11 (0.09)	0.923
Q3 (49-58)	-0.15 (0.10)	-0.09 (0.09)	0.443
Q4 (59-66)	0.28*** (0.10)	0.25** (0.10)	0.736
Has work motivation	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.08)	0.518
Net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	0.06 (0.10)	0.13 (0.09)	0.364
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	0.11 (0.10)	0.17* (0.10)	0.430
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	0.19* (0.10)	0.38*** (0.10)	0.027**
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	0.38*** (0.08)	-0.06 (0.08)	0.000***
Education	0.30*** (0.10)	-0.11 (0.11)	0.000***
Public administration	0.05 (0.11)	-0.24** (0.11)	0.004***
Military	0.28 (0.29)	0.13 (0.30)	0.669
Finance	0.12 (0.13)	-0.08 (0.12)	0.070*
Other sectors	-0.14 (0.11)	-0.18* (0.10)	0.658
Part-time work	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.13* (0.07)	0.766
Not currently working	-0.58*** (0.12)	-0.74*** (0.13)	0.103
Constant	6.42*** (0.13)	6.61*** (0.13)	0.105
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.10	
Mean dependent	7.10	7.35	
SD dependent	1.57	1.55	
Number of respondents	2,608	2,608	

Notes: The variable other sectors is binary and equals 1 for all respondents that are currently working, but not in one of the listed sectors. Part-time work equals 1 for employed respondents working part-time; full-time work is the omitted category. Age quartile Q1 spans 22-36 years. The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 0-1,646 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Regressions include a binary indicator for missing values on work motivation (1177 observations). Work motivation is a binary variable coded 1 if the respondent's main reason for working is not financial. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. We report p-values for respondent meaning-happiness coefficient differences, with significance levels based on a pooled regression. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table V: Summary of findings across data sources

Finding	Open text answers	Vignettes	Self-reports
Meaning			
Female gender	0	0.10***	0.42***
Partner	+	0.12***	0.28***
Children	+	0.30***	0.36***
Work motivation	+	0.58***	-0.05
Higher income	0	0.07	0.19*
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	+	0.67***	0.38***
Education	+	0.60***	0.30***
Public administration	0	0.12*	0.05
Army	0	0.43***	0.28
Finance	0	-0.07	0.12
Happiness			
Female gender	0	0.03	0.34***
Partner	+	0.32***	0.65***
Children	+	0.03	0.19***
Work motivation	0	0.53***	-0.01
Higher income	+	0.29***	0.38***
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	0	0.16***	-0.06
Education	0	0.22***	-0.11
Public administration	0	0.12**	-0.24**
Army	0	0.10*	0.13
Finance	0	0.02	-0.08

Notes: + indicates a positive open-text finding and 0 no clear open-text evidence. For open text answers, + means the item is closely related to a top-ten category, and 0 means it is not. Vignette and self-report columns report coefficients from the corresponding regression Tables III and IV. Higher income reports the Q4 coefficient relative to Q1. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table VI: Correlates of prioritizing meaning at least as much as happiness

Independent variables:	Importance meaning ≥ happiness	Importance meaning ≥ happiness + controls	Mean dependent
Respondent characteristics as dependent variables			
Has a partner	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)	0.75
Has at least one child	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	0.63
Has work motivation	0.11*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.32
Net income quartiles:			
Q1 (0-1,646)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.02)	0.25
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.25
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.25
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.25
Employment sectors:			
Industrial	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.06
Healthcare	0.03** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.16
Education	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.08
Public administration	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.09
Military	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00
Finance	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	0.05
Public/non-profit sector	0.04** (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.37
Not currently working	0.07*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.18
Respondent meaning	0.39*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.06)	7.10
Respondent happiness	-0.32*** (0.06)	-0.33*** (0.06)	7.35

Notes: The main independent variable equals 1 if the respondent rates meaning as at least as important as happiness. Each row reports a separate linear probability model. Net income quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Public/non-profit sector includes public administration, education, healthcare, welfare, environment/culture/other, and military. Controls in the second column are female, higher education, age quartiles, and feeling religious. Control specifications also include a binary indicator for missing values on feeling religious. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table VII: Vignette meaning ratings by respondent and vignette gender

Model Type:	Women on women	Women on men	Men on men	Men on women
Dependent Variable:	Vignette meaning			
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	0.11 (0.07)	0.21*** (0.07)	0.10 (0.08)	0.07 (0.08)
Has children	0.34*** (0.07)	0.15** (0.07)	0.47*** (0.09)	0.30*** (0.08)
Has work motivation	0.63*** (0.07)	0.57*** (0.07)	0.50*** (0.09)	0.57*** (0.08)
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.15 (0.10)	0.04 (0.10)	0.05 (0.12)	-0.09 (0.11)
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.18* (0.10)	-0.11 (0.10)	0.06 (0.12)	0.12 (0.11)
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.25*** (0.10)	-0.16 (0.10)	0.20 (0.12)	0.03 (0.11)
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.66*** (0.11)	0.65*** (0.13)	0.73*** (0.15)	0.66*** (0.15)
Education	0.66*** (0.11)	0.58*** (0.13)	0.50*** (0.14)	0.59*** (0.13)
Public administration	0.05 (0.12)	0.12 (0.12)	0.22 (0.15)	0.12 (0.14)
Army	0.35*** (0.12)	0.49*** (0.12)	0.52*** (0.14)	0.34** (0.14)
Finance	0.02 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.13)	-0.10 (0.15)	-0.18 (0.14)
Constant	6.13*** (0.13)	6.34*** (0.14)	5.81*** (0.16)	6.12*** (0.14)
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.06
Mean dependent	7.11	7.05	6.73	6.88
SD dependent	1.65	1.69	1.82	1.73
N (vignette persons)	2,209	2,174	1,732	1,709
N (respondents)	1,396	1,382	1,100	1,079

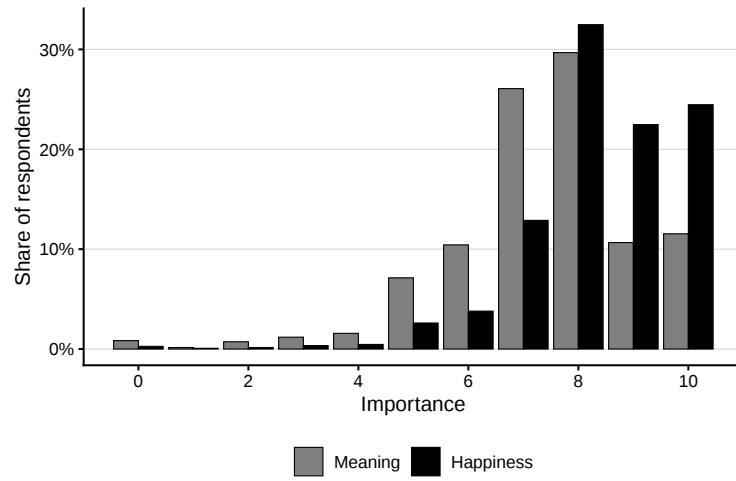
Notes: The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table VIII: Vignette happiness ratings by respondent and vignette gender

Model Type:	Women on women	Women on men	Men on men	Men on women
Dependent Variable:	Vignette happiness			
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	0.27*** (0.06)	0.28*** (0.06)	0.38*** (0.07)	0.37*** (0.07)
Has children	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.11* (0.06)	0.27*** (0.08)	-0.01 (0.07)
Has work motivation	0.57*** (0.06)	0.53*** (0.06)	0.45*** (0.08)	0.51*** (0.07)
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.24*** (0.08)	0.19** (0.09)	0.23** (0.11)	0.03 (0.10)
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.28*** (0.08)	0.11 (0.09)	0.36*** (0.11)	0.26*** (0.10)
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.32*** (0.09)	0.10 (0.09)	0.48*** (0.11)	0.29*** (0.10)
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.04 (0.10)	0.20* (0.12)	0.30** (0.12)	0.14 (0.13)
Education	0.17* (0.10)	0.36*** (0.11)	0.18 (0.13)	0.14 (0.12)
Public administration	0.10 (0.10)	0.12 (0.11)	0.22* (0.13)	0.10 (0.12)
Army	-0.05 (0.10)	0.18 (0.11)	0.35*** (0.13)	-0.06 (0.12)
Finance	-0.04 (0.10)	0.03 (0.11)	0.21 (0.14)	-0.09 (0.12)
Constant	6.16*** (0.11)	6.24*** (0.12)	5.62*** (0.14)	6.12*** (0.12)
Adjusted R ²	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05
Mean dependent	6.83	6.85	6.65	6.75
SD dependent	1.44	1.49	1.60	1.51
N (vignette persons)	2,209	2,174	1,732	1,709
N (respondents)	1,396	1,382	1,100	1,079

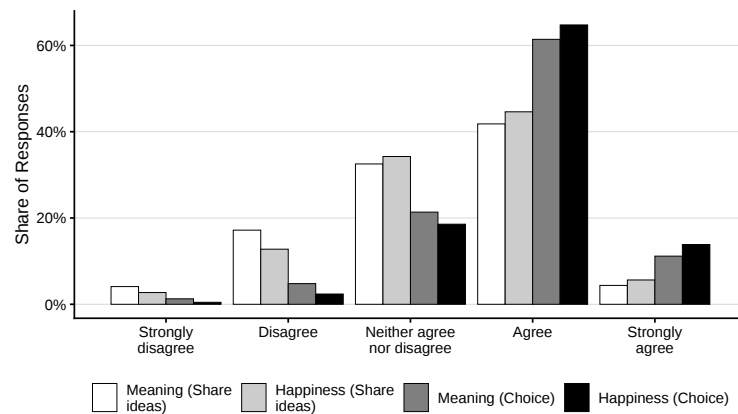
Notes: The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Figure I: Importance of meaning and happiness



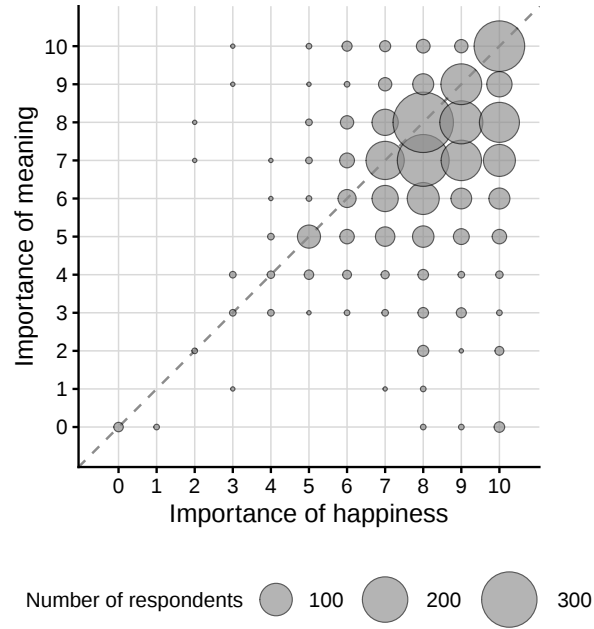
Notes: The respondents rated the importance of leading a meaningful and a happy life on a 0-10 point scale.

Figure II: Influence of meaning and happiness on choices and ideas shared with others



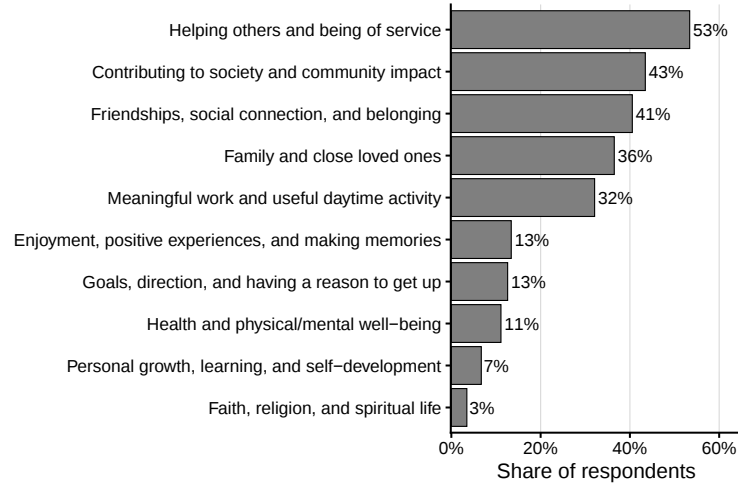
Notes: The respondents were asked whether their search for a meaningful and happy life influences their choices and actions. They were also asked whether they share their ideas about what makes life meaningful and what brings happiness.

Figure III: Correlation of importance of meaning and happiness



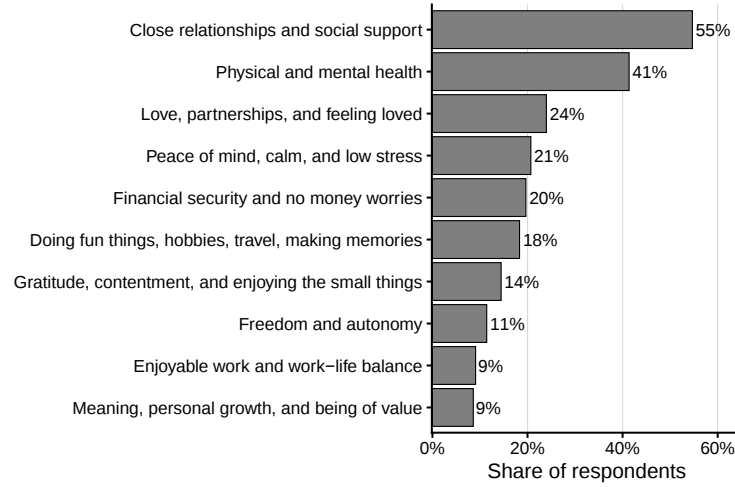
Notes: The figure plots respondents ratings of importance of meaning against importance of happiness. Circle size indicates the number of respondents with each combination of ratings.

Figure IV: Meaningful life themes from open questions



Notes: Bars show the share of respondents whose open-text answer about a meaningful life was classified into each theme by the LLM. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Figure V: Happy life themes from open questions



Notes: Bars show the share of respondents whose open-text answer about a happy life was classified into each theme by the LLM. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Online Appendix

Table A.1: Descriptive statistics for respondents

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean (full LISS sample)
Respondent characteristics					
Female	0.56				0.52
Has a partner	0.75				0.74
Has at least one child	0.63				0.57
Higher education	0.48				0.47
Currently working	0.82				0.77
Age	46.71	12.60	21.00	66.00	43.90
Net monthly income	2464.14	1354.69	0.00	11567.00	2397.35
Employment sector					
Industrial	0.06				
Healthcare	0.16				
Education	0.08				
Public administration	0.09				
Military	0.00				
Finance	0.05				
Other sectors	0.39				

Notes: All variables except age and net monthly income are binary. SD, min, and max are reported for continuous variables only. The respondent characteristics panel has N=2,608 observations. 0.4% of respondents (N=11) work in the military. Higher education equals 1 if the respondent holds a tertiary degree (applied or academic university), and 0 otherwise. The full LISS sample is restricted by age only to respondents aged 21-65 (N=5,357).

Table A.2: Description of categories for meaning defined by LLM based on answers to open questions

Category	Explanation
1. Helping others and being of service	Meaning comes from helping others through care, listening, small acts, or practical support, making others' lives easier or happier.
2. Contributing to society and community impact	Meaning comes from contributing to society or community and doing one's part beyond personal or private interests.
3. Friendships, social connection, and belonging	Meaning arises from friendships and social bonds, trust, deep conversations, and feeling part of a community.
4. Family and close loved ones	Meaning is anchored in family life: relationships with partner, children, and other close family, and being present and supportive.
5. Meaningful work and useful daytime activity	Meaning is found in work or daily activities that benefit others or society and provide a sense of purpose.
6. Enjoyment, positive experiences, and making memories	Meaning is connected to enjoying life, having fun, creating memories, and appreciating everyday moments.
7. Goals, direction, and having a reason to get up	Meaning comes from having goals or a life purpose that provides structure and motivation.
8. Health and physical/mental well-being	Health, energy, and well-being are foundational for functioning, enjoying life, and supporting others.
9. Personal growth, learning, and self-development	Meaning involves learning, skill development, self-reflection, and continuous personal growth.
10. Faith, religion, and spiritual life	Meaning arises from faith or spirituality, following religious teachings, participating in a community, and living according to values.

Notes. We used GPT-5.2 to inductively identify recurring themes in respondents' open-ended answers. The model was instructed to rely only on the survey responses, to avoid external assumptions, and to report the ten most common and salient themes. For each theme, the model provided an English title, a short explanation, and translated example statements. The full prompt is reported at the end of the Online Appendix.

Table A.3: Description of categories for happiness defined by LLM based on answers to open questions

Category	Explanation
1. Close relationships and social support	Happiness comes from close bonds with family and friends, sharing life, and having reliable social support.
2. Physical and mental health	Happiness is grounded in physical and mental health, including the ability to function, sleep well, and maintain well-being for oneself and loved ones.
3. Love, partnerships, and feeling loved	Romantic love and partnership, feeling loved and appreciated, contribute to happiness.
4. Peace of mind, calm, and low stress	Happiness involves inner calm, low stress, and a sense of stability, with fewer worries or conflicts.
5. Financial security and no money worries	Financial security and the absence of money worries enable peace of mind and occasional enjoyment.
6. Doing fun things, hobbies, travel, making memories	Engaging in fun activities, hobbies, travel, and creating memories enhances happiness.
7. Gratitude, contentment, and enjoying the small things	Contentment, appreciation, and noticing small everyday positives foster happiness.
8. Freedom and autonomy	Autonomy and the ability to make one's own choices about time, work, and lifestyle support happiness.
9. Enjoyable work and work-life balance	Enjoyable work and work-life balance contribute to happiness, providing satisfaction and time for personal life.
10. Meaning, personal growth, and being of value	Personal growth, purposeful action, and helping others add meaning and happiness to life.

Notes. We used GPT-5.2 to inductively identify recurring themes in respondents' open-ended answers. The model was instructed to rely only on the survey responses, to avoid external assumptions, and to report the ten most common and salient themes. For each theme, the model provided an English title, a short explanation, and translated example statements. The full prompt is reported in the Online Appendix.

Table A.4: Vignette ratings by vignette person characteristics with respondent fixed effects

Dependent Variables:	Vignette meaning	Vignette happiness	p-value
Vignette person characteristics			
Female	0.07*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.023**
Has a partner	0.14*** (0.03)	0.36*** (0.03)	0.000***
Has children	0.36*** (0.03)	0.07** (0.03)	0.000***
Has work motivation	0.60*** (0.03)	0.58*** (0.03)	0.091*
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.07* (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.004***
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.03)	0.000***
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.38*** (0.04)	0.000***
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	0.66*** (0.05)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.000***
Education	0.49*** (0.05)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.000***
Public administration	0.09* (0.05)	0.09** (0.04)	0.932
Army	0.41*** (0.05)	0.10** (0.04)	0.000***
Finance	-0.11** (0.05)	0.03 (0.04)	0.093*
<i>Fixed-effects</i>			
respondent	Yes	Yes	
Adjusted R ²	0.66	0.63	
Within Adjusted R ²	0.17	0.14	
Mean dependent	6.96	6.78	
SD dependent	1.72	1.50	
N (vignette persons)	7,824	7,824	
N (respondents)	2,608	2,608	

Notes: The lowest net income quartile spans 2,201-2,861 euros. Vignette net income quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. All independent variables are binary. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. The p-value column reports p-values for vignette meaning-happiness coefficient differences, with significance levels based on a pooled regression. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.5: Vignette ratings with respondent-vignette characteristic interactions

Dependent Variables:	Vignette meaning	Vignette happiness
Vignette person characteristics		
Female	0.14*** (0.05)	0.09** (0.05)
Has a partner	-0.05 (0.08)	0.22*** (0.07)
Has children	0.19*** (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)
Has work motivation	0.55*** (0.04)	0.52*** (0.04)
Vignette income quartiles (ref = Q1):		
Q2	0.05 (0.06)	0.20*** (0.05)
Q3	0.07 (0.06)	0.28*** (0.05)
Q4	0.10 (0.06)	0.27*** (0.06)
Employment sectors with reference: Industrial		
Healthcare	0.63*** (0.07)	0.14** (0.06)
Education	0.55*** (0.07)	0.20*** (0.06)
Public administration	0.12* (0.07)	0.14** (0.06)
Army	0.42*** (0.06)	0.10* (0.06)
Finance	-0.07 (0.07)	0.01 (0.06)
Respondent characteristics		
Female	0.36*** (0.07)	0.26*** (0.06)
Has a partner	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.13* (0.07)
Has at least one child	-0.12 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
Has work motivation	-0.18* (0.10)	-0.14 (0.09)
Respondent income quartiles (ref = Q1):		
Q2	0.11 (0.09)	0.08 (0.08)
Q3	0.20** (0.09)	0.22*** (0.08)
Q4	0.25*** (0.09)	0.22*** (0.08)
Employment sectors with reference: Industrial		
Healthcare	-0.02 (0.13)	-0.06 (0.11)
Education	-0.02 (0.14)	-0.14 (0.12)
Public administration	0.12 (0.14)	-0.05 (0.13)
Military	0.15 (0.36)	0.06 (0.34)
Finance	0.11 (0.16)	0.01 (0.14)
Other	-0.08 (0.11)	-0.13 (0.10)
Interactions		
Female × Female	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.12** (0.06)
Has a partner × Has a partner	0.23*** (0.09)	0.15* (0.08)
Has children × Has at least one child	0.18** (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)
Has work motivation × Has work motivation	0.26** (0.13)	0.09 (0.11)
Net income quartile interactions:		
Vignette Q2 × respondent Q2	0.02 (0.10)	-0.08 (0.09)
Vignette Q3 × respondent Q3	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.10 (0.09)
Vignette Q4 × respondent Q4	-0.06 (0.09)	0.09 (0.08)
Employment sector interactions		
Healthcare × Healthcare	0.18 (0.13)	0.10 (0.11)
Education × Education	0.34** (0.15)	0.09 (0.14)
Public administration × Public administration	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.19 (0.14)
Army × Military	-0.19 (0.45)	-0.60 (0.41)
Finance × Finance	-0.19 (0.20)	0.16 (0.17)
Constant	5.93*** (0.17)	5.96*** (0.15)
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.06
Mean dependent	6.96	6.78
SD dependent	1.72	1.50
N (vignette persons)	7,824	7,824
N (respondents)	2,608	2,608

Notes: Vignette income quartiles are based on the vignette person's income; quartile ranges are Q1: €2,201-€2,861; Q2: €2,861-€3,342; Q3: €3,343-€3,963; Q4: €3,963-€9,923. Respondent income quartiles are based on respondent net monthly income; quartile ranges are Q1: €0-€1,646; Q2: €1,650-€2,650; Q3: €2,650-€3,250; Q4: €3,250-€11,567. Q1 serves as the reference category for both income measures. Regressions include interactions between matching respondent and vignette person income quartiles. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.6: Correlates of prioritizing meaning at least as much as happiness using logit

Independent variables:	Importance meaning ≥ happiness	Importance meaning ≥ happiness + controls	Mean dependent
Respondent characteristics as dependent variables			
Has a partner	-0.38*** (0.09)	-0.39*** (0.09)	0.75
Has at least one child	-0.13 (0.08)	-0.22** (0.09)	0.63
Has work motivation	0.49*** (0.11)	0.43*** (0.12)	0.32
Net income quartiles:			
Q1 (0-1,646)	0.34*** (0.09)	0.31*** (0.10)	0.25
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	0.00 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.09)	0.25
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	-0.14 (0.09)	-0.09 (0.09)	0.25
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	-0.21** (0.09)	-0.17 (0.10)	0.25
Employment sectors:			
Industrial	-0.21 (0.17)	-0.16 (0.17)	0.06
Healthcare	0.24** (0.11)	0.18 (0.11)	0.16
Education	0.18 (0.14)	0.14 (0.15)	0.08
Public administration	-0.21 (0.14)	-0.20 (0.15)	0.09
Military	-0.87 (0.68)	-0.86 (0.68)	0.00
Finance	-0.45** (0.19)	-0.42** (0.19)	0.05
Public/non-profit sector	0.17** (0.08)	0.13 (0.09)	0.37
Not currently working	0.49*** (0.10)	0.45*** (0.11)	0.18

Notes: Logit models are used for binary dependent variables. The main independent variable equals 1 if the respondent rates meaning as at least as important as happiness. Each row reports a separate regression. Net income quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Public/non-profit sector includes public administration, education, healthcare, welfare, environment/culture/other, and military. Controls in the second column are female, higher education, age quartiles, and feeling religious. Control specifications also include a binary indicator for missing values on feeling religious. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.7: Correlates of prioritizing meaning at least as much as happiness for respondents with partners

Independent variables:	Importance meaning ≥ happiness	Importance meaning ≥ happiness + controls	Mean dependent
Respondent characteristics as dependent variables			
Has at least one child	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.72
Has work motivation	0.09*** (0.03)	0.07** (0.03)	0.32
Net income quartiles:			
Q1 (0-1,646)	0.05*** (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	0.23
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.25
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.26
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	-0.03* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.27
Employment sectors:			
Industrial	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.06
Healthcare	0.05*** (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	0.17
Education	0.03** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.09
Public administration	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.08
Military	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00
Finance	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	0.05
Public/non-profit sector	0.07*** (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)	0.38
Not currently working	0.06*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.02)	0.15
Respondent meaning	0.44*** (0.07)	0.39*** (0.07)	7.23
Respondent happiness	-0.24*** (0.06)	-0.26*** (0.07)	7.55

Notes: The sample is restricted to respondents who have a partner. The main independent variable equals 1 if the respondent rates meaning as at least as important as happiness. Each row reports a separate linear probability model. Net income quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Public/non-profit sector includes public administration, education, healthcare, welfare, environment/culture/other, and military. Controls in the second column are female, higher education, age quartiles, and feeling religious. Control specifications also include a binary indicator for missing values on feeling religious. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.8: Correlates of prioritizing meaning more than happiness

Independent variables:	Importance meaning > happiness	Importance meaning > happiness + controls	Mean dependent
Respondent characteristics as dependent variables			
Has a partner	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.05* (0.03)	0.75
Has at least one child	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)	0.63
Has work motivation	0.17*** (0.05)	0.14*** (0.05)	0.32
Net income quartiles:			
Q1 (0-1,646)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.25
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	-0.07*** (0.03)	-0.07** (0.03)	0.25
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.25
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.25
Employment sectors:			
Industrial	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	0.06
Healthcare	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.16
Education	0.04* (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.08
Public administration	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.09
Military	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.00
Finance	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.05
Public/non-profit sector	0.11*** (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)	0.37
Not currently working	0.06** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.03)	0.18
Respondent meaning	0.08 (0.11)	0.00 (0.11)	7.10
Respondent happiness	-0.63*** (0.11)	-0.66*** (0.11)	7.35

Notes: The main independent variable equals 1 if the respondent rates meaning as more important than happiness. Each row reports a separate linear probability model. Net income quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Public/non-profit sector includes public administration, education, healthcare, welfare, environment/culture/other, and military. Controls in the second column are female, higher education, age quartiles, and feeling religious. Control specifications also include a binary indicator for missing values on feeling religious. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.9: Self-reported meaning by respondent characteristics separately for men and women

Respondent gender:	Female	Male	p-value
Dependent Variable:	Respondent meaning		
Respondent characteristics			
Has a partner	0.26*** (0.09)	0.32** (0.14)	0.687
Has at least one child	0.36*** (0.10)	0.37*** (0.12)	0.979
Age quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (37-48)	-0.02 (0.11)	-0.24 (0.16)	0.264
Q3 (49-58)	-0.13 (0.13)	-0.18 (0.16)	0.817
Q4 (59-66)	0.40*** (0.12)	0.14 (0.16)	0.185
Has work motivation	0.00 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.13)	0.500
Net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	0.08 (0.11)	0.05 (0.21)	0.914
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	0.05 (0.12)	0.13 (0.21)	0.731
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	0.23* (0.12)	0.15 (0.21)	0.730
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	0.28*** (0.10)	0.53*** (0.16)	0.185
Education	0.21* (0.12)	0.39** (0.18)	0.410
Public administration	-0.11 (0.15)	0.17 (0.17)	0.215
Military	0.79*** (0.16)	0.31 (0.31)	0.161
Finance	-0.21 (0.19)	0.39** (0.18)	0.020**
Other sectors	-0.14 (0.14)	-0.18 (0.17)	0.857
Part-time work	-0.14 (0.09)	-0.07 (0.13)	0.640
Not currently working	-0.59*** (0.14)	-0.65*** (0.22)	0.807
Constant	6.92*** (0.15)	6.40*** (0.23)	0.055*
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.06	
Mean dependent	7.26	6.89	
SD dependent	1.46	1.68	
Number of respondents	1,461	1,147	

Notes: The variable other sectors is binary and equals 1 for all respondents that are currently working, but not in one of the listed sectors. Part-time work equals 1 for employed respondents working part-time; full-time work is the omitted category. Age quartile Q1 spans 22-36 years. The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 0-1,646 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Regressions include a binary indicator for missing values on work motivation (1177 observations). Work motivation is a binary variable coded 1 if the respondent's main reason for working is not financial. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. We report p-values for female-male coefficient differences, with significance levels based on a pooled regression with gender interactions. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.10: Self-reported happiness by respondent characteristics separately for men and women

Respondent gender:	Female	Male	p-value
Dependent Variable:	Respondent happiness		
Respondent characteristics			
Has a partner	0.63*** (0.09)	0.66*** (0.12)	0.848
Has at least one child	0.29*** (0.10)	0.09 (0.11)	0.180
Age quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (37-48)	-0.15 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.15)	0.672
Q3 (49-58)	-0.16 (0.13)	-0.02 (0.15)	0.502
Q4 (59-66)	0.26** (0.12)	0.24 (0.16)	0.927
Has work motivation	0.08 (0.11)	-0.11 (0.13)	0.260
Net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):			
Q2 (1,650-2,650)	0.11 (0.10)	0.19 (0.21)	0.725
Q3 (2,650-3,250)	0.13 (0.12)	0.20 (0.21)	0.751
Q4 (3,250-11,567)	0.36*** (0.12)	0.39* (0.21)	0.912
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):			
Healthcare	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.17)	0.846
Education	0.04 (0.12)	-0.39* (0.21)	0.079*
Public administration	-0.32** (0.16)	-0.14 (0.15)	0.397
Military	0.40** (0.16)	0.16 (0.33)	0.499
Finance	-0.12 (0.16)	-0.06 (0.19)	0.790
Other sectors	-0.14 (0.14)	-0.23 (0.15)	0.668
Part-time work	-0.20** (0.10)	-0.02 (0.11)	0.226
Not currently working	-0.64*** (0.15)	-0.95*** (0.24)	0.266
Constant	6.98*** (0.15)	6.60*** (0.22)	0.148
Adjusted R ²	0.10	0.10	
Mean dependent	7.42	7.26	
SD dependent	1.47	1.64	
Number of respondents	1,461	1,147	

Notes: The variable other sectors is binary and equals 1 for all respondents that are currently working, but not in one of the listed sectors. Part-time work equals 1 for employed respondents working part-time; full-time work is the omitted category. Age quartile Q1 spans 22-36 years. The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 0-1,646 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Regressions include a binary indicator for missing values on work motivation (1177 observations). Work motivation is a binary variable coded 1 if the respondent's main reason for working is not financial. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. We report p-values for female-male coefficient differences, with significance levels based on a pooled regression with gender interactions. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.11: Vignette ratings by vignette person characteristics and respondent gender

Respondent gender	Male respondents		Female respondents	
Dependent Variables:	Vignette meaning	Vignette happiness	Vignette meaning	Vignette happiness
Vignette person characteristics				
Female	0.14** (0.05)	0.10** (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Has a partner	0.08 (0.06)	0.38*** (0.05)	0.16*** (0.05)	0.27*** (0.04)
Has children	0.38*** (0.06)	0.13** (0.05)	0.25*** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.04)
Has work motivation	0.54*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)	0.60*** (0.05)	0.55*** (0.05)
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	-0.02 (0.09)	0.13* (0.08)	0.09 (0.07)	0.21*** (0.06)
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.09 (0.09)	0.31*** (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)	0.20*** (0.06)
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.11 (0.09)	0.39*** (0.08)	0.05 (0.07)	0.21*** (0.06)
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.69*** (0.11)	0.22** (0.09)	0.65*** (0.09)	0.12 (0.08)
Education	0.55*** (0.10)	0.16* (0.09)	0.62*** (0.08)	0.26*** (0.07)
Public administration	0.16 (0.11)	0.15* (0.09)	0.08 (0.08)	0.10 (0.08)
Army	0.43*** (0.10)	0.15* (0.09)	0.42*** (0.08)	0.06 (0.07)
Finance	-0.15 (0.10)	0.05 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.01 (0.08)
Constant	5.90*** (0.12)	5.82*** (0.10)	6.21*** (0.10)	6.22*** (0.09)
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.05
Mean dependent	6.80	6.70	7.08	6.84
SD dependent	1.78	1.55	1.67	1.46
N (vignette persons)	3,441	3,441	4,383	4,383
N (respondents)	1,147	1,147	1,461	1,461

Notes: Vignette net income quartiles are based on the vignette person's income; Q1 serves as the reference category. Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.12: Differences in vignette meaning coefficients by respondent and vignette gender

	Coefficient differences			
	Women on women – women on men	Women on men – men on men	Men on men – men on women	Men on women – women on women
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	-0.10 [0.282]	0.11 [0.296]	0.03 [0.806]	-0.03 [0.733]
Has children	0.19* [0.054]	-0.32*** [0.005]	0.17 [0.150]	-0.05 [0.671]
Has work motivation	0.06 [0.553]	0.07 [0.535]	-0.07 [0.536]	-0.06 [0.605]
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.12 [0.421]	-0.01 [0.948]	0.14 [0.379]	-0.25 [0.102]
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.28** [0.032]	-0.17 [0.282]	-0.06 [0.695]	-0.05 [0.710]
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.40*** [0.003]	-0.35** [0.027]	0.17 [0.293]	-0.22 [0.134]
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.00 [0.990]	-0.07 [0.713]	0.07 [0.733]	0.00 [0.999]
Education	0.08 [0.631]	0.09 [0.649]	-0.10 [0.615]	-0.07 [0.679]
Public administration	-0.07 [0.693]	-0.10 [0.592]	0.10 [0.635]	0.08 [0.681]
Army	-0.15 [0.399]	-0.02 [0.901]	0.18 [0.366]	0.00 [0.978]
Finance	0.09 [0.614]	0.03 [0.875]	0.07 [0.711]	-0.20 [0.282]
Constant	-0.21 [0.262]	0.53** [0.011]	-0.32 [0.112]	-0.01 [0.963]

Notes: Differences are from a pooled model with full interactions between vignette characteristics and the respondent-by-vignette gender group. Each cell reports the coefficient difference with the p-value in brackets. Standard errors for the differences are computed from the clustered variance-covariance matrix. Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.13: Differences in vignette happiness coefficients by respondent and vignette gender

	Coefficient differences			
	Women on women – women on men	Women on men – men on men	Men on men – men on women	Men on women – women on women
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	-0.01 [0.887]	-0.10 [0.296]	0.01 [0.937]	0.10 [0.270]
Has children	0.10 [0.256]	-0.38*** [0.000]	0.28*** [0.007]	0.00 [0.980]
Has work motivation	0.04 [0.631]	0.08 [0.417]	-0.06 [0.575]	-0.06 [0.517]
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.05 [0.713]	-0.04 [0.785]	0.20 [0.177]	-0.21 [0.110]
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.17 [0.170]	-0.24* [0.079]	0.10 [0.493]	-0.02 [0.872]
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.22* [0.076]	-0.38*** [0.007]	0.19 [0.203]	-0.03 [0.841]
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	-0.16 [0.294]	-0.10 [0.567]	0.16 [0.382]	0.10 [0.549]
Education	-0.19 [0.187]	0.18 [0.301]	0.04 [0.808]	-0.03 [0.840]
Public administration	-0.02 [0.900]	-0.10 [0.546]	0.12 [0.480]	0.00 [1.000]
Army	-0.22 [0.143]	-0.17 [0.318]	0.40** [0.020]	-0.01 [0.956]
Finance	-0.07 [0.633]	-0.18 [0.313]	0.30* [0.094]	-0.05 [0.759]
Constant	-0.08 [0.602]	0.62*** [0.001]	-0.50*** [0.005]	-0.04 [0.821]

Notes: Differences are from a pooled model with full interactions between vignette characteristics and the respondent-by-vignette gender group. Each cell reports the coefficient difference with the p-value in brackets. Standard errors for the differences are computed from the clustered variance-covariance matrix. Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.14: Vignette meaning ratings by gender of parent and vignette person

Model Type:	Women on women	Women on men	Men on men	Men on women
Dependent Variable:	Vignette meaning			
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	0.12 (0.08)	0.20** (0.09)	0.11 (0.10)	0.00 (0.09)
Has children	0.39*** (0.09)	0.25*** (0.09)	0.54*** (0.11)	0.38*** (0.10)
Has work motivation	0.62*** (0.09)	0.53*** (0.09)	0.41*** (0.12)	0.53*** (0.10)
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.15)	-0.09 (0.14)
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.09 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.15)	0.13 (0.15)
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.23* (0.12)	-0.26** (0.12)	0.07 (0.15)	-0.11 (0.14)
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.65*** (0.14)	0.60*** (0.16)	0.73*** (0.19)	0.58*** (0.19)
Education	0.84*** (0.14)	0.62*** (0.16)	0.35* (0.20)	0.49*** (0.17)
Public administration	0.17 (0.15)	0.00 (0.16)	0.28 (0.20)	0.14 (0.16)
Army	0.43*** (0.15)	0.44*** (0.16)	0.46** (0.19)	0.37** (0.18)
Finance	0.08 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.16)	-0.09 (0.20)	-0.30* (0.17)
Constant	6.08*** (0.16)	6.39*** (0.18)	5.95*** (0.21)	6.26*** (0.18)
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.06	0.05	0.07
Mean dependent	7.08	7.04	6.75	6.91
SD dependent	1.67	1.72	1.79	1.65
N (vignette persons)	1,421	1,396	1,054	1,034
N (respondents)	894	888	667	658

Notes: The sample is restricted to respondents with at least one child. The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.15: Vignette happiness ratings by gender of parent and vignette person

Model Type:	Women on women	Women on men	Men on men	Men on women
Dependent Variable:	Vignette happiness			
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	0.26*** (0.07)	0.27*** (0.08)	0.34*** (0.09)	0.29*** (0.09)
Has children	0.00 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.08)	0.28*** (0.10)	-0.05 (0.09)
Has work motivation	0.57*** (0.08)	0.50*** (0.08)	0.42*** (0.10)	0.48*** (0.09)
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.14 (0.10)	0.11 (0.11)	0.18 (0.14)	0.06 (0.13)
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.23** (0.11)	0.02 (0.11)	0.32** (0.13)	0.22* (0.13)
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.30*** (0.11)	-0.01 (0.10)	0.48*** (0.14)	0.23* (0.13)
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.06 (0.13)	0.27* (0.14)	0.27* (0.16)	0.12 (0.16)
Education	0.29** (0.12)	0.47*** (0.13)	0.20 (0.18)	0.11 (0.15)
Public administration	0.21* (0.12)	0.14 (0.14)	0.35** (0.17)	0.02 (0.14)
Army	0.04 (0.13)	0.23* (0.13)	0.43** (0.17)	0.04 (0.15)
Finance	0.02 (0.13)	0.12 (0.14)	0.28 (0.18)	-0.21 (0.14)
Constant	6.15*** (0.14)	6.27*** (0.15)	5.66*** (0.18)	6.28*** (0.15)
Adjusted R ²	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04
Mean dependent	6.84	6.87	6.69	6.78
SD dependent	1.42	1.46	1.56	1.46
N (vignette persons)	1,421	1,396	1,054	1,034
N (respondents)	894	888	667	658

Notes: The sample is restricted to respondents with at least one child. The lowest income quartile Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level are in parentheses. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.16: Differences in vignette meaning coefficients by gender of parent and vignette person

	Coefficient differences			
	Women on women – women on men	Women on men – men on men	Men on men – men on women	Men on women – women on women
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	-0.08 [0.523]	0.09 [0.499]	0.11 [0.426]	-0.12 [0.330]
Has children	0.14 [0.266]	-0.29** [0.044]	0.17 [0.251]	-0.02 [0.894]
Has work motivation	0.09 [0.458]	0.12 [0.431]	-0.12 [0.410]	-0.09 [0.527]
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	-0.01 [0.945]	0.02 [0.906]	0.06 [0.770]	-0.07 [0.718]
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.25 [0.133]	-0.04 [0.842]	-0.26 [0.204]	0.04 [0.828]
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.49*** [0.003]	-0.33* [0.093]	0.18 [0.367]	-0.34* [0.067]
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	0.05 [0.834]	-0.12 [0.628]	0.15 [0.575]	-0.08 [0.748]
Education	0.23 [0.281]	0.26 [0.293]	-0.14 [0.596]	-0.36 [0.100]
Public administration	0.17 [0.448]	-0.28 [0.277]	0.14 [0.577]	-0.03 [0.903]
Army	-0.01 [0.951]	-0.02 [0.944]	0.09 [0.727]	-0.06 [0.803]
Finance	0.17 [0.437]	0.00 [0.994]	0.20 [0.457]	-0.37* [0.099]
Constant	-0.32 [0.172]	0.45 [0.102]	-0.32 [0.228]	0.19 [0.437]

Notes: The sample is restricted to respondents with at least one child. Differences are from a pooled model with full interactions between vignette characteristics and the respondent-by-vignette gender group. Each cell reports the coefficient difference with the p-value in brackets. Standard errors for the differences are computed from the clustered variance-covariance matrix. Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Table A.17: Differences in vignette happiness coefficients by gender of parent and vignette person

	Coefficient differences			
	Women on women – women on men	Women on men – men on men	Men on men – men on women	Men on women – women on women
Vignette person characteristics				
Has a partner	-0.01 [0.919]	-0.07 [0.545]	0.05 [0.687]	0.03 [0.783]
Has children	0.06 [0.586]	-0.34*** [0.006]	0.33*** [0.007]	-0.05 [0.690]
Has work motivation	0.07 [0.511]	0.08 [0.509]	-0.06 [0.630]	-0.09 [0.457]
Vignette net income quartiles (ref. = Q1):				
Q2 (2,861-3,342)	0.03 [0.819]	-0.07 [0.693]	0.12 [0.515]	-0.08 [0.618]
Q3 (3,343-3,963)	0.21 [0.169]	-0.30* [0.077]	0.10 [0.555]	-0.01 [0.938]
Q4 (3,963-9,923)	0.31** [0.032]	-0.49*** [0.005]	0.24 [0.203]	-0.06 [0.708]
Employment sectors (ref. = Industrial):				
Healthcare	-0.21 [0.286]	0.00 [0.995]	0.15 [0.514]	0.05 [0.799]
Education	-0.19 [0.304]	0.27 [0.225]	0.09 [0.693]	-0.17 [0.359]
Public administration	0.07 [0.700]	-0.21 [0.340]	0.33 [0.126]	-0.19 [0.304]
Army	-0.19 [0.305]	-0.20 [0.355]	0.40* [0.077]	-0.01 [0.977]
Finance	-0.10 [0.571]	-0.15 [0.498]	0.49** [0.029]	-0.23 [0.223]
Constant	-0.12 [0.533]	0.61*** [0.009]	-0.62*** [0.006]	0.13 [0.518]

Notes: The sample is restricted to respondents with at least one child. Differences are from a pooled model with full interactions between vignette characteristics and the respondent-by-vignette gender group. Each cell reports the coefficient difference with the p-value in brackets. Standard errors for the differences are computed from the clustered variance-covariance matrix. Q1 spans 2,201-2,861 euros; quartile ranges in row labels are in euros. Significance levels are * 10%, ** 5%, and *** 1%.

Figure A.1: Screenshot of an example vignette

Persoon 3

Lucas heeft geen partner.
Hij heeft geen kinderen.
Hij werkt fulltime bij de overheid.
Voor Lucas is werk iets waar hij zich sterk voor inzet.
Hij verdient €2662 netto per maand.

Op een schaal van 0 (helemaal niet betekenisvol) tot 10 (zeer betekenisvol), ...

Helemaal niet betekenisvol 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Zeer betekenisvol

...hoe betekenisvol vindt u het leven van Lucas?

Op een schaal van 0 (zeer ongelukkig) tot 10 (zeer gelukkig), ...

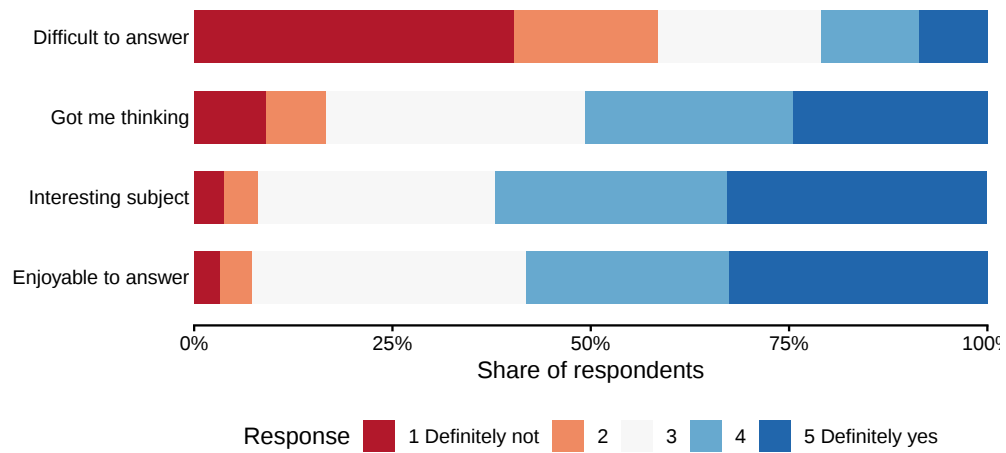
Zeer ongelukkig 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Zeer gelukkig

...hoe gelukkig denkt u dat Lucas is?

Vorige Verder

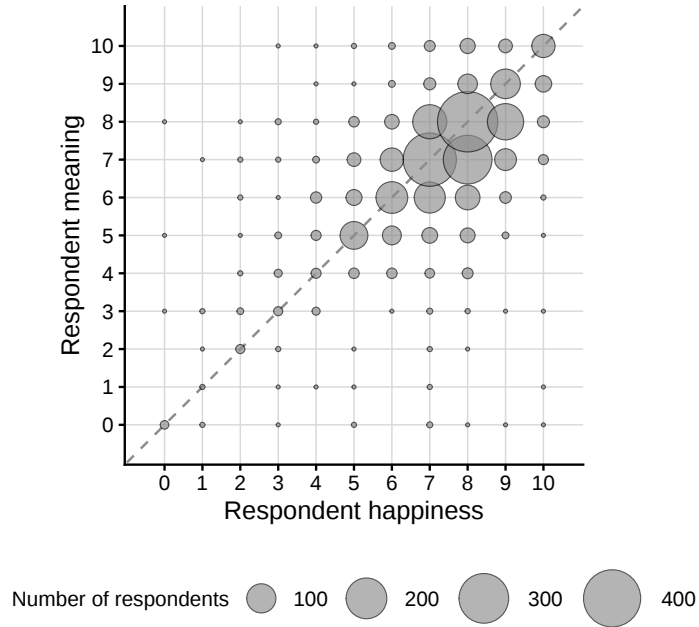
 

Figure A.2: Feedback to the questionnaire



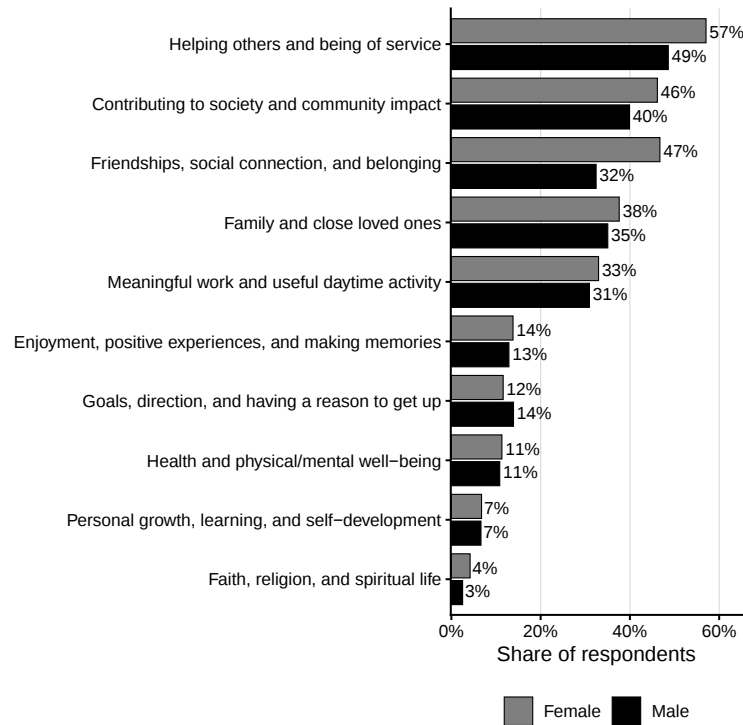
Notes: After each LISS survey, respondents are asked to evaluate the questionnaire. The items shown ask whether respondents found the survey interesting, whether it made them think, whether they found it difficult, and whether the topic was clear.

Figure A.3: Relationship between self-reported meaning and happiness



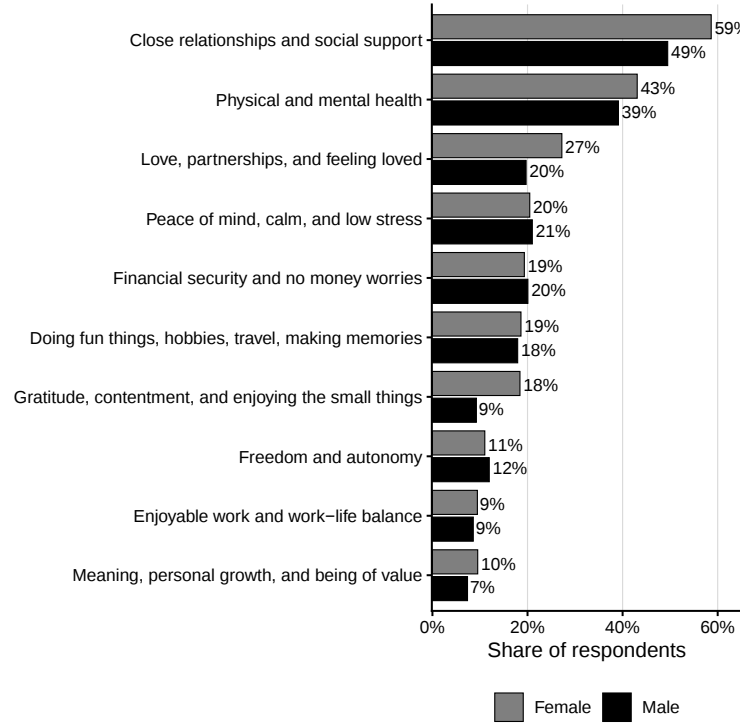
Notes: The figure plots self-reported happiness against self-reported meaning. Circle size indicates the number of respondents with each combination of ratings, as shown in the size legend.

Figure A.4: Meaningful life themes from open questions



Notes: Bars show the share of men or women whose open-text answer about a meaningful life was classified into each theme by the LLM. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Figure A.5: Happy life themes from open questions by gender



Notes: Bars show the share of men or women whose open-text answer about a happy life was classified into each theme by the LLM. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

LLM Prompt for Theme Identification

You are an economics professor at a leading university studying human behavior, especially what makes life meaningful and contributes to happiness. When analyzing a respondent's text, only use the content of the text as evidence. Do not bring in your own assumptions or general knowledge about what makes life meaningful.

You are analyzing written survey responses. The texts you see are all responses from multiple respondents to the following Dutch question:

“We willen het graag hebben over wat het leven betekenisvol maakt. Wat vindt u belangrijk voor een leven met betekenis? U mag zoveel noemen als u wilt.”

Based only on the content of the provided responses, identify the ten most common and salient themes mentioned by respondents. For each theme, provide an English title, a short explanation, and two to three translated or closely paraphrased example statements. Use only the provided responses as evidence, do not introduce unsupported themes, and provide the entire output in English.