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Family Studies

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Research Brief

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Meaning in Modern America

by Clay Routledge

Meaning is a fundamental psychological need. People who perceive their lives as full of meaning are physically and psychologically healthier than those who lack meaning. A lack of meaning is a risk factor for mental illness, suicide, and a wide range of unhealthy behaviors. When people are facing major life stressors and traumas, it is those who have a strong sense of purpose and meaning who are the most resilient. Individuals who view their lives as meaningful also live longer. In general, meaning motivates healthy, long-term goal pursuit and promotes psychological wellbeing.¹

Relationships and religion have long been recognized as two particularly powerful sources of meaning in life. People who feel connected to and supported by others report greater meaning than those who feel disconnected, ostracized, or lonely.² Experimental studies confirm this link by demonstrating that experiences of social exclusion decrease meaning³ whereas experiences that engender feelings of social support increase meaning.⁴ Concerning religion, believers and those who highly identify as religious tend to report greater perceptions of meaning than nonbelievers and those who believe but are not particularly religious.⁵ Religion has further been found to be a potent resource for defending against meaning threats; believers turn to their faith when confronted with situations that undermine a sense of meaning, and doing so helps protect psychological health.⁶

American culture is changing in a number of ways that have potentially powerful implications for people's efforts to find and maintain meaning in life. Americans are waiting longer to get married and have children, and are having fewer children.⁷ Feelings of social disconnection and loneliness are on the rise, even as people are increasingly "connected" via social media.⁸ Americans are decreasingly religious both in terms of personal faith and

¹ Hicks, J. & Routledge, C. (Eds) (2013). *The experience of meaning in life: Classical perspectives, emerging themes, and controversies*. New York: Springer Press.

² Lambert, N. M., Stillman, T. F., Hicks, J. A., Kamble, S., Baumeister, R. F., & Fincham, F. D. (2013). To belong is to matter: Sense of belonging enhances meaning in life. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39, 1418-1427.

³ Stillman, T. F., Baumeister, R. F., Lambert, N. M., Crescioni, A., DeWall, N., Fincham, F. D. (2009). *Alone and without purpose: Life loses meaning following social exclusion*. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 68-694.

⁴ Routledge C., Arndt, J., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Hart, C., Juhl, J., Vingerhoets, A. J., & Scholtz, W. (2011). The past makes the present meaningful: Nostalgia as an existential resource. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, 638-652.

⁵ Abeyta, A. & Routledge, C. (2018). The need for meaning and religiosity: An individual differences approach to assessing existential needs and the relation with religious commitment, beliefs, and experiences. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 123, 6-13.

⁶ Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M.E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of religion and health*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/p20-579.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/08/lonely-die.aspx>

involvement in religious organizations (e.g., church attendance).⁹ Considering the changing landscape of American culture, I wanted to explore people's current views on what gives their lives meaning and how these views may be similar and distinct as a function of factors relevant to both social and religious life.

To this end, my research team conducted two surveys. To start, we wanted to allow individuals to articulate, with as little direction as possible, what gives their lives meaning. So, we recruited a sample of adults and provided them a simple-meaning writing prompt. We believed this would help us better capture people's natural views because we would not be orienting them towards any specific source of meaning. Since American culture is becoming increasingly secular, we were particularly interested in comparing theists with atheists. We used the themes that emerged in Study 1 to design a second survey that allowed us to further explore how different people approach meaning as well as the extent to which they believe their lives are meaningful. Below, I describe each study and what we found.

Study 1: What are the Most Prominent Sources of Meaning in Life?

Participants were given a simple prompt to detail in writing what gives their lives meaning. Specifically, we utilized an online labor market (Amazon Mechanical Turk) to recruit a sample of adult atheists and theists. We recruited a total of 404 participants (226 females and 178 males, with an age range of 18 to 88 and a mean age of 34.27). Our sample consisted of 217 atheists and 187 theists, was 75% white, 6.7% black, 6.2% Hispanic, and 9.2% Asian, and 3% non-specified. We specifically recruited atheists because American culture is becoming increasingly secular, but there has been little research focused on similarities and differences between believers and nonbelievers in the study of meaning in life. Roughly 10% identified a high school diploma as their highest level of education and 5% indicated having training from a trade school. Just over 25% indicated having some college. Nearly 45% reported having an associates or bachelor's degree, and about 10% reported having a graduate or professional degree.

Our study began with the following prompt:

We are interested in identifying the different ways people find a sense of personal meaning in life. Using the space below, for the next few minutes, please describe what makes your life feel meaningful.

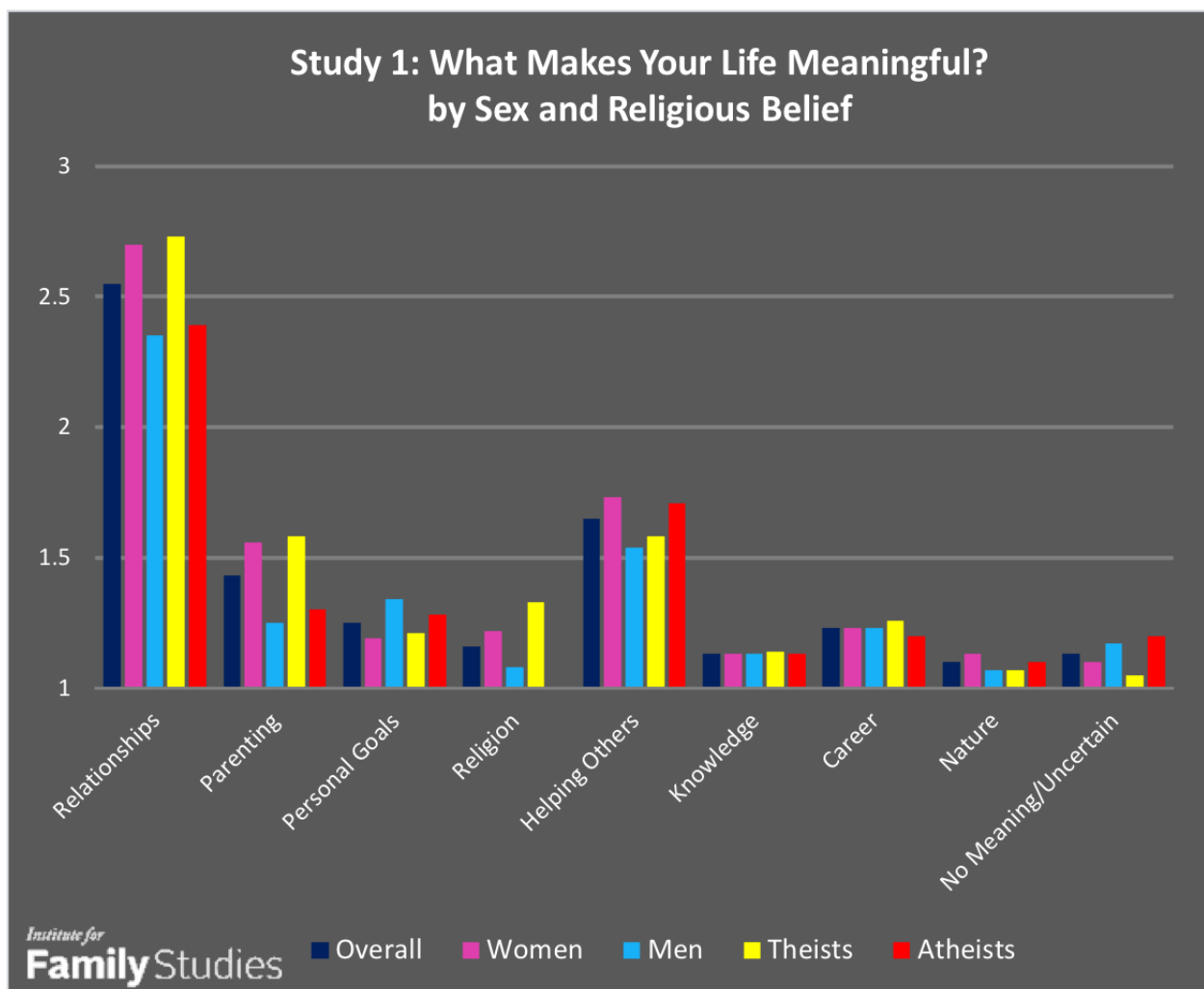
Upon completion of data collection, our lab developed a content quantification protocol in which we had trained research assistants code responses to the writing prompt. Specifically, based on past research and an examination of a random sample of the narratives, we generated a list of 13 meaning themes. Three trained research assistants were given the list of 13 themes and asked to rate the extent to which each participants' written response to the meaning prompt focused on each of these themes using a scale of 1 (not at all) to 4 (quite a bit). The research assistants completed their ratings independently and did not have access to any information about the participants.

⁹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

The 13 themes were: social relationships, parenting, personal goals/self-improvement, religion, spirituality, helping others, legacy, pursuit of knowledge, hobbies, travel, career, nature, and no meaning/uncertainty. After the research assistants completed all of their ratings, we found that 4 of the themes we generated were rated as being absent from most of the narratives, so we did not consider them further in our analyses (spirituality, legacy, hobbies, and travel). It is possible that these and other themes contribute to meaning, but it was difficult for our assistants to identify them in the narratives. We found high inter-rater reliability across the remaining 9 themes and thus created a single score for each participant on each theme by averaging the ratings across raters.

Meaning is found in social connections for all, but there are a number of differences between theists and atheists, and between men and women.

As can be seen from the figure below, social relationships stand out as the most prominently mentioned source of meaning in life for all participants. This is not surprising as social bonds are critical for survival and have a major influence on physical and psychological health. Consistent with surveys showing major declines in Americans' religiosity, religion did not emerge as a prominent theme.

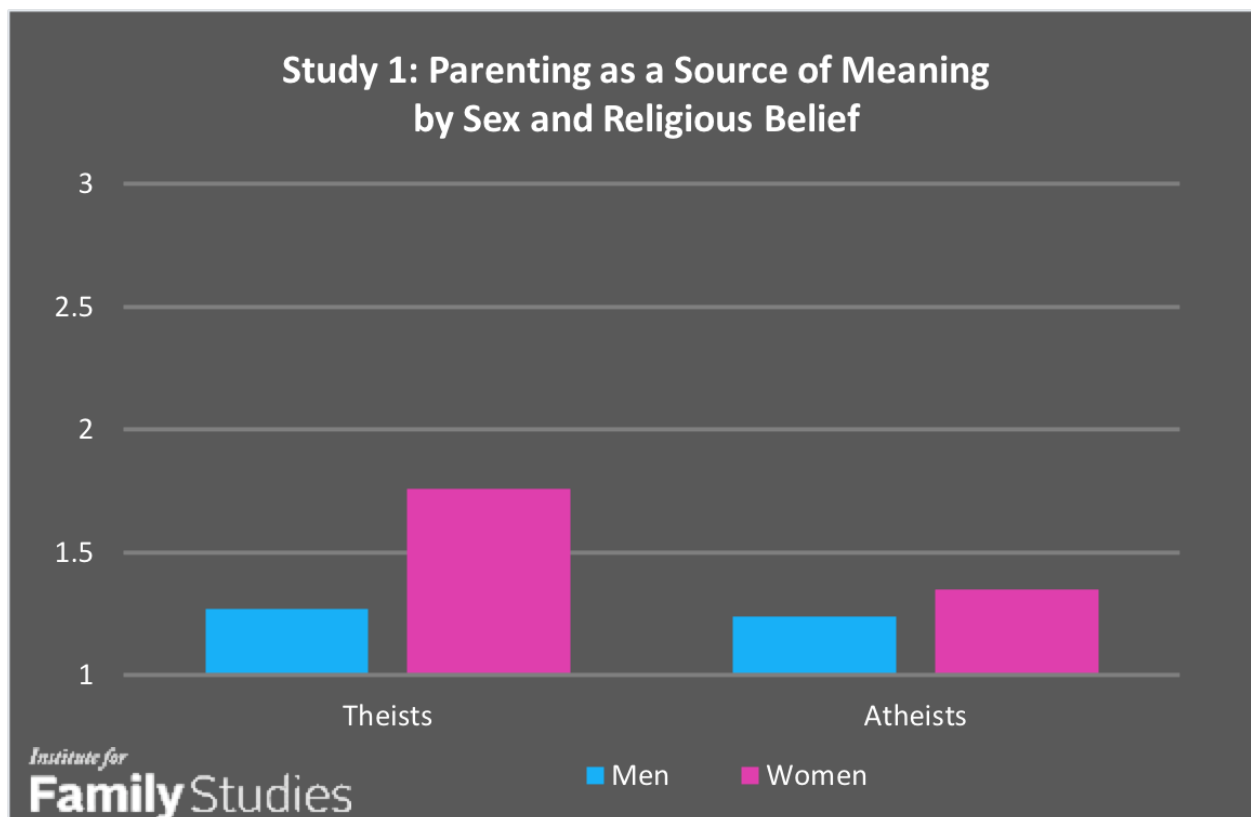


Since many studies have linked religious faith to meaning and traditional religion is in decline in the United States, we wanted to specifically focus on similarities and differences between theists and atheists. On many of the themes, we observed no significant differences between these groups. However, we did find a number of significant differences. Theists focused significantly more on relationships, parenting, and, not surprisingly, religion, than atheists. Atheists were more inclined to describe life as having no meaning or feeling uncertain about life's meaning.¹⁰

We also observed a number of statistically significant sex differences. Women focused significantly more on relationships, parenting, religion, helping others, and nature than males. Males focused significantly more on personal goals/self-improvement than women.

Female theists stand apart in viewing parenting as a source of meaning.

We tested possible interactions between theism/atheism and sex on each theme. The only statistically significant interaction was on parenting, such that theist women stood apart compared to all others on parenting as a source of meaning. Since relationships emerged as the prominent theme and parenting was identified as a distinct social domain of meaning, in Study 2 we asked a number of additional questions (e.g., marital status, parental status) and examined more specific social themes to allow for a deeper examination of the connection between family life and meaning.



¹⁰ These effects remained statistically significant when controlling for sex.

Study 2: A Deeper Investigation of Meaning

Study 1 allowed people to describe, without direction, what gives their lives meaning. Since both theism/atheism and sex were related to specific social themes such as parenting, we conducted a follow-up study for a deeper investigation of how different people find meaning. In addition, we tested whether people's overall perceptions of meaning in life varied based on theism/atheism and sex, and also marital and parental status.

We recruited an online sample of 502 adult participants (219 females and 283 males, aged 19 to 71, with a mean age of 33.75). Our sample consisted of 165 atheists and 337 theists, was 70.3% white, 12.5% black, 6.4% Hispanic, 8% Asian, .6% American Indian, .6% Pacific Islander, and 1.6% non-specified. Roughly 11% identified a high school diploma as their highest level of education and 2.4% indicated having training from a trade school. About 25% indicated having some college. Nearly 50% reported having an associates or bachelor's degree and about 12% reported having a graduate or professional degree. There were 225 parents with an average of 1.76 children (range 1 to 5), and 228 participants were single (never married), 240 were married, 27 divorced, 4 widowed, and 3 currently separated.

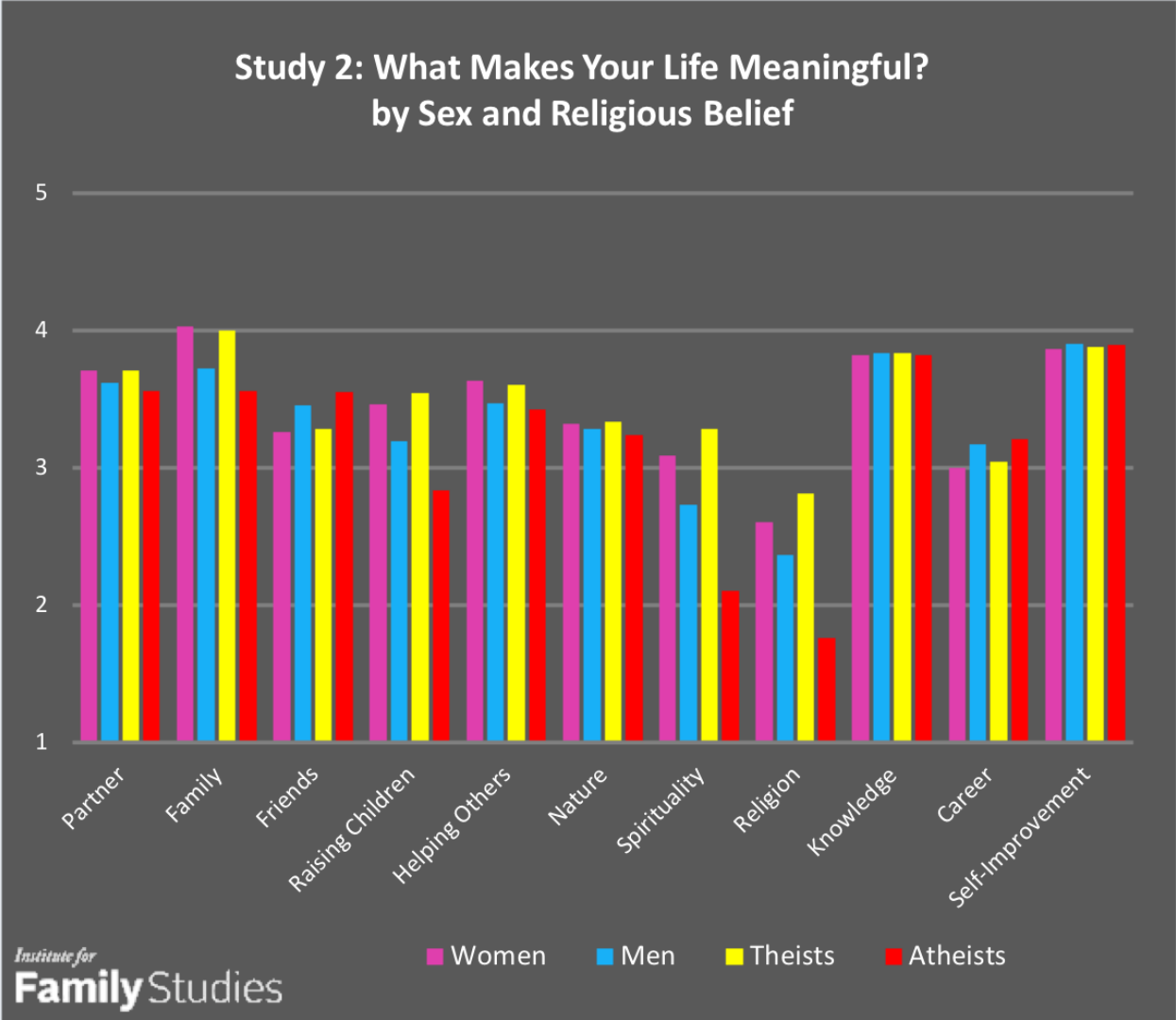
First, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed the extent to which they perceive their lives as meaningful.¹¹ Next, instead of generating their own meaning themes, participants responded to the following statements (largely based on the themes documented in Study 1) by indicating the importance of each domain to their sense of meaning on a scale of 1 (not important or relevant) to 5 (very important). Though in Study 1 the spirituality theme was dropped from analyses because it was not well detected by coders, we used it as a domain in Study 2 because spiritual experiences and practices are widely considered to be associated with the meaning motive.

- How important is **your romantic partner (e.g., spouse, girl/boyfriend, etc.)** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **your family** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important are **your friends** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **raising children (either now or in the future)** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **helping others** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **nature** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **spirituality** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **religion** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **obtaining knowledge** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **your career** to your sense of meaning in life?
- How important is **self-improvement** to your sense of meaning in life?

¹¹ Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53*, 80-93. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.53.1.80

Theists view faith and family as more important to meaning than atheists.

We examined the extent to which people rated different domains of life as important to their sense of meaning in life. The figure below presents results divided by the same group of definitions used in Study 1. Unlike Study 1, however, a number of non-social (or at least not *explicitly* social) domains were rated as highly important to meaning. This suggests that when people are presented with domains of meaning and asked to rate them, they respond differently than when they generate their own meaning themes.

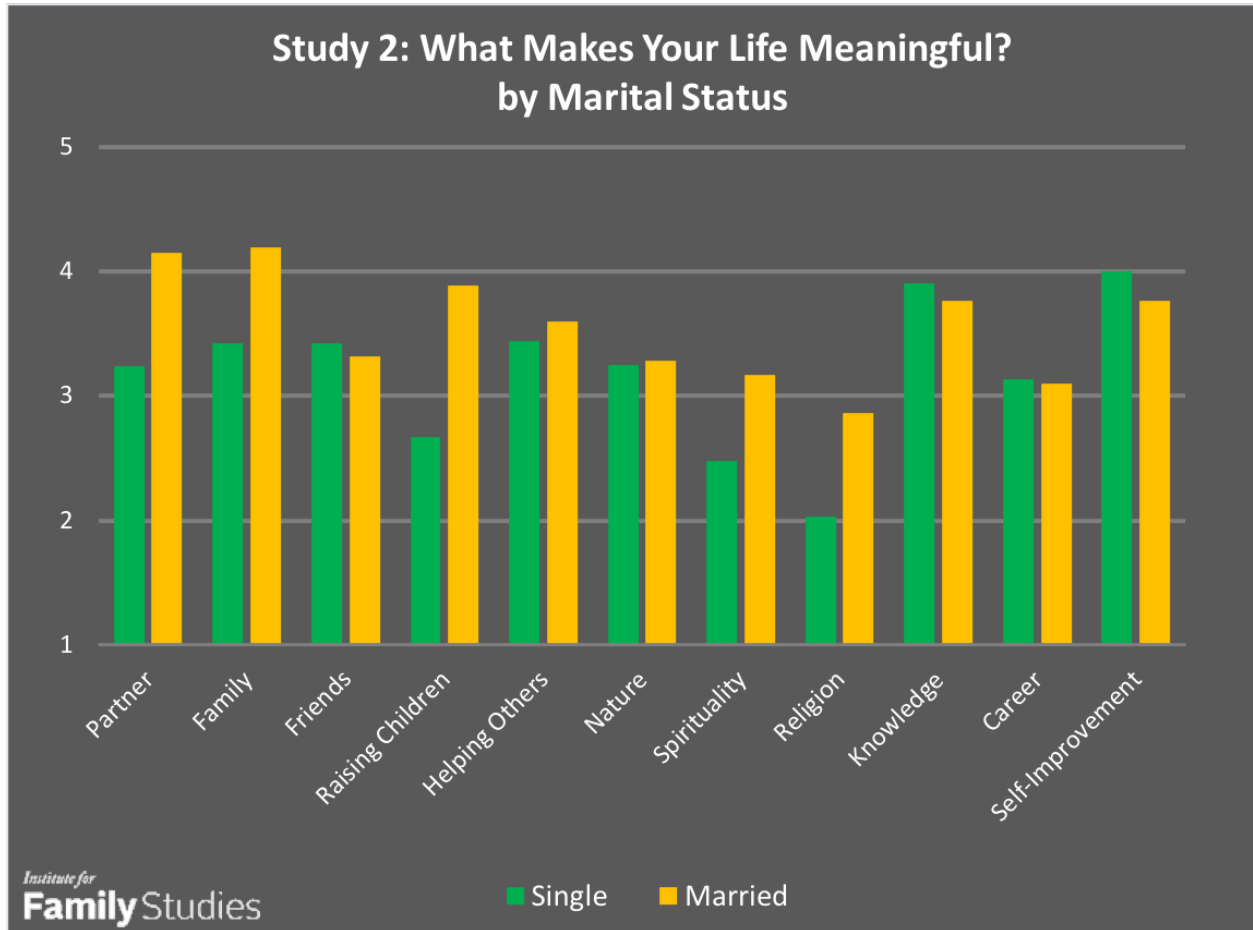


However, as in Study 1, within each domain, there were a number of distinctions between groups. Theists, compared to atheists, rated family, raising children, spirituality, and religion as significantly more important to meaning. Atheists rated friends as significantly more important than theists.¹² Women rated family and spirituality significantly higher than men. However, these sex differences were not statistically significant when controlling for theism/atheism.

¹² The effects of theism/atheism remained statistically significant when controlling for sex, marital status, and parental status.

Married people view faith and family as more important to meaning than single people.

To expand upon Study 1, we also examined potential differences between married and single people. Because of the small number of widowed, divorced, and separated people in our sample, we restricted our analyses to single (never-married) and currently married. We observed a number of statistically significant differences. Married people rated their partner, family, raising children, spirituality, and religion as more important to meaning than single people. However, the effect of marital status on raising children was non-significant when controlling for theism/atheism. Single people rated self-improvement as more important to meaning than married people.¹³

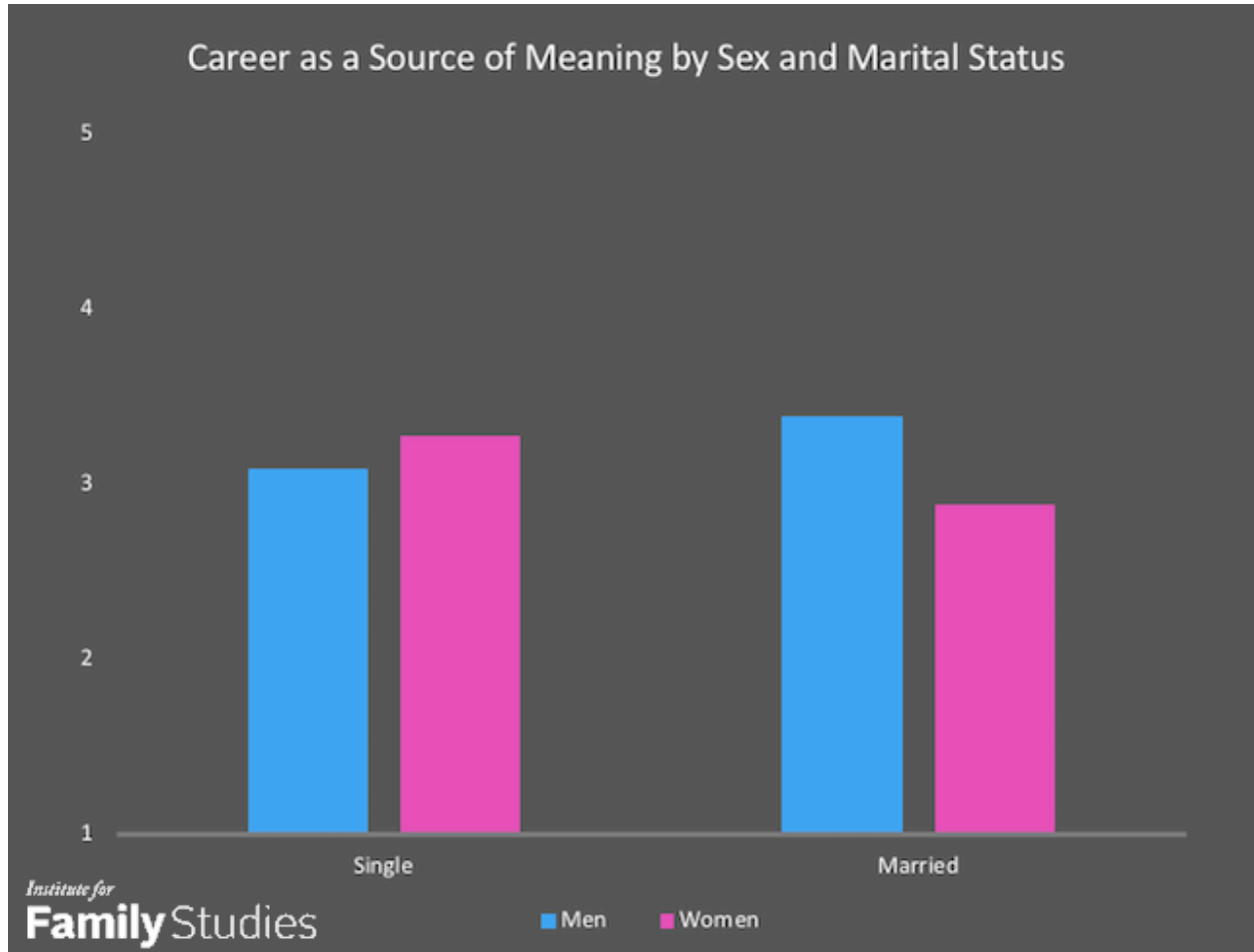


¹³ These effects remained statistically significant when controlling for theism/atheism, sex, and parental status.

Married women are less likely to view a career as a source of meaning.

The previously reported differences between married and single people did not differ as a function of sex. However, within the domain of career, there was a significant interaction between marital status and sex.¹⁴

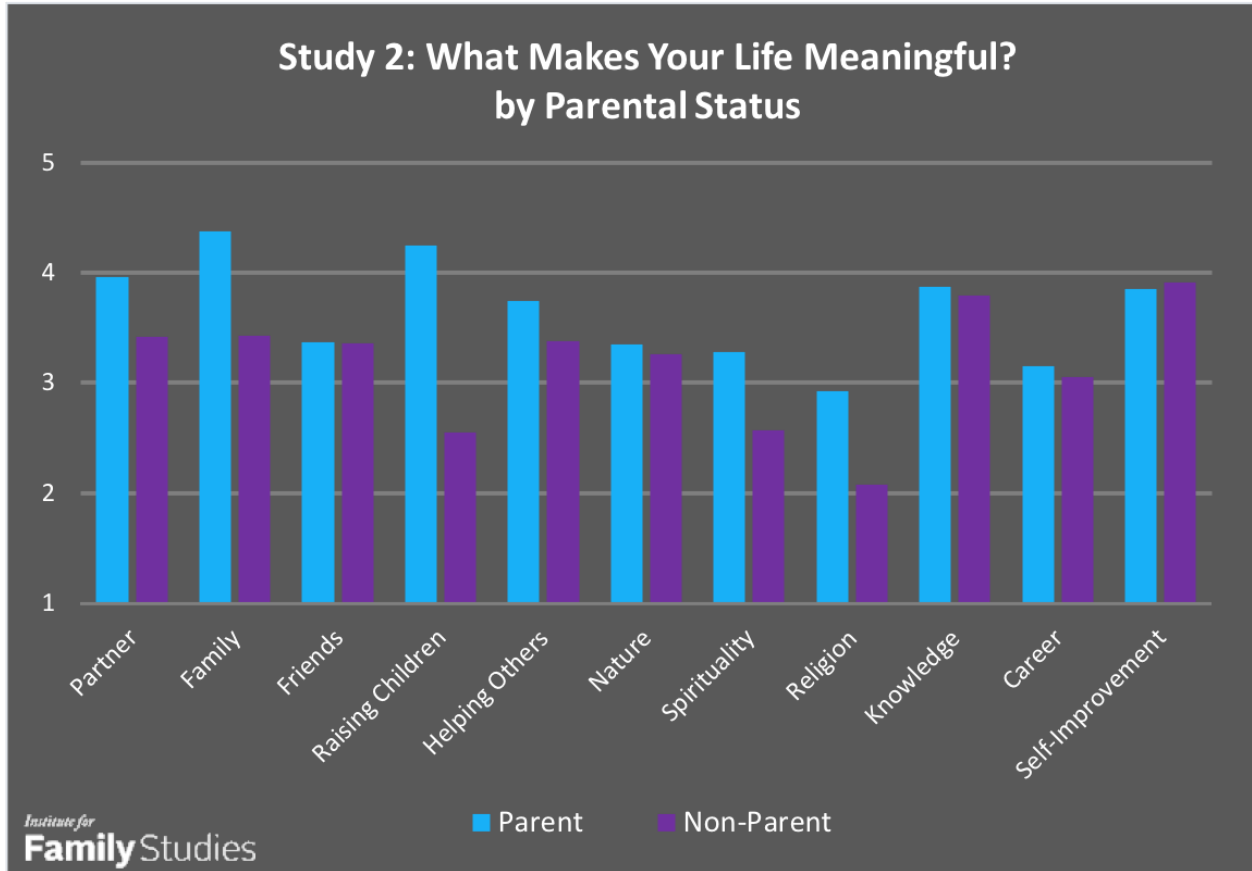
Among single people, men and women did not significantly differ on the importance of their careers to their sense of meaning in life. However, among married people, men rated career significantly higher than women. Looked at differently, married women rated career significantly lower than single women. Married men rated career as more important than single men, but this difference was not quite statistically significant.



¹⁴ The interaction remained statistically significant when controlling for theism/atheism and parental status.

Parents view faith, family, and helping others as more important to meaning than non-parents.

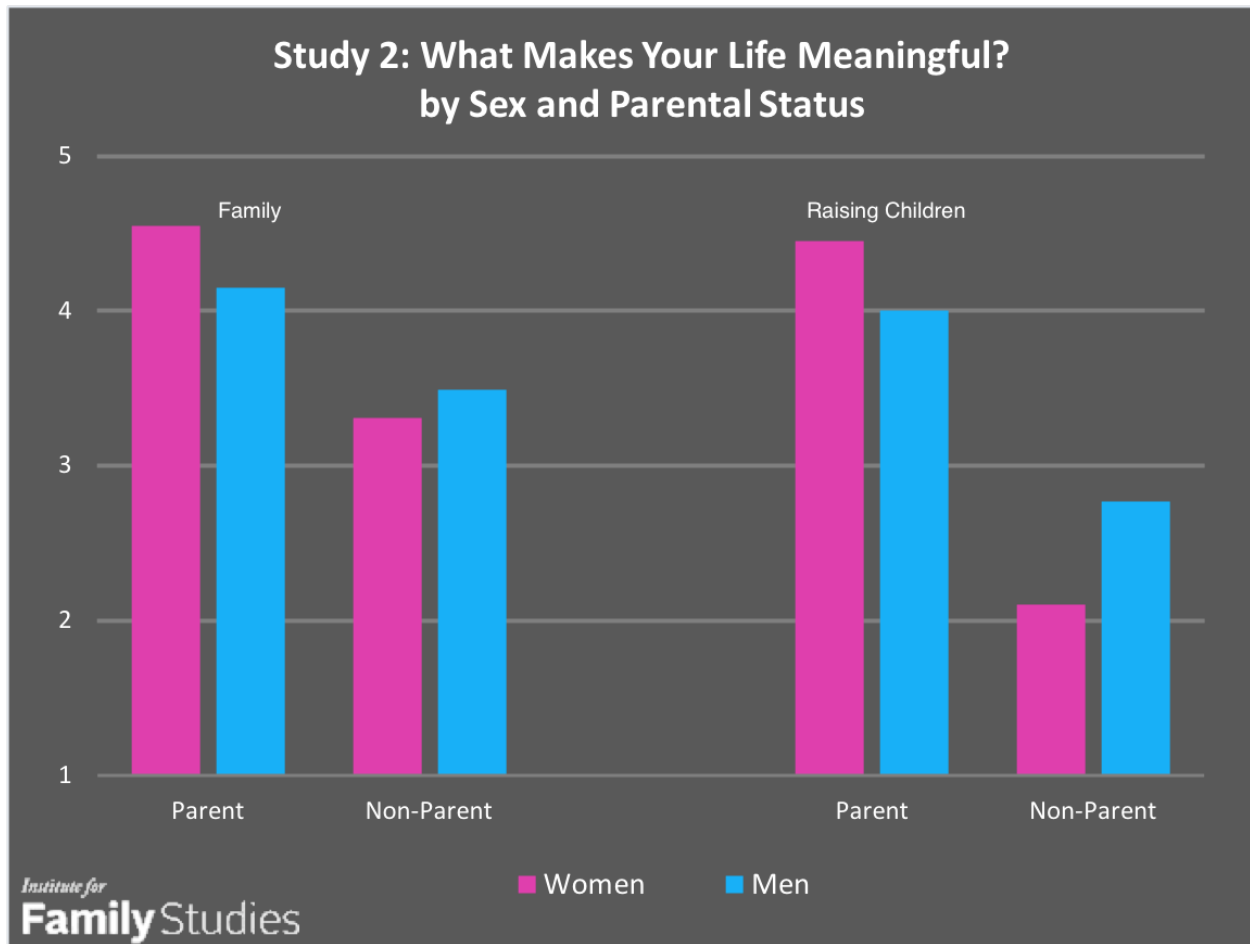
There were a number of statistically significant differences between those who do and do not have children. Compared to non-parents, parents rated their partners, family, raising children, helping others, spirituality, and religion as more important to meaning.¹⁵



¹⁵ When controlling for marital status, the effect on partner became non-significant. However, all other effects remained significant when controlling for atheism/theism, sex, and marital status.

Mothers are especially inclined to view family and raising children as important to meaning.

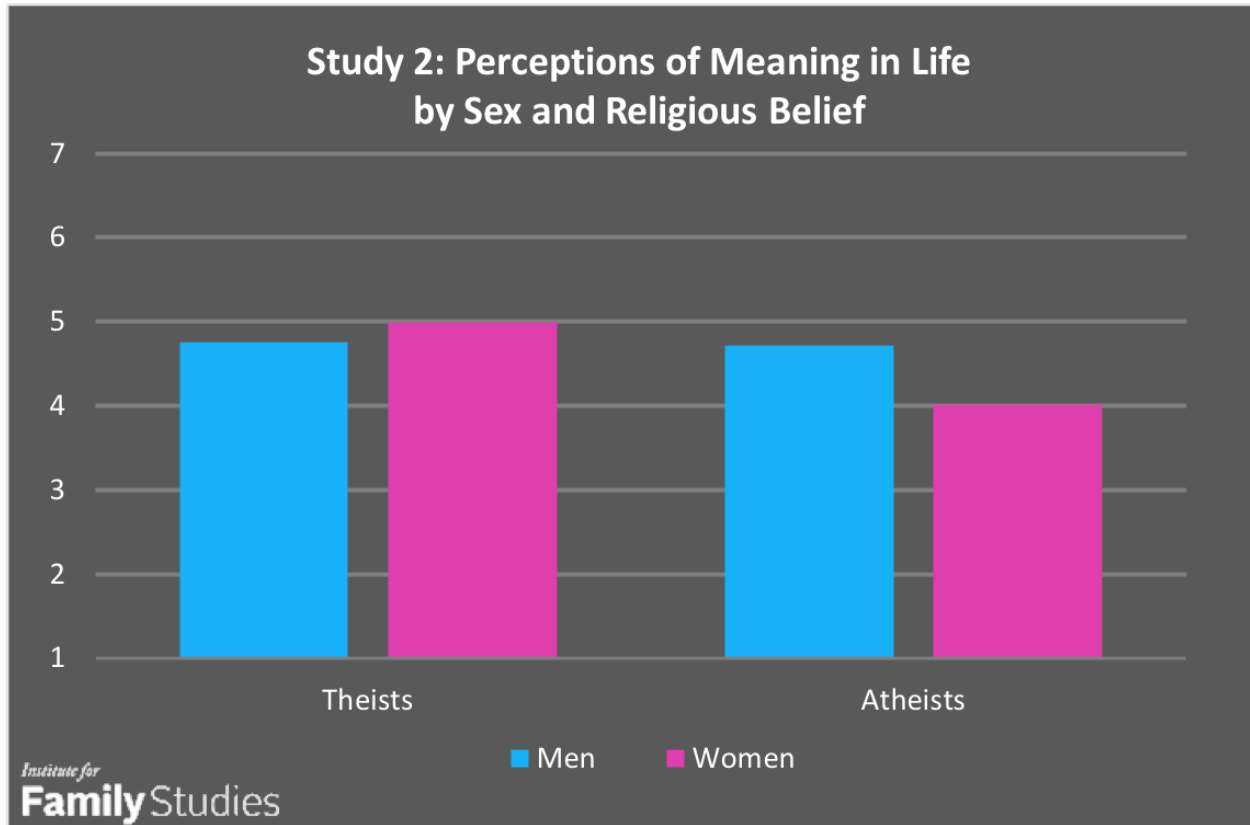
When examining how the ratings of domains of meaning differ between those who do and do not have children, we also observed a couple of significant interactions involving sex.¹⁶ Compared to men, women rated family and raising children as more important to meaning if they were parents. For non-parents, there was a sex difference such that men rated raising children as more important than women.



¹⁶ These interactions remained statistically significant when controlling for theism/atheism and marital status.

Atheist women perceive life as less meaningful than atheist men and theist men and women.

After exploring how people view the importance of different life domains to finding meaning, we examined potential differences between groups in their overall perceptions of life as meaningful. We observed a significant interaction between theism/atheism and sex.¹⁷ As can be seen below, atheist women reported lower meaning than all other groups.

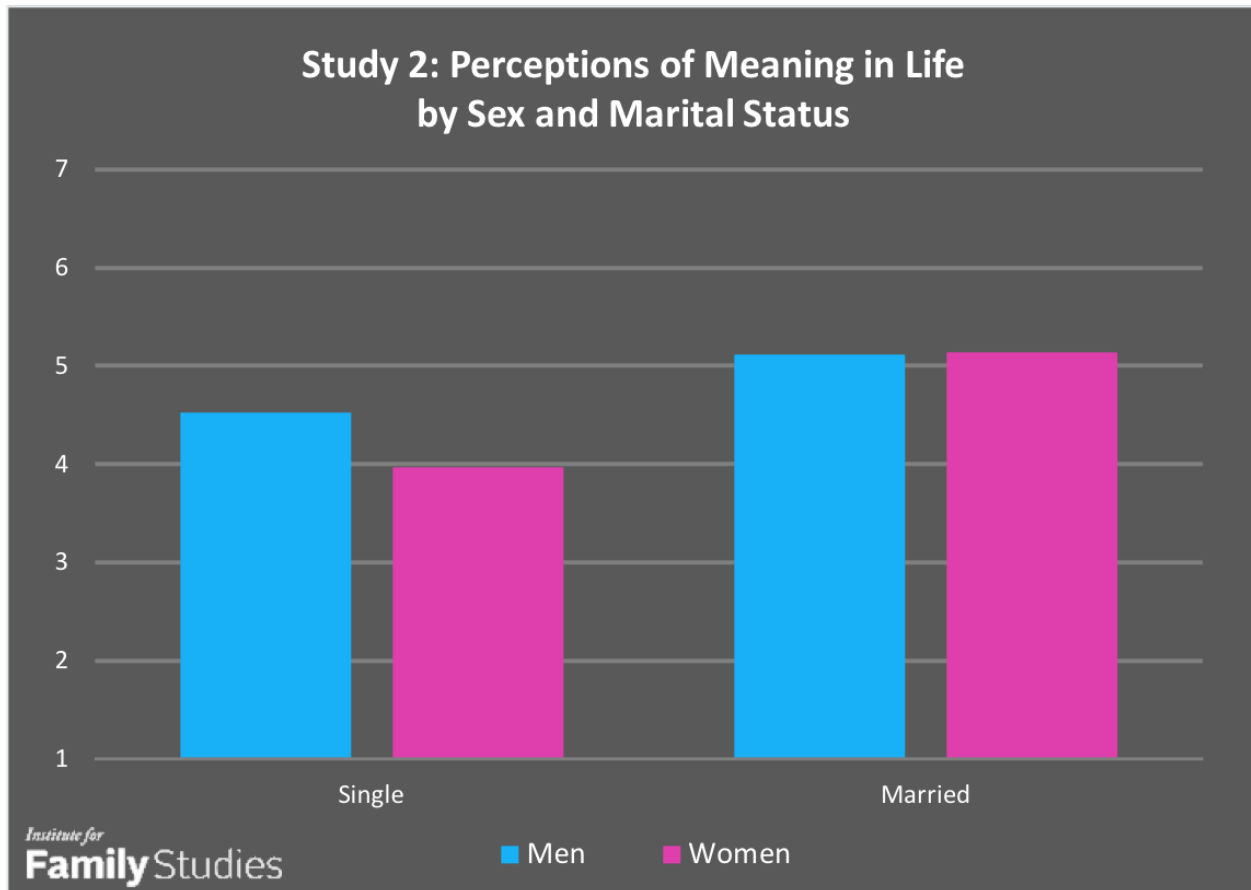


It should be noted that of the 219 females in the study, only 57 (26%) were atheist, compared to 108 (38%) of the 283 males. Women are less inclined to be atheists, and those who are report lower meaning in life.

¹⁷ The interaction remained statistically significant when controlling for marital status and parenting status.

Married people have a meaning advantage and single women perceive life as less meaningful than married women and married or single men.

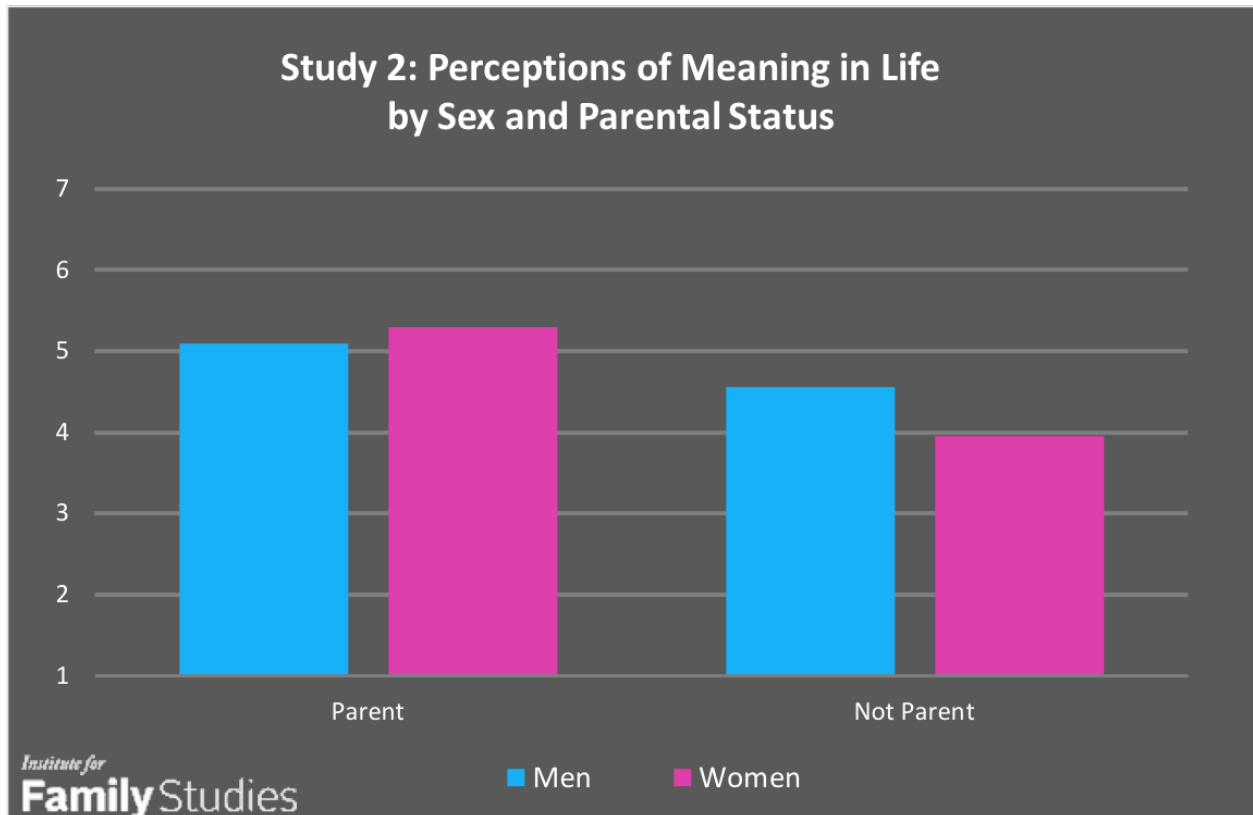
Since we observed differences between single and married individuals on the importance of family-related domains of meaning, we also explored whether these groups differed on overall perceptions of meaning. As the below figure illustrates, married people had a meaning advantage compared to single people. However, there was also a significant interaction between marital status and sex such that single women reported lower meaning than all other groups.¹⁸



¹⁸ The main and interaction effects remained statistically significant when controlling for theism/atheism and parental status.

Parents have a meaning advantage and women without children perceive life as less meaningful than women with children and men with or without children.

Since we observed a number of differences involving sex and parental status on the importance of family-related domains of meaning, we also explored whether men and women who are and are not parents differ on perceptions of life as meaningful. As the figure shows, parents have the meaning advantage. This difference between parents and non-parents was statistically significant. But again, there was a statistically significant interaction in that women without children reported lower meaning compared to other groups.¹⁹



Family and Faith Play a Powerful Role in Finding Meaning

Because perceptions of meaning have a wide range of physical, social, and mental health consequences, it is critical to examine how people approach the pursuit of meaning and how the changing social and religious landscape of American culture may influence people's ability to find and maintain meaning.

Interestingly—and perhaps speaking to the general decline of religious life in the United States—when participants were prompted to describe what gives their lives meaning (Study 1), religious faith did not emerge as a dominant theme. That being said, the results from our surveys indicate people of faith are more heavily invested in the family relationships that are most strongly associated with meaning. This suggests that though it is declining according to many metrics, religion or some psychological or social component

¹⁹ The interaction remained statistically significant when controlling for theism/atheism and marital status.

of it continues to play an important role in meaning-making. For instance, in a recent series of studies, my colleagues and I found that the need for meaning is a unique predictor of belief in God and religious commitment and that religious involvement is associated with greater perceptions of meaning.²⁰ In other studies, we also found that those who do not identify as religious tend to be more attracted to fringe beliefs such as belief in intelligent extraterrestrial beings when searching for meaning in life.²¹ The decline of traditional religion at the societal level tells us little about the potentially inherent religious proclivities of humans or how these proclivities connect to other meaning-providing social pursuits.

For women, family life appears to be especially relevant to meaning. However, the extent to which women viewed family and raising children as sources of meaning varied depending on parental status. Specifically, mothers were particularly inclined to view family and raising children as important to meaning. Moreover, within the domain of raising children, it was women without children, compared to women with children and men with and without children, who were least inclined to view raising children as important for meaning. These trends may have significance for perceptions of meaning as single women and women without children viewed their lives as less meaningful than married women and mothers respectively. In addition, married women were less likely to view their careers as important to meaning than married men or single women.

For men, there was some evidence that careers and related goals may play an important role in finding meaning. In Study 1, men were more likely to discuss personal and self-improvement goals (which could include professional goals) as important to meaning. In Study 2, though single men and women did not differ in the importance placed on careers, married men placed more importance on careers than married women. Critically, though some effects related to family were strongest for women, married men and fathers also viewed family life as important for meaning compared to single men and men without children. And married people and parents, regardless of sex, have a meaning advantage over their single and childless counterparts.

The take-home message for all adults—regardless of group distinction—is that close social bonds, particularly those that involve marriage and family, appear to play a powerful role in finding meaning in life. The data from these surveys cannot answer important questions regarding causal relationships, and there are undoubtedly many other factors that influence how people find and maintain meaning in life. More research is certainly needed. However, these studies offer an important step toward a better understanding of meaning in modern America.

Dr. Clay Routledge is a professor of psychology at North Dakota State University. He is a leading expert on the psychology of meaning. You can find out more about his work at clayroutledge.com.

²⁰ Abeyta, A. & Routledge, C. (2018). The need for meaning and religiosity: An individual differences approach to assessing existential needs and the relation with religious commitment, beliefs, and experiences. *Personality and Individual Differences, 123*, 6-13.

²¹ Routledge, C., Abeyta, A. A., & Roylance, C. (2017). We are not alone: The meaning motive, religiosity, and belief in extraterrestrial intelligence. *Motivation and Emotion, 41*, 135-146.

