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Individual differences in lay conceptions of a happy, meaningful, and psychologically rich life

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ABSTRACT

This study examines individual differences in how individuals evaluate lives described as happy, meaningful, or psychologically rich, and how these life ideals relate to judgments of a "good life." The present research investigates whether systematic variation in lay evaluations reflects stable trait-linked orientations. Results show that a happy life is evaluated as emotionally comfortable and relationally grounded, characterized by feeling good, valuing close relationships, and preferring stability, and security. A meaningful life is evaluated as future-oriented and purpose-driven, marked by striving, societal contribution, and long-term goals, consistent with conscientious and prosocial orientations. In contrast, a psychologically rich life is evaluated as emphasizing novelty, exploration, and creativity, aligning with openness to experience and extraversion. Across evaluations, happy and meaningful lives are judged as more prototypical of a good life than psychologically rich lives. These findings suggest that individual differences in personality and motivation shape how people attribute value to different kinds of lives, rather than how they define well-being per se.

1. Introduction

Understanding what constitutes a *good life* has long been a central concern in research. Within psychological research, this question has primarily been addressed through the study of well-being, with influential distinctions between happiness and meaning in life. Happiness is typically conceptualized as a hedonic construct encompassing positive affect, pleasure, vitality, and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999; Kahneman & Deaton 2010). Meaning in life, by contrast, is commonly discussed within eudaimonic traditions and characterized by purpose, coherence, and significance (Baumeister et al., 2013; King & Hicks, 2021; Martela & Steger, 2016). More recently, a psychologically rich life has been proposed as a complementary life ideal emphasizing variety, complexity, and perspective-changing experiences (Oishi et al., 2019, 2020).

These concepts differ in their theoretical status. Happiness and meaning are well-established psychological constructs studied as experiential states or outcomes, whereas psychological richness has been introduced as a life ideal capturing forms of value not fully represented by either happiness or meaning. The good life itself is not a psychological construct, but a broader evaluative notion shaped by moral, social, and cultural considerations (Kneer & Haybron, 2024).

The present research examines lay conceptions—that is, how individuals intuitively represent and evaluate different kinds of lives. When individuals attribute characteristics to a "happy," "meaningful," "psychologically rich," or "good" life, they draw on shared but imperfect mental representations rather than formal definitions or explicit theories.

Recent work demonstrates that such lay conceptions are psychologically relevant. Lay judgments of happiness are not reducible to subjective well-being and often exclude moral considerations (Kneer & Haybron, 2023). Lay conceptions of meaning emphasize purpose, contribution, and narrative structure, extending beyond scientific models (Fuhrer & Cova, 2023b; Li et al., 2022; Prinzing et al., 2022).

Despite this growing literature, relatively little is known about systematic individual differences in these lay evaluations. One plausible source of variation lies in stable, personality-linked motivational orientations. Personality traits shape what individuals attend to, value, and regard as desirable, and may therefore influence which characteristics they associate with different life ideals (Oishi & Westgate, 2022).

From this perspective, lay conceptions of happiness, meaning, psychological richness, and the good life can be understood as trait-linked attributional schemas. The present research adopts this approach by examining third-person evaluations of different life ideals. The study

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focuses on lay evaluations of others' lives rather than explicit definitions or first-person experience. These evaluative patterns reflect enduring motivational priorities—such as orientations toward comfort, contribution, or curiosity—rather than explicit philosophies or normative commitments.

The present study contributes to research in three ways. First, it demonstrates that third-person evaluations of life ideals are structured and differentiated. Second, it situates psychological richness within a broader evaluative landscape relative to happiness, meaning, and the good life. Third, by explicitly comparing these life ideals with judgments of a *good life*, it clarifies which characteristics are perceived as prototypical versus distinctive in evaluations.

2. Conceptions of different life ideals

Lay persons routinely evaluate lives not only in terms of how individuals feel, but also in terms of whether a life is *good*. Such judgments extend beyond momentary experiences and reflect broader evaluative standards concerning what matters in life. Although psychological research has traditionally distinguished between happiness and meaning in life—often aligning them with hedonic and eudaimonic well-being—accumulating evidence challenges a sharp separation between these constructs. Eudaimonic well-being has been operationalized in highly heterogeneous ways, leading to inconsistent findings and limited comparability across studies (e.g., Martela & Sheldon, 2019). Moreover, large-scale analyses indicate that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, as commonly measured, are highly correlated and embedded in similar nomological networks (e.g., Disabato et al., 2016).

These findings suggest that distinctions between happiness, meaning, and related concepts may function less as separations between distinct experiential states and more as evaluative frameworks used to interpret lives. Accordingly, the focus is on how individuals evaluate different kinds of lives.

2.1. Conceptions of a good life

Individuals frequently evaluate whether a person has lived a *good life*. Recent empirical work suggests that lay conceptions of a good life constitute a broad evaluative category that is not reducible to subjective well-being alone (Kneer & Haybron, 2024). Judgments of a good life integrate moral, social, and evaluative considerations that may diverge from perceived happiness. For instance, having a morally bad character substantially reduces ascriptions of having lived a good life even when perceived happiness remains unchanged (Kneer & Haybron, 2024).

These findings indicate that the good life functions as a superordinate evaluative concept that integrates multiple sources of value. Happiness, meaning, and other experiences contribute to judgments of a good life, but none is sufficient on its own. Examining lives described as good alongside lives described as happy, meaningful, or psychologically rich therefore allows for a systematic comparison of which characteristics are perceived as broadly prototypical of a *good life* and which are viewed as distinctive to specific life ideals.

2.2. A happy life

In psychological research, happiness is typically conceptualized as a hedonic construct encompassing positive affect, pleasure, vitality, and evaluative life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). The present research does not seek to define happiness as a theoretical construct, but instead examines how individuals intuitively attribute characteristics to a life described as happy.

A happy life is commonly associated with emotional comfort, balance, and the predominance of positive affect, alongside the relative absence of stress or conflict (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Oishi et al., 2019, 2020; Oishi & Westgate, 2022). From a personality perspective, such attributions align with motivational orientations toward stability, security, and social harmony. Happiness is therefore represented less in terms of achievement or transformation and more in terms of maintaining positive mood, comfort, and harmonious relationships (Oishi & Westgate, 2022). Within evaluations of the good life, happiness captures affective and relational dimensions that are widely regarded as desirable.

2.3. A meaningful life

Meaning in life is commonly discussed in psychological research in terms of purpose, coherence, and significance, albeit sometimes extended by the dimension of positive impact (Fuhrer & Cova, 2023; King & Hicks, 2021; Martela & Steger, 2016). While these dimensions structure scientific models of experienced meaning, prior work suggests that lay conceptions of a meaningful life extend beyond abstract cognitive components.

Meaningful lives are often associated with effort, responsibility, and sustained commitment to goals that extend beyond immediate pleasure and the self (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2013). Meaning is associated with moral worth, contribution, and narrative structure, highlighting the social and ethical significance of a life rather than hedonic comfort alone (Fuhrer & Cova, 2023; Prinzing et al., 2022). Within evaluations of the good life, meaning contributes a dimension grounded in purpose, responsibility, and perceived moral significance.

2.4. A psychologically rich life

The psychologically rich life has been proposed as a complementary life ideal emphasizing variety, complexity, and perspective-changing experiences. Psychological richness is not primarily associated with pleasure or purpose, but with experiential depth and cognitive engagement (Oishi et al., 2019, 2020).

Psychological richness is closely aligned with openness to experience, intellectual curiosity, and exploratory motivation (Besser & Oishi, 2020). Psychologically rich lives are often associated with emotionally complex rather than uniformly positive, involving ambiguity, mixed affect, and disruption of routine. Psychological richness is distinguished from happiness by its tolerance for challenge and from meaning by its emphasis on exploration over obligation (Oishi et al., 2020). Within broader evaluations of a good life, psychological richness contributes a dimension centered on cognitive engagement and experiential depth.

2.5. Trait-linked conceptions of the good life

Lay attributions concerning what constitutes a happy, meaningful, psychologically rich, or good life are likely shaped by enduring motivational tendencies associated with personality traits. Agreeable individuals may be more inclined to associate good lives with harmony and care, conscientious individuals with purpose and contribution, and open individuals with novelty and exploration.

Rather than treating life ideals as objective or universally shared standards, the present research conceptualizes them as trait-linked attributional schemas reflecting stable motivational orientations. Individuals differ systematically in the characteristics they associate with different kinds of lives, and these differences reflect stable motivational orientations rather than explicit theoretical beliefs. By examining how individuals attribute traits, values, and behaviors to different life ideals, the present research captures how personality functions as a cognitive framework shaping lay evaluations of lives.

3. The present research

Prior research has focused predominantly on lived experiences of happiness, meaning, and psychological richness, leaving open how individuals intuitively evaluate different kinds of lives. The present research addresses this gap by examining individual differences in third-

person evaluations of happy, meaningful, and psychologically rich lives, and by situating these evaluations relative to judgments of a good life.

By focusing on attributional patterns rather than experienced states, this research extends personality research from self-reported outcomes to cognitive representations of life ideals that guide evaluative judgments and everyday choice. It examines how motivational tendencies are reflected in evaluative judgments rather than in lived experience (see OSF for pre-registration, measurement, stimuli, data, and supplementary analysis).

3.1. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to imagine a person living one of four conditions: a good life ($n = 108$; control condition), a happy life ($n = 94$), a meaningful life ($n = 100$), or a psychologically rich life ($n = 107$; see OSF for instructions). They then indicated how strongly a range of traits, values, and behaviors applied to that person.

Minimal descriptive information was provided to avoid priming and to elicit spontaneous judgments. This vignette-based, between-subjects design captures attributional representations—how participants intuitively associate emotional, motivational, and behavioral characteristics with different life ideals—rather than descriptions or reports of lived experience.

3.2. Participants

I recruited 434 participants at a mid-size research university in Germany. As preregistered, I excluded participants who did not pass the attention check ($n = 25$; Gummer et al., 2021). This resulted in a total sample size of $N = 409$ ($M_{age} = 26.17$, $SD_{age} = 9.94$, range: 18–78 years). In the final sample, 74.6% identified as female and 25.4% as male, and 1.3% identified as diverse which is the option for a third gender in European countries.

3.3. Dependent variables

Participants completed a comprehensive set of items assessing their associations with each life ideal. Items were drawn from research on happiness, meaning, and psychological richness and organized into ten conceptual domains: affect; time orientation and use; social engagement; activities; job and work values; life areas; humor; agency and communion; consumption choices; and choosing a good life (full item list on OSF and in tables).

3.4. Results

Results are reported narratively with descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each life ideal and the good life. One-way ANOVAs with planned contrasts were used to examine differences among happy, meaningful, and psychologically rich lives, as well as comparisons between each life ideal and the good life. The text highlights systematic differences.

3.4.1. Affect

Affect-related attributions differed across life ideals and relative to the good life (Table 1). Happy lives were rated higher on ease ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.44$) and feeling good ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 0.77$), and lower on struggle ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.25$) and feeling bad ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.95$) than meaningful and psychologically rich lives. Meaningful lives showed lower ease ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.37$) and higher struggle ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.38$), whereas psychologically rich lives were characterized by moderate struggle ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.37$), lower feeling good ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 0.92$), and higher feeling bad ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.10$).

Compared with the good life, happy lives showed the closest alignment on ease and positive affect, whereas psychologically rich lives diverged most strongly by combining lower positive and higher negative affect.

3.4.2. Time orientation and use

Time-related attributions differed across life ideals and in comparison with the good life (Table 2). Meaningful lives were more future-oriented ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.42$) and more strongly associated with helping others ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.02$). Psychologically rich lives were characterized by diversifying experiences ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 0.92$) and openness to novelty ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 0.80$).

Relative to the good life, happy lives again showed the greatest overlap in present focus and time valuation, whereas psychologically rich lives diverged by emphasizing experiential diversification over temporal balance.

3.4.3. Social engagement

Social engagement patterns differed across life ideals and relative to the good life (Table 3). Happy lives emphasized close ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 0.77$) and stable relationships ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 0.79$), meaningful lives combined relational closeness ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 0.98$) with prosocial engagement ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.16$), and psychologically rich lives prioritized social variety. Psychologically rich lives were rated lower on long-term friendships ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.42$) and family ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.50$), and higher on forming new contacts ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 0.93$), compared with happy and meaningful lives.

In comparison with the good life, happy and meaningful lives showed greater overlap in relational stability, whereas psychologically rich lives diverged by placing less emphasis on enduring social bonds.

3.4.4. Activities

Activity-related attributions differed across life ideals and in relation to the good life (Table 4). Happy lives were associated with sleeping ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.15$), snoozing ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.45$), and watching TV ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.40$). Meaningful lives were associated with work ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.01$), commuting ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.01$), and less with sex ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.13$). Psychologically rich lives emphasized socializing ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 0.87$), partying ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.12$), social media use ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.55$), commuting ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.65$), and arguing ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.33$), less with being home ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.36$) and reading ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.46$).

Compared with the good life, happy and meaningful lives showed

Table 1
Affect.

Statement	Total	Good life (control)	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
For the person, life is easy.	4.38(1.47)	$4.67(1.46)_{a}$	$4.87(1.44)_{a}$	$3.91(1.37)_{b}$	$4.09(1.40)_{b}$
For this person, life is a struggle.	2.51(1.36)	$2.30(1.27)_{a}$	$2.03(1.25)_{a}$	$2.98(1.38)_{b}$	$2.70(1.37)_{b}$
The person often feels good.	6.05(1.00)	$6.09(1.09)_{a}$	$6.41(0.77)_{c}$	$5.89(1.09)_{a,b}$	$5.82(0.92)_{b}$
The person often feels bad.	2.17(1.11)	$1.95(1.03)_{a}$	$1.89(0.95)_{a}$	$2.35(1.23)_{b}$	$2.47(1.10)_{b}$
The person often feels bored.	2.19(1.23)	$2.46(1.19)_{a}$	$2.11(1.05)_{b,c}$	$2.24(1.11)_{a,b,c}$	$1.95(1.46)_{b,c}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference.

Table 2
Time.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
The person thinks a lot about the past.	2.89(1.23)	2.99(1.07)	2.97(1.31)	2.79(1.21)	2.83(1.33)
The person thinks a lot about the present.	5.52(1.19)	5.52(1.10)	5.63(1.11)	5.59(1.12)	5.37(1.39)
The person thinks a lot about the future.	4.44(1.42)	$4.43(1.23)_{a,b,c}$	$4.06(1.45)_{a}$	$4.74(1.42)_{b,d}$	$4.50(1.51)_{c,d}$
It is important to the person to have free time.	5.34(1.25)	$5.40(1.19)_{a,b,c}$	$5.63(0.98)_{a}$	$5.17(1.26)_{b,d}$	$5.20(1.48)_{c,d}$
The person likes to spend time at work.	4.62(1.36)	$4.96(1.14)_{a,b}$	$4.99(1.27)_{a,d}$	$4.88(1.16)_{b,d}$	$3.72(1.40)_{c}$
The person uses their time to help other people.	5.28(1.18)	$5.21(1.18)_{a}$	$5.51(1.00)_{a}$	$5.83(1.02)_{b}$	$4.62(1.17)_{c}$
The person uses their time to actively shape their life.	6.12(0.94)	$5.99(0.95)_{a,b}$	$6.13(0.91)_{a,d,c}$	$6.06(0.93)_{b,d,e}$	$6.31(0.96)_{c,e}$
The person uses their time to diversify their life.	5.96(1.06)	$5.88(1.01)_{a,b}$	$5.73(1.06)_{a,d}$	$5.75(1.09)_{b,d}$	$6.44(0.92)_{c}$
The person knows how to value the time they have.	6.21(1.01)	$6.15(1.11)_{a,c}$	$6.50(0.79)_{b,e}$	$6.36(0.85)_{c,e}$	$5.87(1.12)_{d}$
The person likes to spend time reminiscing.	3.64(1.34)	$3.92(1.31)_{a}$	$3.95(1.33)_{a}$	$3.43(1.30)_{b,d}$	$3.28(1.31)_{c,d}$
The person often spends time worrying.	2.45(1.26)	$2.43(1.25)_{a,d}$	$1.85(0.89)_{b}$	$2.79(1.32)_{c,e}$	$2.69(1.32)_{d,e}$
It is more important to the person to organize their own time than to earn money.	5.19(1.28)	5.15(1.25)	5.15(1.25)	5.41(1.24)	5.07(1.37)
The person is open to new experiences.	6.22(0.94)	$6.02(0.99)_{a,b}$	$6.13(0.91)_{a,d}$	$6.15(0.95)_{b,d}$	$6.57(0.80)_{c}$
The person makes experiences they are familiar with.	3.78(1.37)	$4.19(1.23)_{a,b}$	$4.22(1.40)_{a,d}$	$3.88(1.26)_{b,d}$	$2.89(1.14)_{c}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference.

Table 3
Social engagement.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
The person spends a lot of time with friends.	5.80(1.11)	5.90(0.95)	5.91(1.13)	5.65(1.20)	5.75(1.16)
The person enjoys spending time with people they love.	6.23(0.97)	$6.32(0.86)_{a,c}$	$6.55(0.77)_{b}$	$6.27(0.98)_{c}$	$5.82(1.09)_{d}$
Friendships are more important to the person than achievements.	5.69(1.20)	$5.96(0.97)_{a,b}$	$5.82(1.25)_{a}$	$5.76(1.04)_{b}$	$5.23(1.36)_{c}$
The person likes to make new contacts.	5.73(1.15)	$5.50(1.17)_{a,b}$	$5.65(1.15)_{a,d}$	$5.50(1.18)_{b,d}$	$6.27(0.93)_{c}$
The person has many friends.	4.98(1.40)	$4.78(1.31)_{a,b}$	$4.74(1.49)_{a,d}$	$4.68(1.43)_{b,d}$	$5.70(1.24)_{c}$
Spending time with family is important to the person.	5.52(1.32)	$5.72(1.21)_{a,b}$	$5.85(1.13)_{a,d}$	$5.66(1.18)_{b,d}$	$4.89(1.50)_{c}$
The person likes to have friendships that are long-term.	5.95(1.18)	$6.31(0.80)_{a,b}$	$6.40(0.79)_{a,d}$	$6.25(0.83)_{b,d}$	$4.91(1.42)_{c}$
The person likes to get things.	4.08(1.27)	$4.19(1.11)_{a,c}$	$4.05(1.33)_{a,d,e,f}$	$3.80(1.32)_{b,d}$	$4.26(1.28)_{c,e,f}$
The person likes to give things.	5.36(1.20)	$5.53(1.19)_{a,b}$	$5.52(1.02)_{a,d}$	$5.52(1.24)_{b,d}$	$4.91(1.21)_{c}$
The person likes to help those in need.	5.11(1.24)	$5.28(1.22)_{a}$	$5.21(1.10)_{a}$	$5.62(1.16)_{b}$	$4.37(1.10)_{c}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference.

Table 4
Activities.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Work	4.59(1.11)	$4.45(1.15)_{a,c}$	$4.48(1.05)_{a,d}$	$5.09(1.01)_{b}$	$4.33(1.05)_{c,d}$
Commuting	3.14(1.47)	$2.84(1.30)_{a,b}$	$2.62(1.06)_{a}$	$2.99(1.37)_{b}$	$4.04(1.65)_{c}$
Socializing	5.81(0.96)	$5.80(0.94)_{a,b}$	$5.72(0.98)_{a,d}$	$5.54(0.98)_{b,d}$	$6.14(0.87)_{c}$
Being Home	4.33(1.53)	$4.83(1.16)_{a,c}$	$5.24(0.91)_{b}$	$4.64(1.28)_{c}$	$2.75(1.36)_{d}$
Eating	5.25(1.11)	$5.28(1.06)_{a,b,c}$	$5.48(0.98)_{a}$	$5.15(1.14)_{b,d}$	$5.11(1.21)_{c,d}$
Exercising	5.56(0.99)	5.51(0.96)	5.67(0.97)	5.63(0.93)	5.45(1.07)
Watching TV	3.28(1.34)	$3.55(1.20)_{a}$	$3.74(1.40)_{a}$	$3.05(1.28)_{b,d}$	$2.80(1.31)_{c,d}$
Shopping	4.16(1.26)	4.18(1.25)	4.27(1.26)	4.03(1.27)	4.15(1.27)
Housework	3.83(1.26)	$3.92(1.23)_{a,b}$	$4.05(1.21)_{a,d}$	$4.13(1.12)_{b,d}$	$3.24(1.27)_{c}$
Being Online	3.69(1.31)	3.75(1.25)	3.59(1.28)	3.77(1.31)	3.65(1.42)
Being on social media	3.83(1.55)	$3.49(1.52)_{a,b}$	$3.61(1.51)_{a,d}$	$3.59(1.36)_{b,d}$	$4.59(1.55)_{c}$
Sex	5.33(1.13)	$5.38(1.16)_{a,c}$	$5.46(1.11)_{a,c}$	$4.04(1.13)_{b}$	$5.44(1.08)_{c}$
Sleeping	4.58(1.36)	$4.95(1.14)_{a,b}$	$5.14(1.15)_{a}$	$4.78(1.25)_{b}$	$3.52(1.28)_{c}$
Snoozing	2.96(1.43)	$3.27(1.54)_{a}$	$3.23(1.45)_{a}$	$2.83(1.39)_{b,d}$	$2.53(1.21)_{c,d}$
Arguing	2.62(1.21)	$2.43(1.43)_{a}$	$2.15(0.88)_{b}$	$2.62(1.20)_{c}$	$3.22(1.33)_{d}$
Reading	4.88(1.28)	$5.01(1.16)_{a,c}$	$5.31(0.94)_{b,e}$	$5.27(1.02)_{c,e}$	$4.02(1.46)_{d}$
Partying	4.98(1.31)	$4.86(1.28)_{a}$	$4.87(1.22)_{a}$	$4.42(1.25)_{b}$	$5.74(1.12)_{c}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference. "To what extent does this person show the following activities?" (1 = seldomly; 7 = very often).

greater overlap in routine and goal-directed activities, whereas psychologically rich lives diverged by emphasizing activity diversity and experiential breadth.

3.4.5. Life areas

Evaluations of central life areas differed across life ideals and relative to the good life (Table 5). Happy lives were rated high on leisure time ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 0.71$), health ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 0.87$), and family life ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 0.75$). Meaningful lives showed similar patterns for leisure time ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.06$), health ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 0.84$), and family life ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.07$). Psychologically rich lives were rated lower on health ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.09$), family life ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.27$), and

Table 5
Life area.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Leisure time	6.25(0.90)	$6.24(0.87)_{a,c}$	$6.41(0.71)_{a,c}$	$5.92(1.06)_{b}$	$6.44(0.83)_{c}$
Health	6.20(0.97)	$6.38(0.88)_{a,b}$	$6.44(0.87)_{a,b}$	$6.27(0.84)_{b}$	$5.77(1.09)_{c}$
Family life	5.94(1.11)	$6.14(1.01)_{a}$	$6.39(0.75)_{b}$	$5.94(1.07)_{a}$	$5.35(1.27)_{c}$
Job	5.18(1.07)	$5.35(0.92)_{a,b}$	$5.30(0.86)_{a,b}$	$5.38(1.09)_{b}$	$4.71(1.22)_{c}$
Finance	4.52(1.33)	$4.72(1.22)_{a,b}$	$4.61(1.30)_{a,b,c}$	$4.41(1.46)_{b,c}$	$4.36(1.33)_{c}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference. " To what degree does this person get satisfaction and joy out of these life areas?" (1 = very little; 7 = very much).

job ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.22$), while leisure time remained high ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 0.83$). Finance was rated moderately across life ideals (happy: $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.30$; meaningful: $M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.46$; psychologically rich: $M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.33$).

Relative to the good life, happy and meaningful lives closely mirrored evaluations of stability and self-maintenance, whereas psychologically rich lives diverged by prioritizing autonomy and experiential diversity.

3.4.6. Job and job choices

Job-related attributions largely did not differ across life ideals. Job choices however revealed the following patterns: meaningful lives were associated with social jobs (57.4%) and less with creative jobs (6.3%); and psychologically rich lives with creative jobs (40.0%) (see Tables 6.1 and 6.2).

The good life integrated elements of happiness and meaning, combining stability, purpose as there are no differences between self-determined jobs being equally associated.

3.4.7. Humor

Humor-related attributions differed across life ideals and relative to the good life (Table 7). Humor was rated as important highest for happy lives ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 0.83$) and the good life ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 0.85$), followed by psychologically rich lives ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 0.93$), and lowest for meaningful lives ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.02$). Similar patterns emerged for making others laugh (happy: $M = 6.07$, $SD = 0.99$; meaningful: $M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.14$; psychologically rich: $M = 6.07$, $SD = 0.95$; good life: $M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.12$) and humor consumption.

Relative to the good life, humor was less central to evaluations of meaningful lives, whereas happy and psychologically rich lives showed closer alignment.

3.4.8. Agency & communion

Agency and communion showed distinct patterns across life ideals and in comparison, with the good life (Table 8). Agency ratings were similar across happy ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 0.60$), meaningful ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.75$), psychologically rich ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 0.86$), and good lives ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 0.67$). In contrast, communion differed: psychologically rich lives were rated lower ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.00$) than happy ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 0.65$) and meaningful lives ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 0.69$). The good life combined high agency ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 0.67$) and high communion ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 0.75$).

Table 6.2
Job choices.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
Self-determined job	227 (100)	57 (25.1)	55 (24.2)	53(23.3)	62(27.3)
Creative jobs	80 (100)	23 $(28.7)_{a}$	20 $(25.0)_{a}$	$5(6.3)_{b}$	$32(40.0)_{a}$
Social job	54 (100)	10 $(18.5)_{a}$	9 $(16.7)_{a}$	$31(57.4)_{b}$	$4(7.4)_{a}$
Save and well-paid job	48 (100)	18 (37.5)	10 (20.8)	11(22.9)	9(18.8)

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference. Chi^2 results; "Please decide which of the following do you most associate with this person."

3.4.9. Consumption choices

Consumption preferences differed across life ideals and relative to the good life (Table 9). Happy lives were associated with funny movies (34.9%) and pop music (28.7). Meaningful lives were associated with interesting movie (32.5%) and classical music (52.1%). Psychologically rich lives emphasized exciting movies (48.8%), electro music (52.6%), RnB/hip-hop (42.9%), and adventure vacations (31.5%). The good life showed a balanced pattern combining enjoyment and enrichment while a psychologically rich life combined excitement.

3.4.10. Choosing a good life

Preferences among life ideals differed relative to the good life (Table 10). Participants most frequently chose happy (158, 36.0%) or meaningful lives (148, 39.0%), whereas psychologically rich lives were selected less often, replicating prior findings (103, 25.18%; Oishi et al., 2020).

4. Discussion

Taken together, the present findings demonstrate that lay

Table 6.1
Job.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
It is important for the person to have a job in addition to their family.	5.38(1.22)	5.39(1.25)	5.35(1.20)	5.48(1.27)	5.31(1.19)
It is important to the person to be successful and competent in life.	5.47(1.08)	5.59(0.99)	5.42(1.13)	5.53(1.09)	5.33(1.12)
It is important to the person to advance their own career.	4.82(1.33)	4.89(1.27)	4.78(1.22)	4.84(1.55)	4.78(1.28)
It is important to the person to have a job that provides a good income.	5.03(1.27)	5.19(1.13)	5.12(1.21)	4.89(1.36)	4.91(1.36)
It is important to the person to have a job that allows them to use their own time freely.	6.03(0.94)	6.04(0.86)	6.02(0.88)	$5.84(1.07)_{a}$	$6.21(0.91)_{b}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference.

Table 7
Humor.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Humor is important to the person in life.	6.16(0.93)	$6.29(0.85)_{a,c}$	$6.32(0.83)_{a,d}$	$5.89(1.02)_{b}$	$6.16(0.93)_{c,d}$
The person likes to make others laugh.	5.99(1.06)	$6.03(1.12)_{a,b,c}$	$6.07(0.99)_{a,d,e}$	$5.79(1.14)_{b,d,f}$	$6.07(0.95)_{c,e,f}$
The person likes to consume humor.	5.77(1.16)	$5.82(1.13)_{a,c}$	$5.97(1.13)_{a,d}$	$5.34(1.20)_{b}$	$5.96(1.09)_{c,d}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference.

Table 8
Agency & communion.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Agency ($\alpha = 0.85$)	5.39(0.73)	5.46(0.67)	5.28(0.60)	5.43(0.75)	5.39(0.86)
Communion ($\alpha = 0.92$)	5.68(0.89)	$5.88(0.75)_{a}$	$5.96(0.65)_{a}$	$5.98(0.69)_{a}$	$4.96(1.00)_{b}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference. " How do you rate the personality of this person?"

Table 9
Choices.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	(%)	*(%)*	*(%)*	*(%)*	*(%)*
Movies					
Interesting movies	228 (100)	62 $(27.2)_{a}$	48 $(21.1)_{a,b}$	$74(32.5)_{c}$	$44(19.3)_{b}$
Funny movies	86 (100)	24 $(27.9)_{a,b}$	30 $(34.9)_{b}$	$11(12.8)_{c}$	$21(24.4)_{a,c}$
Exciting movies	84 (100)	18 $(21.4)_{a}$	14 $(16.7)_{a}$	$11(13.1)_{a}$	$41(48.8)_{b}$
Sad movies	11 (100)	4(36.4)	2(18.2)	4(36.4)	1(9.1)
Music					
Pop music	150 (100)	48 $(32.0)_{a}$	43 $(28.7)_{a}$	$19(12.7)_{b}$	$40(26.7)_{a}$
Jazz music	103 (100)	32 $(31.1)_{a}$	23 $(22.3)_{a}$	$35(34.0)_{a}$	$13(12.6)_{b}$
RnB/HipHop music	70 (100)	15 $(21.4)_{a}$	10 $(14.3)_{a}$	$15(21.4)_{a}$	$30(42.9)_{b}$
Classic music	48 (100)	8 $(16.7)_{a,b}$	11 $(22.9)_{b}$	$25(52.1)_{c}$	$4(8.3)_{a}$
Electro music	38 (100)	5 $(13.2)_{a}$	7 $(18.4)_{a}$	$6(15.8)_{a}$	$20(52.6)_{b}$
Vacation					
Adventure Vacation	273 (100)	65 $(23.8)_{a}$	59 $(21.6)_{a}$	$63(23.1)_{a}$	$86(31.5)_{b}$
City Trip/ Cultural	121 (100)	33 $(27.3)_{a,b}$	33 $(27.3)_{b}$	$34(28.1)_{b}$	$21(17.4)_{a}$
Package Holiday (all inclusive)	15 (100)	10 $(66.7)_{a}$	2 $(13.3)_{b}$	$3(20.0)_{a,b}$	$0(0.0)_{b}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference. Chi^2 results; "Please decide which of the following do you most associate with this person."

Table 10
Choosing a good life.

Statement	Total	Good life	Happy life	Meaningful life	Psychological rich life
	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
Happy life	158 (100)	33 $(20.9)_{a}$	36 $(22.8)_{a,b}$	$38(24.1)_{a,b}$	$51(32.3)_{b}$
Meaningful life	148 (100)	47 $(31.8)_{a}$	37 $(25.0)_{a}$	$39(26.4)_{a}$	$25(16.9)_{b}$
Psychological rich life	103 (100)	28 $(27.2)_{a}$	21 $(20.4)_{a}$	$23(22.3)_{a}$	$31(30.1)_{a}$

Note. Dissimilar subscripts (e.g., a, b, c) indicate significant differences between groups ($p < .05$); Shared subscripts indicate no significant difference ($p > .05$); No subscripts indicate no significant difference; Chi^2 results ($p = .058$).

conceptions of a good life are structured evaluative representations rather than vague or undifferentiated intuitions. Participants' judgments consistently integrated affective, motivational, social, and behavioral considerations when evaluating different kinds of lives, indicating that lay evaluations of living well are coherent and systematically organized rather than arbitrary.

These results extend prior work on ordinary or lay conceptions of happiness, meaning in life, and the good life (e.g., Fuhrer & Cova, 2023b; Kneer & Haybron, 2023, 2024; Li et al., 2022; Prinzing et al., 2022) by showing how these concepts are jointly applied in third-person evaluations of lives. Whereas previous research has examined lay conceptions of happiness or meaning largely in isolation, the present study illustrates how laypeople comparatively weigh happiness, meaning, and psychological richness when judging whether a life is good.

Importantly, the findings clarify that psychological richness, while positively valued, occupies a more peripheral position in lay judgments of a good life compared with happiness and meaning. This pattern aligns with prior evidence that moral, social, and purposive considerations play a central role in evaluations of the good life, beyond experiential quality alone (Kneer & Haybron, 2024). The present results thus contribute to a growing literature showing that lay conceptions of living well integrate multiple sources of value rather than collapsing into a single experiential dimension.

The attributional profiles observed in the Results were consistent across domains. Happy lives were associated with comfort, emotional balance, and stable social relationships; meaningful lives emphasized effort, responsibility, and future-oriented contribution; psychologically rich lives highlighted novelty, exploration, and experiential complexity. Psychologically rich lives were somewhat positively evaluated, however lacking communion, they showed the greatest divergence from the good life across domains, indicating that exploration and experiential variety occupy a more peripheral position in lay judgments of living well

compared with comfort and purpose.

Taken together, these findings suggest that lay conceptions of the good life integrate multiple evaluative orientations rather than reflecting a single dominant ideal. Happiness and meaning occupy central positions in judgments of a good life, whereas psychological richness represents a valued but less prototypical alternative. These patterns illustrate how personality-linked motivational orientations shape everyday evaluations of lives independently of lived experience or explicit theory.

5. Conclusion

The present research investigated how individuals intuitively evaluate different kinds of lives and which characteristics they associate with happiness, meaning, psychological richness, and a good life. Within these evaluations, happiness and meaning emerged as central to judgments of a good life, whereas psychological richness represented a generally positively valued but less prototypical alternative. By clarifying how life ideals are intuitively represented and compared, the present study advances understanding of individual differences in evaluative orientations toward what it means to live well.

Pre-registration

Pre-registrations, data, and materials are openly available at the Open Science Framework.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Meikel Neumann: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Informed consent

Participants provided their informed consent before participating in this study.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Everything is uploaded to OSF (see manuscript)

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