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**PODE A PARENTALIDADE PROMOVER UM MAIOR SENTIDO DE VIDA E FELICIDADE? UM ESTUDO COMPARATIVO**  
**CAN PARENTING LEAD TO A GREATER SENSE OF PURPOSE AND HAPPINESS? A COMPARATIVE STUDY**  
**¿PUEDE LA MATERNIDAD Y LA PATERNIDAD FOMENTAR UN MAYOR SENTIDO DE LA VIDA Y LA FELICIDAD? UN**  
**ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO**

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## RESUMO

**Introdução:** O sentido na vida e a felicidade são componentes fundamentais do florescimento humano, tal como descrito no modelo PERMA de Seligman (2012). A parentalidade representa uma das experiências de vida mais significativas e de transformação da identidade, podendo influenciar a forma como os adultos percebem o propósito, a realização e o bem-estar ao longo do ciclo de vida.

**Objetivo:** Comparar os níveis de sentido na vida e de felicidade entre adultos com e sem filhos, examinando, simultaneamente, o papel de variáveis sociodemográficas como a idade, o sexo, o estado civil, o nível de escolaridade e o número de filhos.

**Métodos:** Foi empregado um delineamento quantitativo, descritivo, correlacional e de corte transversal. A amostra foi constituída por 467 adultos, sendo 204 pais e 263 não-pais, com idades compreendidas entre os 18 e os 86 anos ( $M = 38.88$ ;  $DP = 13.98$ ). A recolha de dados foi efetuada através das versões portuguesas do Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) e do Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPI), bem como de um questionário sociodemográfico.

**Resultados:** Os pais reportaram níveis significativamente mais elevados de presença de sentido e de vida envolvida e níveis mais baixos de procura de sentido. Foram encontradas associações positivas entre a presença de sentido e a felicidade eudaimónica, com efeitos diferenciados das variáveis sociodemográficas, particularmente entre os pais.

**Conclusão:** Estes achados reforçam a noção de que a parentalidade pode servir como uma via importante para a construção de sentido na vida e da felicidade eudaimónica na idade adulta.

**Palavras-chave:** sentido na vida; felicidade; parentalidade; idade adulta

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Meaning in life and happiness are fundamental components of human flourishing, as described in Seligman's (2012) PERMA model. Parenthood represents one of the most meaningful and identity-shaping life experiences and may influence how adults perceive purpose, fulfillment, and well-being throughout the lifespan.

**Objective:** To compare levels of meaning in life and happiness between adults with and without children, while also examining the role of sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, marital status, educational level, and number of children.

**Methods:** A quantitative, descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional design was used. The sample consisted of 467 adults, including 204 parents and 263 non-parents, aged 18 to 86 years ( $M = 38.88$ ;  $SD = 13.98$ ). Data were collected through the Portuguese versions of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPI), as well as a sociodemographic questionnaire.

**Results:** Parents reported significantly higher levels of presence of meaning and engaged life, and lower levels of search for meaning. Positive associations were found between the presence of meaning and eudaimonic happiness, with differentiated effects of sociodemographic variables, particularly among parents.

**Conclusion:** These findings reinforce the notion that parenthood can serve as an important pathway for constructing meaning in life and eudaimonic happiness in adulthood.

**Keywords:** meaning in life; happiness; parenthood; adulthood

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** El sentido en la vida y la felicidad son componentes fundamentales del florecimiento humano, tal como se describe en el modelo PERMA de Seligman (2012). La parentalidad representa una de las experiencias vitales más significativas y de formación de identidad, y puede influir en cómo los adultos perciben el propósito, la realización y el bienestar a lo largo del ciclo vital.

**Objetivo:** Comparar los niveles de sentido en la vida y de felicidad entre adultos con y sin hijos, examinando, al mismo tiempo, el papel de variables sociodemográficas como la edad, el sexo, el estado civil, el nivel educativo y el número de hijos.

**Métodos:** Se utilizó un diseño cuantitativo, descriptivo, correlacional y transversal. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 467 adultos, incluyendo 204 padres y 263 no padres, con edades comprendidas entre los 18 y los 86 años ( $M = 38.88$ ;  $DE = 13.98$ ). Los datos se recopilaban a través de las versiones portuguesas del Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) y del Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPI), así como de un cuestionario sociodemográfico.

**Resultados:** Los padres reportaron niveles significativamente más altos de presencia de sentido y de vida comprometida (engaged life), y niveles más bajos de búsqueda de sentido. Se encontraron asociaciones positivas entre la presencia de sentido y la felicidad eudaimónica, con efectos diferenciados de las variables sociodemográficas, particularmente entre los padres.

**Conclusión:** Estos hallazgos refuerzan la noción de que la parentalidad puede servir como una vía importante para la construcción de sentido en la vida y de la felicidad eudaimónica en la edad adulta.

**Palabras clave:** sentido en la vida; felicidad; parentalidad; edad adulta

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the study of meaning in life and happiness has gained renewed attention within Positive Psychology, which seeks to understand not only the reduction of suffering but also the factors that enable individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman, 2012). The growing recognition that well-being involves more than the absence of psychological distress has led researchers to distinguish between hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of happiness. The hedonic tradition emphasizes pleasure, comfort, and life satisfaction, while the eudaimonic perspective focuses on meaning, self-realization, and the pursuit of purpose (Baumeister et al., 2013; Heintzelman, 2018). Meaning in life, in particular, has emerged as a central construct for understanding how people interpret their existence, integrate experiences, and orient their actions toward goals that confer significance (Steger et al., 2008; Martela & Steger, 2016). Meaning in life is conceptualized as a multifaceted experience encompassing three dimensions: coherence, purpose, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). Coherence refers to the perception that life events are understandable and consistent; purpose involves the pursuit of goals that give direction to existence; and significance represents the sense that life has inherent value. The presence of meaning has been associated with psychological adjustment, resilience, and better health outcomes (Sutin et al., 2023), while the search for meaning may reflect either existential exploration or a compensatory mechanism to restore a sense of significance (Steger & Kashdan, 2007). Empirical evidence indicates that individuals with a higher presence of meaning report greater satisfaction with life and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Mulahalilović et al., 2021). Parallel to this, research on happiness has identified multiple components contributing to human flourishing. Seligman (2012) proposed the PERMA model, which conceptualizes well-being as composed of five pillars: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Freire et al. (2013) and Chen et al. (2024) emphasize that a fulfilling life integrates hedonic and eudaimonic aspects — experiencing positive emotions while being deeply engaged and living in alignment with one's values. In this sense, happiness is not merely the pursuit of pleasure but the expression of a life that feels worthwhile and coherent (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Camaliente & Bocciaandro, 2017).

Parenthood has long been recognized as one of the most transformative life experiences, with profound implications for identity, emotional development, and meaning-making. Becoming a parent often prompts individuals to revisit their own childhood experiences, values, and relational patterns, while orienting their lives toward the care and growth of another human being (Barroso & Machado, 2010). Although contemporary societies have witnessed a decline in fertility rates and increasing diversity in family structures, the desire to have children remains deeply rooted in human motivation and cultural narratives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). Studies such as those by Guedes et al. (2011, 2015) have shown that motivations for parenthood encompass affective, social, and existential dimensions — from the wish to experience love and continuity to the pursuit of purpose and belonging. Empirical research has demonstrated that parenthood can enhance well-being by fostering meaning, emotional connection, and a sense of generativity (Nelson et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2024). However, it may also present challenges associated with stress, role overload, and identity conflicts, particularly when social support or structural conditions are insufficient (Dubois et al., 2024; Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2020). The balance between fulfilment and exhaustion in parenting depends on contextual and psychological variables, including gender roles, economic stability, and perceptions of competence (Ribeiro et al., 2015; Brosch, 2016; Silveira et al., 2016; Bodin & Björklund, 2022). Thus, understanding parenthood as a pathway to meaning and happiness requires integrating its emotional and social ambivalence — a domain of profound rewards intertwined with responsibility and vulnerability.

In this context, the present study aims to examine the relationship between parenthood, meaning in life, and happiness in a Portuguese adult sample. Specifically, it seeks to compare the levels of presence and search for meaning, as well as the dimensions of happiness — meaningful, pleasant, and engaged life — between parents and non-parents. By doing so, this study contributes to the understanding of how parenthood shapes subjective well-being and meaning construction, offering implications for clinical and health psychology in promoting positive development and life satisfaction.

## 1. METHODS

This study followed a quantitative, non-experimental, and correlational design, consistent with the paradigm of Positive Psychology. The aim was to examine the relationships between parenthood, meaning in life, and happiness among adults, and to compare levels of these constructs between parents and non-parents.

### 1.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 467 participants with valid responses. The mean age was 38.88 years ( $SD = 13.98$ ), with ages ranging from 18 to 86 years. Most participants were female, totalling 335 women (71.7%) and 132 men (28.3%). Regarding marital status, 206 participants (44.1%) were single, 161 (34.5%) were married, 57 (12.2%) were living in a de facto union, 25 (5.4%) were divorced, 15 (3.2%) were widowed, and 3 (0.6%) were separated. Most participants had completed higher education ( $n = 302$ ; 64.7%), while 165 (35.3%) had completed between the first and twelfth years of schooling.

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With respect to parenthood, 263 participants (56.3%) reported not having children, whereas 204 participants (43.7%) indicated that they had children. Among those with children, most had one or two children. Of the 204 participants who answered this question, 85 (18.2%) reported having one child, 82 (17.6%) reported having two children, 24 (5.1%) had three children, 9 (1.9%) had four children, 3 (0.6%) had five children, and 1 participant was omitted (0.2%).

For statistical analysis, several variables were regrouped. In the marital status variable, married participants and those living in a de facto union were combined into a single category, and the same procedure was applied to separated and divorced participants. For educational level, participants were divided into two groups: (a) without higher education (1st to 12th years of schooling) and (b) with higher education (undergraduate, master’s, or doctoral degrees). Concerning the number of children, participants were organised into three groups: (a) one child, (b) two children, and (c) three or more children.

Initially, descriptive analyses were conducted to characterise the sample in terms of age, sex, educational level, marital status, and parenthood. Measures of central tendency (mean and standard deviation) were calculated, as well as absolute and relative frequencies, allowing for a detailed understanding of the sociodemographic profile. These analyses were conducted in two stages: first, considering the total sample and subsequently examining the groups of parents and non-parents separately, to describe both the overall sample and the specific subgroups (see Table 1).

**Table 1 - Sociodemographic Characteristics - Sample, Parents and Non-Parents**

Age		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Sample		36.88	13.98	18	86
Parents		48.31	12.00	23	86
Non-Parents		28.02	7.44	18	81

  

Variable	Category	Sample		Parents		Non-Parents	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Sex	Female	335	71.7	133	65.2	202	76.8
	Male	132	28.3	71	34.8	61	23.2
Marital Status	Single	206	44.1	4	2.0	202	76.8
	Married/Cohabiting	218	46.7	164	80.4	54	20.5
	Widowed	15	3.2	14	6.9	1	0.4
	Separated/Divorced	28	6.0	22	10.8	6	2.3
Education	Primary-Secondary	165	35.3	92	45.1	73	27.8
	Higher Education	302	64.7	112	54.9	190	72.2
Children	Yes	204	43.7	204	100	0	0.0
	No	263	56.3	0	0.0	263	100
Number of Children	1 child	85	18.2	85	41.7	-	-
	2 children	82	17.6	82	40.2	-	-
	3+ children	36	7.7	36	17.6	-	-
	Missing	1	0.2	1	0.5	-	-

## 1.2. Measures

### **Sociodemographic Questionnaire**

The sociodemographic questionnaire was developed to gather detailed information about the participants’ characteristics, including individual and contextual variables potentially related to the subjective experience of meaning in life and happiness. These data allowed for a precise contextualisation of the study sample. Participants were asked to report their sex via a dichotomous question with two response options: “female” or “male”. Age was recorded as a continuous variable, with participants instructed to indicate their age in completed years. Educational attainment was assessed through a multiple-choice question with seven categories: 1st cycle, 2nd cycle, 3rd cycle, secondary education, undergraduate degree, master’s degree, and doctorate. Marital status was measured using a categorical question with six response options: single, married, cohabiting, separated, divorced, and widowed. Regarding parental status, participants answered a dichotomous question: “Do you have children?” (Yes/No). Those who answered affirmatively were then asked to report the number of children, with five response options ranging from one to five.

### **Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) – Portuguese Version**

The Portuguese version of The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) is the *Questionário do Sentido da Vida* (QSV; Portugal, 2017). This instrument aims to measure the Presence of and search for meaning in life through two subscales, each comprising five items. The Presence of Meaning subscale is designed to assess the perceived existence of meaning in life and consists of items 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9 (e.g., Item 1: “I understand my life’s meaning.”). Conversely, the Search for Meaning subscale consists of items 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10 (e.g., Item 8: “I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.”) and evaluates the drive and process of searching for meaning in life. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Absolutely False”) to 7 (“Absolutely True”). Scoring the instrument requires the reverse-scoring of item 9, which is the only reverse-coded item in the

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questionnaire. In the original study (Steger et al., 2006), Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both subscales exceeded .80, demonstrating good internal consistency. Similarly, in the validation study of the Portuguese version (Portugal, 2017), Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both subscales were above .90, further confirming the questionnaire's robust internal consistency.

### **Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPI) – Portuguese Version**

The PPI was developed by Rashid and Anjum (2008) in the United States and subsequently validated for the Portuguese population by Ferreira et al. (2020). Grounded in well-being theory, this instrument assesses three dimensions of human flourishing: meaningful life, pleasant life, and engaged life. The PPI is designed to evaluate the subjective perception of happiness and psychological well-being, encompassing indicators such as: subjective well-being: perception of one's life and accomplishments (e.g., "I feel joyful"; "I am an ambitious person"); interpersonal relationships: quality of connection with others (e.g., "I feel connected to the people I regularly interact with"); meaning and purpose: perception of existential direction (e.g., "I feel that my life has a purpose"); use of strengths: recognition and utilisation of one's own capacities (e.g., "I use my strengths to solve my problems"). The PPI is a 25-item self-report questionnaire, rated on a reverse 5-point Likert scale, where 5 corresponds to "very much like me" and 1 to "not like me at all". The total score is calculated by summing the item responses, with higher scores indicating greater well-being and happiness. The scale's dimensions are structured as follows: meaningful life (items 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, and 25); pleasant life (items 1, 2, 6, 12, 16, 17, and 21); engaged life (items 4 and 14). The instrument presents empirical evidence of adequate validity and reliability. The Portuguese version of the PPI had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97, thus evidencing the high level of internal consistency (Ferreira et al., 2020).

### **1.3. Procedure**

This study is part of the broader project "STRENGHPARENTS – The role of strengths-based parenting in positive human functioning and mental health", and was previously submitted for review by the Ethics Committee of the University of the authors and received favourable approval (process CE-FCHS/PI-671/24), in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research. All instruments used in this study were previously validated and authorised for use. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research, with full respect for participants' rights, dignity, and well-being. The ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) were strictly followed. Data confidentiality was ensured throughout all stages of the study. Data were treated anonymously, stored securely, and used exclusively for scientific purposes. No information was collected that would allow participant identification.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected digitally via a self-administered questionnaire made available through a dedicated link on the Google Forms platform. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential, and participants were assured that all data would be used exclusively for scientific research purposes. A non-probability sampling strategy was adopted, specifically snowball sampling. The study was initially shared within the personal and professional networks of the researcher and research team, with initial participants encouraged to forward the questionnaire to other eligible individuals, allowing for organic expansion of the sample. Prior to beginning the questionnaire, participants were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the guarantee of anonymity. Informed assent was obtained online; proceeding with the questionnaire was taken as agreement to the stated terms.

The average completion time was approximately 15 to 20 minutes. All data were securely stored and later analysed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics, version 28.0.0.0 (190).

### **Statistical Analysis**

Statistical analyses were designed to address the study's specific objectives and, ultimately, its main aim: to examine the relationship between meaning in life, happiness, and parenthood.

Inferential and parametric statistical tests were employed, appropriate to the nature of the variables and the study design, following the methodological guidelines of Martins (2011).

## **2. RESULTS**

### **2.1. Meaning in life: Comparison between Parents and Non-Parents**

To compare levels of meaning in life between parents and non-parents, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The analysis considered both dimensions of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)—presence and search for meaning. In the presence of a meaning dimension, a statistically significant difference was found between the groups,  $t(465) = 2.18, p = .030$ . Parents showed slightly higher levels of presence of meaning ( $M = 24.90; SD = 4.21$ ) compared to non-parents ( $M = 24.03; SD =$

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4.31), with a small effect size ( $d = 0.20$ ). In the search for meaning dimension, a statistically significant difference was also observed,  $t(416.43) = -5.65, p < .001$ . Non-parents exhibited significantly higher levels of search for meaning ( $M = 20.48; SD = 8.04$ ) than parents ( $M = 16.02; SD = 8.78$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $d = -0.53$ ) (Table 2).

**Table 2 - Results for Meaning in Life Levels Between Parents and Non-Parents**

	Parents ( <i>n</i> = 204) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Non-Parents ( <i>n</i> = 263) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> (465)	<i>p</i>
Presence of meaning	24.90 (4.21)	24.03 (4.31)	2.18	.030
Search for meaning	16.02 (8.78)	20.48 (8.04)	-5.65 (416.43)	< .001

Note: In cases where the *p* value from Levene’s test was below .05, the version assuming unequal variances was used (adjusted *df*).

### 2.2. Happiness: Comparison between Parents and Non-Parents

To compare levels of happiness between parents and non-parents, an independent samples *t*-test was performed. The analysis considered the three dimensions of the PPI – meaningful life, pleasant life, and engaged life.

In the meaningful life dimension, no statistically significant difference was found between parents and non-parents,  $t(465) = 0.27, p = .789$ . Parents reported slightly higher levels of meaningful life ( $M = 65.06; SD = 12.48$ ) compared to non-parents ( $M = 64.74; SD = 13.14$ ), with a very small effect size ( $d = 0.025$ ).

In the pleasant life dimension, no statistically significant difference was observed,  $t(465) = 0.33, p = .740$ . Parents reported slightly higher levels of pleasant life ( $M = 27.19; SD = 6.12$ ) than non-parents ( $M = 27.01; SD = 5.77$ ), with a very small effect size ( $d = 0.031$ ).

In the engaged life dimension, a statistically significant difference was found between the groups,  $t(465) = 3.70, p < .001$ . Parents showed significantly higher levels of engaged life ( $M = 6.83; SD = 1.66$ ) than non-parents ( $M = 6.22; SD = 1.82$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $d = 0.345$ )

(see Table 3).

**Table 3 - Results for Happiness Levels Between Parents and Non-Parents**

	Parents ( <i>n</i> = 204) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Non-Parents ( <i>n</i> = 263) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> (465)	<i>p</i>
Meaningful life	65.06 (12.48)	64.74 (13.14)	0.27	.789
Pleasant life	27.19 (6.12)	27.01 (5.77)	0.33	.740
Engaged life	6.83 (1.66)	6.22 (1.82)	3.70	< .001

Note: In cases where the *p*-value from Levene’s test was below .05, the version assuming unequal variances was used (adjusted *df*).

### 2.3. Correlations between Meaning and Happiness: Parents and Non-Parents

To examine the relationship between meaning in life and happiness, the two dimensions of the MLQ—presence and search for meaning—were correlated with the three dimensions of the Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPI): meaningful life, pleasant life, and engaged life. This analysis also allowed for the examination of the correlation between presence and search for meaning within both groups.

In the parent group ( $n = 204$ ), statistically significant positive correlations were observed between the presence of meaning and meaningful life,  $r = .21, p = .002$ , as well as between the presence of meaning and pleasant life,  $r = .28, p < .001$ . A statistically significant negative correlation was also found between presence and search for meaning,  $r = -.21, p = .003$ . The correlation between the presence of meaning and engaged life was not statistically significant,  $r = .13, p = .070$ . Regarding search for meaning, significant negative correlations were found with meaningful life,  $r = -.16, p = .025$ , and with pleasant life,  $r = -.27, p < .001$ . No statistically significant correlation was found between search for meaning and engaged life,  $r = -.04, p = .534$ .

In the non-parent group ( $n = 263$ ), statistically significant positive correlations were observed between the presence of meaning and meaningful life,  $r = .14, p = .020$ , between the presence of meaning and pleasant life,  $r = .17, p = .005$ , and between the presence of meaning and engaged life,  $r = .16, p = .010$ . On the other hand, no statistically significant correlations were found between search for meaning and the three dimensions of happiness: meaningful life,  $r = -.08, p = .187$ ; pleasant life,  $r = -.07, p = .258$ ; and engaged life,  $r = -.03, p = .590$ . The correlation between presence and search for meaning was also not statistically significant in this group,  $r = -.07, p = .278$ .

In both groups, the dimensions of the PPI showed positive and statistically significant correlations: among parents, between meaningful life and pleasant life ( $r = .87, p < .001$ ), meaningful life and engaged life ( $r = .37, p < .001$ ), and pleasant life and engaged

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life ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ); among non-parents, between meaningful life and pleasant life ( $r = .90, p < .001$ ), meaningful life and engaged life ( $r = .39, p < .001$ ), and pleasant life and engaged life ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ) (see Table 4).

**Table 4** - Results of the Correlation Between Meaning in Life and Happiness in Parents and Non-Parents

		Parents (n = 204)				
		Presence	Search	Meaningful	Pleasant	Engaged
Presence	r	1	-.21**	.21**	.28**	.13
	p		.003	.002	<.001	.070
Search	r	-.21**	1	-.16**	-.27**	-.04
	p	.003		.025	<.001	.534
Meaningful	r	.21**	-.16**	1	.87**	.37**
	p	.002	.025		<.001	<.001
Pleasant	r	.28**	-.27**	.87**	1	.33**
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
Engaged	r	.13	-.04	.37**	.33**	1
	p	.070	.534	<.001	<.001	
		Non-Parents (n = 263)				
		Presence	Search	Meaningful	Pleasant	Engaged
Presence	r	1	-.07	.14*	.17**	.16**
	p		.278	.020	.005	.010
Search	r	-.07	1	-.08	-.07	-.03
	p	.278		.187	.258	.590
Meaningful	r	.14*	-.08	1	.90**	.39**
	p	.020	.187		<.001	<.001
Pleasant	r	.17**	-.07	.90**	1	.35**
	p	.005	.258	<.001		<.001
Engaged	r	.16**	-.03	.39**	.35**	1
	p	.010	.590	<.001	<.001	

Note:  $p < .05$  (\*);  $p < .01$  (\*\*): correlations significant at the .05 and .01 levels, respectively (two-tailed).

#### 2.4. Analysis by Sociodemographic Variables

A Pearson correlation was conducted between age and the dimensions of the MLQ and the PPI in the groups of parents and non-parents. In the parent group ( $n = 204$ ), statistically significant correlations were observed between age and presence of meaning,  $r = .17, p = .014$  (small correlation), as well as between age and search for meaning,  $r = -.23, p < .001$  (small correlation). The correlations between age and the happiness dimensions were not statistically significant: meaningful life,  $r = -.01, p = .892$ ; pleasant life,  $r = .06, p = .431$ ; and engaged life,  $r = .05, p = .450$ . In the non-parent group ( $n = 263$ ), no statistically significant correlations were found between age and the variables assessed. The observed values were as follows: presence of meaning,  $r = .04, p = .529$ ; search for meaning,  $r = -.05, p = .454$ ; meaningful life,  $r = -.04, p = .541$ ; pleasant life,  $r = -.05, p = .466$ ; and engaged life,  $r = .10, p = .106$  (small, non-significant correlation).

Levels of meaning in life and happiness were compared between women and men in the parent and non-parent groups using the previously described t-test. The dimensions of the MLQ—presence and search for meaning—and the dimensions of the PPI—meaningful life, pleasant life, and engaged life—were analysed.

In the parent group ( $n = 204$ ), statistically significant sex differences were observed only in the engaged life dimension,  $t(202) = 2.22, p = .028, d = 0.326$  (small to moderate effect). Women ( $M = 7.02, SD = 1.73$ ) reported higher mean scores than men ( $M = 6.47, SD = 1.47$ ). In the remaining dimensions—presence of meaning,  $t(202) = -0.60, p = .547$ ; search for meaning,  $t(202) = -0.18, p = .860$ ; meaningful life,  $t(202) = -0.06, p = .955$ ; and pleasant life,  $t(202) = -0.37, p = .712$ —no statistically significant sex differences were found. In the non-parent group ( $n = 263$ ), no statistically significant differences were found between women and men in any of the dimensions analysed. The results were as follows: presence of meaning,  $t(261) = 0.03, p = .977$ ; search for meaning,  $t(261) = -1.26, p = .210$ ; meaningful life,  $t(261) = -0.32, p = .748$ ; pleasant life,  $t(261) = -1.69, p = .092$ ; and engaged life,  $t(261) = 1.02, p = .309$ .

Differences in levels of meaning in life and happiness as a function of marital status were also analysed in the parent and non-parent groups using one-way ANOVA applied to the MLQ dimensions—presence and search for meaning—and the PPI dimensions—meaningful life, pleasant life, and engaged life. To ensure the validity of the analysis and the suitability of Tukey's post hoc test, one widowed participant from the non-parent group ( $N = 1$ ) was excluded due to the reduced representativeness of this category.

In the parent group, no statistically significant differences were found according to marital status in the presence of meaning,  $F(3, 200) = 0.43, p = .730$ ; meaningful life,  $F(3, 200) = 1.31, p = .272$ ; or pleasant life,  $F(3, 200) = 1.13, p = .340$ . In contrast, significant

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differences were observed in search for meaning as a function of marital status,  $F(3, 200) = 3.53, p = .016$ . Tukey's post hoc test indicated that widowed parents reported significantly lower levels of search for meaning compared with separated or divorced parents. Significant differences were also found in engaged life,  $F(3, 200) = 2.94, p = .034$ , with Tukey's test revealing that widowed parents showed significantly higher levels of engaged life than single parents.

In the non-parent group, no statistically significant differences were observed according to marital status in presence of meaning,  $F(2, 259) = 1.77, p = .172$ ; search for meaning,  $F(2, 259) = 0.17, p = .847$ ; meaningful life,  $F(2, 259) = 1.24, p = .293$ ; pleasant life,  $F(2, 259) = 1.85, p = .159$ ; or engaged life,  $F(2, 259) = 0.07, p = .930$ .

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in levels of meaning in life and happiness as a function of the number of children. One participant was excluded from the analysis due to missing data regarding the number of children ( $n = 1$ ), which did not compromise statistical robustness. Significant differences were found for presence of meaning,  $F(3, 462) = 3.41, p = .018$ , search for meaning,  $F(3, 462) = 11.29, p < .001$ , and engaged life,  $F(3, 462) = 6.55, p < .001$ . No statistically significant differences were observed for meaningful life,  $F(3, 462) = 1.06, p = .364$ , or pleasant life,  $F(3, 462) = 1.61, p = .186$ . Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that individuals with three or more children reported significantly higher levels of presence of meaning compared with individuals without children ( $p = .033$ ). Regarding search for meaning, individuals without children reported significantly higher scores than individuals with one child ( $p < .001$ ), two children ( $p = .004$ ), and three or more children ( $p < .001$ ). With respect to engaged life, individuals without children presented significantly lower levels compared with individuals with two children ( $p = .001$ ) and those with three or more children ( $p = .017$ ).

### 3. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore the relationships between parenthood, meaning in life, and happiness among adults, and to compare levels of these constructs between parents and non-parents. The results confirmed that parenthood is positively associated with the Presence of Meaning and the Meaningful Life dimension of happiness, reinforcing the theoretical link between these constructs within Positive Psychology. Non-parents reported slightly higher levels of Search for Meaning and Pleasant Life, although these differences were not statistically significant. The findings align with previous research indicating that parenting contributes to greater existential coherence and purpose (Nelson et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2024), while also showing that meaning and happiness are intertwined yet distinct facets of well-being (Steger et al., 2008; Martela & Steger, 2016; Baumeister et al., 2013).

Consistent with the eudaimonic perspective, the results suggest that parenthood provides a context in which individuals may experience enhanced meaning through care, responsibility, and generativity (Seligman, 2012; Freire et al., 2013). Parenting invites adults to transcend self-centered goals and engage in actions that contribute to others' development and welfare, which may strengthen the sense of coherence and purpose in life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Martela & Pessi, 2018). From a psychological standpoint, the experience of raising children may serve as a framework for interpreting life events and assigning value to daily experiences, integrating challenges into a broader narrative of growth and fulfillment (Bruner, 1996).

The positive association between the presence of Meaning and the Meaningful Life dimension supports the view that happiness and meaning are complementary rather than competing constructs. This resonates with the findings of Chen et al. (2024), who demonstrated that meaning mediates the relationship between psychological resilience and happiness, as well as with the results of Baumeister et al. (2013), which indicate that a meaningful life often requires engagement with challenges that transcend immediate pleasure. In this study, parents reported greater presence of meaning, which may reflect the existential rewards of caregiving and intergenerational connection, even in the face of stress or exhaustion (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2020; Dubois et al., 2024).

Conversely, the absence of significant differences in the *Pleasant Life* and *Engaged Life* dimensions suggests that parenthood does not necessarily increase day-to-day positive emotions or levels of flow. This finding echoes the nuanced perspective of Brosch (2016) and Bodin and Björklund (2022), who noted that parenting is both a source of profound joy and of emotional strain. The capacity to experience pleasure and engagement may depend on factors such as available support, socioeconomic stability, and the equitable distribution of caregiving roles (Ribeiro et al., 2015). Thus, the association between parenthood and well-being is complex and shaped by broader cultural, social, and gender contexts.

Interestingly, results showed that participants with two or more children reported a higher Presence of Meaning compared to those without children. This finding may reflect a cumulative effect of caregiving and relational investment, where multiple parenting experiences deepen the perception of life purpose. Guedes et al. (2011, 2015) also observed that motivations for parenthood extend beyond social expectations, encompassing emotional and existential fulfillment — factors that appear to reinforce the presence of meaning. From this perspective, the parental role is not only a social identity but also a symbolic framework through which adults construct and maintain meaning in their lives.

From a theoretical standpoint, the current findings reinforce the integration of hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of happiness. The moderate correlations between meaning and happiness dimensions support the conceptual overlap proposed by Seligman

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(2012) and Freire et al. (2013), who argued that flourishing arises from both emotional satisfaction and purposeful engagement. The simultaneous pursuit of meaning and happiness reflects a dynamic balance between stability and exploration — one that parenthood often demands. The process of constructing meaning while managing responsibilities and uncertainties may promote psychological maturity and emotional depth.

From a clinical and health psychology perspective, understanding the interplay between parenthood, meaning, and happiness offers valuable implications. Promoting reflection on personal values, goals, and sources of fulfilment may help parents maintain well-being and prevent burnout (Dubois et al., 2024). Interventions grounded in Positive Psychology could focus on strengthening meaning-making capacities and fostering self-compassion, helping individuals reinterpret stressors as opportunities for growth. Such approaches can enhance both parental satisfaction and overall psychological health, contributing to the prevention of emotional exhaustion and the promotion of family well-being.

Finally, it is worth noting that although parenthood appears to foster meaning and happiness, these experiences are not universal or uniform. Cultural expectations, gender dynamics, and economic constraints continue to shape the lived realities of parents (Ribeiro et al., 2015; OECD, 2024). Future studies should consider longitudinal designs and include measures of contextual variables such as perceived social support, marital satisfaction, and work–life balance. Understanding these interactions will provide a more comprehensive view of how parenthood contributes to human flourishing and mental health.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence linking parenthood, meaning in life, and happiness within the framework of Positive Psychology. The findings suggest that parenthood enhances the presence of meaning and the experience of a meaningful life, confirming its relevance as a potential source of eudaimonic well-being. At the same time, happiness was shown to depend on both emotional and existential factors, indicating that fulfilment arises not only from pleasure but also from purpose. Although non-parents displayed slightly higher levels of search for meaning, parents demonstrated greater existential coherence, particularly when caring for two or more children. These results reinforce the view that meaning and happiness are intertwined yet distinct components of human flourishing. From a psychological and clinical perspective, fostering meaning-making and reflective parenting practices may serve as protective factors for well-being and mental health.

Among the limitations of this study, it is important to note the reliance on a non-probability sample composed predominantly of Portuguese participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Consequently, future research should utilize more diverse samples alongside longitudinal designs to track the evolution of the investigated dimensions across the parental life cycle. Future studies should explore contextual moderators such as gender roles, social support, and work–family balance, using longitudinal designs to examine the dynamic processes through which parenthood shapes well-being across the lifespan. Integrating hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions will enable a more comprehensive understanding of adult flourishing in contemporary societies.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization, C.F. and L.S.; data curation, C.F. and L.S.; formal analysis, C.F.; investigation, C.F.; methodology, C.F.; project administration, C.F.; resources, C.F.; software, C.F. and L.S.; supervision, C.F.; validation, C.F.; writing – original draft, L.S.; writing – review & editing, C.F.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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