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Parenthood in Europe: Not More Life Satisfaction, but More Meaning in Life

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study contrasts the associations between parenthood and two central components of subjective well-being: life satisfaction and meaning in life.

Background: Theoretical arguments and previous research based on qualitative analyses suggest that parenthood might lower life satisfaction but increase meaning in life. This study provides the first test of this idea based on a large-scale, multicountry analysis, considering heterogeneity in the link between parenthood and well-being across sociodemographic groups and national contexts.

Methods: The data were sourced from the European Social Survey, with more than 43,000 respondents from 30 countries. Multilevel regression models tested the role of parenthood, proxied by the presence of children in the household, on life satisfaction and meaning in life, with separate analyses conducted for women and men. Additional analyses investigated heterogeneity across sociodemographic groups and country clusters.

Results: The link between parenthood and life satisfaction varied significantly by gender and context, tending to be more negative for parents facing more challenging conditions. Conversely, the analyses revealed a consistent *positive* link between parenthood and meaning in life for both women and men, regardless of social and national context.

Conclusion: Parenthood is linked to lower life satisfaction for some groups but to higher meaning in life across diverse populations. However, under certain conditions, such as the culture and policy context of the Nordic countries, parenthood is associated with both higher life satisfaction and meaning, two key components of a good life.

1 | Introduction

Parenthood is a complex experience and a “mixed bag” (Musick et al. 2016; Negraia and Augustine 2020). Whether having children contributes to a “good life” is a multifaceted question that has been widely examined across disciplines (for a recent review, see Nomaguchi and Brown 2011); several studies point out that parents do not experience higher life satisfaction than

nonparents (e.g., Kohler and Mencarini 2016; Mikucka and Rizzi 2020). However, whether having children makes life better depends largely on how a “good life” is defined and which aspects of parents’ well-being are considered (e.g., Kashdan et al. 2008; Senik 2011; Vanhoutte 2014). Life satisfaction and the perception that life is meaningful—both critical dimensions of a “good life”—may yield very different results (King and Hicks 2021; Oishi and Westgate 2022; Ryan and Deci 2001).

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Therefore, a closer examination of various aspects of well-being and how they differ by parental status in various social contexts may provide a clearer understanding of the experience of parenthood.

Despite considerable overlap between satisfaction and meaning in life, they remain distinct constructs (cf. Baumeister et al. 2013; McGregor and Little 1998; Ryan and Deci 2001). Life satisfaction, defined as a global cognitive evaluation of well-being (Diener et al. 1999), is more closely linked to having one's needs met, to present-moment well-being, and to *hedonic* happiness. In contrast, meaning in life involves having a sense of purpose and recognizing that one's actions contribute to something greater than oneself (Hansen 2012; King and Hicks 2021; Steger et al. 2008), aligning more with *eudaimonia* (cf. Aristotle, 4th Century B.C./Aristotle 2000). People value both a happy and a meaningful life, and when forced to choose only one, for every three people who chose a happy life, two opted for a meaningful life (Oishi and Westgate 2022).

Sociological and demographic studies analyzing large-scale, representative data have predominantly focused on happiness or life satisfaction, often overlooking the dimension of meaning in life (e.g., Pollmann-Schult 2014; Margolis and Myrskylä 2011; Aassve et al. 2012; for similar research in economics, see e.g., Clark et al. 2013; Clark et al. 2008). These studies often use happiness and life satisfaction as synonymous and have identified a so-called “parenthood happiness puzzle” (Kohler and Mencarini 2016) or parenthood “penalty” (Glass et al. 2016), where parents' life satisfaction is, on average, no better—and sometimes even *lower*—than that of nonparents. Research examining heterogeneity in the parenthood—wellbeing relationship has found that living with children can reduce life satisfaction in particular for individuals in challenging circumstances, such as single parents, those with lower socioeconomic status (SES), or those in countries with unsupportive public-policy contexts (for a review, see Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020).

In contrast, psychologically oriented research has increasingly focused on meaning in life (e.g., King and Hicks 2021; Schnell 2020; Steger et al. 2009). Although studies on parenthood in this vein are often based on single-country, small, or partly nonrepresentative samples, their findings suggest that parents tend to experience *higher* levels of meaning than nonparents (e.g., Baumeister et al. 2013; Nelson et al. 2013; Umberson and Gove 1989; White and Dolan 2009).

Few studies have directly compared how parenthood is related to life satisfaction versus meaning in life. A recent study using a German panel found that both life satisfaction and meaning in life increased with the birth of the first child, but satisfaction declined after about 18 months while meaning remained elevated (Hudde 2025).

Against this background, we identify two research gaps: (1) the differing relationship between parenthood and these two dimensions of well-being has not been tested with large-scale representative data, and (2) while social and institutional context has been studied for life satisfaction, its relationship to meaning in life remains unexplored.

The current study addresses these research gaps as follows: First, we elaborate conceptually on life satisfaction and meaning in life and how they might be differentially affected by parenthood. We then discuss how the association might vary by social and institutional context, arguing that the parenthood—meaning link may be less dependent on social circumstances and country context than the parenthood—life satisfaction link. In our empirical analyses, we analyze data from more than 43,000 individuals from the European Social Survey (ESS), a unique source that provides measures of both life satisfaction and meaning in life. Furthermore, the current study examined heterogeneity in the association between well-being and parenthood based on the social characteristics of respondents' age, education, and partnership status. In addition, the cross-country design allowed us to identify which patterns are general and which vary across country clusters with different cultural and policy contexts. The main models compared individuals with and without children in the household, while a robustness check tested the role of biological parenthood for a subsample of the data.

2 | Background

There are numerous conceptualizations of life satisfaction and meaning in life (e.g., Baumeister 1991; King and Hicks 2021; Oishi and Westgate 2022; Ryan and Deci 2001; Schnell 2020). In the following, we primarily refer to the definition of life satisfaction as an integrative, cognitive evaluation of one's own life and well-being, often based on the balance between positive and negative experiences (for more detailed conceptual considerations see Diener et al. 2018; Oishi and Westgate 2022). Meaning in life, on the other hand, encompasses purpose, coherence, and significance (for more detailed conceptual considerations see Baumeister 1991; King and Hicks 2021; Martela and Steger 2016; Oishi and Westgate 2022; Schnell 2020; Steger et al. 2009). Purpose is the “perception that one's life has direction and contributes to something greater than the self,” (Oishi and Westgate 2022, 792) while coherence is the idea that one's roles and experiences aggregate into a coherent whole and significance is the “subjective sense that one's life matters” (Oishi and Westgate 2022, 792).

3 | Parenthood, Life Satisfaction, and Meaning

To explain why the parenthood—satisfaction link may differ from the parenthood—meaning link, we consider three dimensions of parenthood: *temporal*, *relational*, and *behavioral*.

First, parenthood changes life's *temporal dimension*, which may affect satisfaction and meaning in life in different ways. Life satisfaction describes a person's cognitive well-being at a specific time and is primarily focused on the present or past (Baumeister et al. 2013; Li et al. 2021). Daily stress, unforeseen challenges, and positive parent–child activities may alter parents' life satisfaction from one day to the next. Individuals without children may be less susceptible to such unforeseen family needs. Research shows that major life events can alter life satisfaction, though often only temporarily, supporting the situational evaluation of life satisfaction (for a meta-analysis, see Luhmann et al. 2012).

In contrast, meaning places more emphasis on the future; anything contributing to a better future, even if unpleasant now, is considered meaningful (Baumeister et al. 2013; van Tilburg and Igou 2019) and may alleviate current negative experiences. Parenthood is a future-oriented, as parents invest time, money, and energy in their children to provide them with the best future possible (de St. Aubin 2013; and/or to secure their own legacy and to prevent poverty and loneliness in old age, cf. Becker 1993). In addition, raising children contributes to the continuation of the family, society, and species.

Parenthood also shapes one's relations to others and interdependence with them (*relational dimension*). Having children affects the relative importance of one's own needs versus caring for others. Research has shown that life satisfaction is positively associated with met needs (Sheldon et al. 2001), whereas concern for others increases meaning in life (Baumeister et al. 2013; King and Hicks 2021). Simply put, "receiving" relates more to life satisfaction, and "giving" more to meaning. Parenthood involves devoting time, resources, and emotional energy to children, which is a shift toward giving, often at the expense of one's own needs.

Parents understand that their (young) children depend on them, which may increase their sense of significance—a fundamental component of meaning in life. The parent-child bond may be perceived as deeply fulfilling, providing emotional connection and a sense of belonging. This can contribute to parents' sense of significance and purpose—the feeling that their life matters and contributes to something beyond themselves—components of meaning in life (Hedberg et al. 2009; Martela and Steger 2016). Additionally, for people with a self-image of being a family-oriented person, parenthood may improve their sense of coherence (Morse and Steger 2019).

Finally, parenthood can affect life satisfaction and meaning via tasks, routines, and actions (*behavioral dimension*). While satisfaction may be achieved through leisure activities and enjoyable experiences (Roeters et al. 2016; Schmiedeberg and Schröder 2017), childcare often limits leisure time, potentially affecting life satisfaction negatively (Nelson et al. 2014; Roeters et al. 2016). However, tasks with greater purpose and that contribute to essential goals may increase meaning in life. Meaning can be gained through difficulties or sacrifices if these serve an important purpose (Oishi and Diener 2014; Park 2010; Vohs et al. 2019). Though many childrearing-related tasks seem mundane, they contribute to children's development and well-being. While time with children is not always fun, it is frequently perceived as rewarding and meaningful (Musick et al. 2016; Roeters and Gracia 2016). Raising children allows parents to pass on values and traditions, contributing to something enduring beyond their lifetime.

In addition, parenting may add meaning to unrelated tasks (Baumeister 1991; Nelson et al. 2014). For some, their job or career aspirations may not be meaningful in and of themselves, but if they contribute to a higher purpose—such as providing better conditions and opportunities for one's children,—this may increase the perceived meaningfulness of going to work each day (cf. Ashwin and Isupova 2014). Moreover, childrearing keep parents busy, preventing them from questioning life's meaning (Kauppinen 2015; Oishi and Diener 2014).

To summarize the theoretical considerations and previous research, parenthood entails both daily challenges and rewards that likely impact present-day life satisfaction. As a long-term commitment, parenthood may enhance life's meaning. It shifts the focus from personal needs to caring for others, potentially reducing satisfaction while enhancing meaning through a heightened sense of significance and purpose. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1. *Parents experience higher levels of meaning in life than nonparents, whereas the parental advantage in life satisfaction is smaller or even negative.*

4 | Variation by Sociodemographic and National Context

The link between parenthood and life satisfaction and meaning in life may vary based on sociodemographic characteristics and social circumstances. In all three dimensions—temporal, relational, and behavioral—the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction might vary more strongly by social context than its effect on meaning in life.

Previous research has shown that the association between parenthood life satisfaction varies depending on family structure, available resources, and institutional support. For instance, the association is more positive for people in relationships, particularly marriage, than for single parents (Aassve et al. 2012; Galatzer-Levy et al. 2011; Pollmann-Schult 2018b; Ugur 2020). Parents also tend to exhibit higher life satisfaction after childbirth when they are older and have higher education levels (Galatzer-Levy et al. 2011; Margolis and Myrskylä 2011; Myrskylä and Margolis 2014). Additionally, the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction is more positive in countries with favorable family policies, such as paid parental leave and subsidized childcare (Aassve et al. 2012; Glass et al. 2016; Margolis and Myrskylä 2011; Pollmann-Schult 2018a; Schmitz 2020; Tobler et al. 2024). Thus, the more favorable the circumstances, the more positive the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction.

Whereas previous research on the relevance of context for the parenthood-meaning link is limited, the theoretical arguments connecting parenthood and meaningfulness should apply to parents in diverse settings. First, the temporal dimension of parenthood includes the meaning-enhancing shift from present to future orientation, which is not specific to any parental group or context (Baumeister et al. 2013; de St. Aubin 2013; Li et al. 2021). Within the *relational* dimension, parents across all country clusters and sociodemographic groups can develop a deep connection to their children and experience that their parental efforts contribute to something beyond themselves—specifically, their children's well-being and future (King and Hicks 2021; Martela and Steger 2016). Finally, parenthood entails numerous tasks contributing to child development, which can be experienced as purposeful (*behavioral dimension*) (Baumeister et al. 2013; King and Hicks 2021) regardless of individual resources or constraints.

The few available studies on the role of context suggest that parenthood is equally, if not more, relevant to meaning for less privileged individuals (Kushlev et al. 2012; Nelson and

Lyubomirsky 2015). For instance, qualitative research by Edin et al. 2005; found that mothers with lower SES considered motherhood a source of social status and meaning in life. Similarly, Meier et al. (2016) found that the arguably most precarious group, unemployed single mothers, fared worse on traits like happiness, stress, or fatigue but experienced almost the same level of meaning in parenting as other groups. Furthermore, mothers without college degrees were more likely to report that having children gave their lives new meaning (Nomaguchi and Brown 2011), and lower-SES parents reported greater meaning in time with children compared to higher-SES parents (Kushlev et al. 2012).

In sum, theoretical reasoning and previous research suggest that meaning in life might be one component of well-being in which disadvantaged parents fare at least as well as more privileged parents. This aligns with the general idea that meaning in life does not only come from positive experiences but may also be increased through challenging experiences (Oishi and Diener 2014; Park 2010; Vohs et al. 2019).

Based on these considerations, we expect that:

H2. *The difference in life satisfaction between parents and non-parents varies considerably by sociodemographic and national context. In contrast, the difference in meaning in life between parents and non-parents is more consistent across sociodemographic groups and national context.*

5 | Gender Difference

The experience of parenthood differs between men and women. Social pressure on mothers to spend much time with their children is typically high (Milkie et al. 2015; Nomaguchi et al. 2005; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020), and mothers tend to be more involved in housework and childcare than fathers (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Craig and Mullan 2010; Nitsche et al. 2025). Hence, mothers may experience the daily challenges of parenting more intensely than men, and some previous studies found that parenthood is associated with lower life satisfaction for women but higher satisfaction for men (e.g., Nelson-Coffey et al. 2019). This gender disparity in the parenthood–satisfaction link appears to be contextual rather than universal. As women tend to experience more intense parenting and greater work–family conflict, their satisfaction is more dependent on the availability of resources and a supportive cultural and policy context (Andringa et al. 2015; Glass et al. 2016; Mcquillan et al. 2008).

On the contrary, the theoretical arguments connecting parenthood and meaning in life should apply not only to people in different countries and social situations—as argued above—but also to women as well as men.

Based on these considerations, we expect:

H3. *The difference between satisfaction and meaning, as specified in H1 and H2, show more strongly for women than for men.*

6 | Method

6.1 | Data

We analyzed data from rounds 3 (2006) and 6 (2012) of the ESS, a biannual survey providing a representative sample of Europeans aged 15 and over (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) 2018b, 2018a). The ESS is a repeated cross-sectional study, meaning that different individuals were surveyed in both rounds. These data and rounds were chosen because they include both a measure of life satisfaction and a measure of individuals' perceived meaning in life. The ESS has previously been used for cross-national analyses of life satisfaction (most recently Adriaans 2023; Bruna 2022; Shao 2022), studies on the links between different components of well-being (Martela et al. 2023; Ruggeri et al. 2020), and analyses of parenthood and life satisfaction/happiness (e.g., Ainsaar and Rootalu 2015; Andersson et al. 2014; Glass et al. 2016; Pollmann-Schult 2018b, 2018a; Stavrova and Fetchenhauer 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has used such data to examine the association between parenthood and meaning in life, nor to compare the associations between parenthood, life satisfaction, and meaning in life based on sociodemographic characteristics and national context.

6.2 | Sample

The sample includes individuals from 30 countries (see Table S1 in the Supporting Information S1: Appendix) and consists of adults aged 18–49. Respondents aged 50 and above were excluded, as by this age, many children have left the parental home (Leopold and Skopek 2015). However, one of the robustness checks analyzed a larger age range. Missing information was below 1% per variable, with two exceptions: respondents' parents' occupation and education, which were missing for 4.4% and 3.5% of cases, respectively. Full information on all relevant variables was available for 89.9% of respondents who were included in the analyses ($n = 43,721$).

6.3 | Analytical Approach

Given the structure of the data—individuals nested in countries—we ran multilevel regression models with fixed effects at the country level. Models tested the link between living with children and life satisfaction and perceived meaning in life after accounting for several potential confounders (see below).

Models were run separately for life satisfaction and meaning. Since the experience of parenthood differs by gender, models were run separately for women and men, allowing the main predictor and all control variables to vary by gender. Finally, separate models for women and men have the advantage of testing for effect heterogeneity in the association between parenthood and well-being using “simple” interaction terms rather than more complex three-way interactions in gender-joint models. The equations for the model specifications are provided below, following the introduction of all measures.

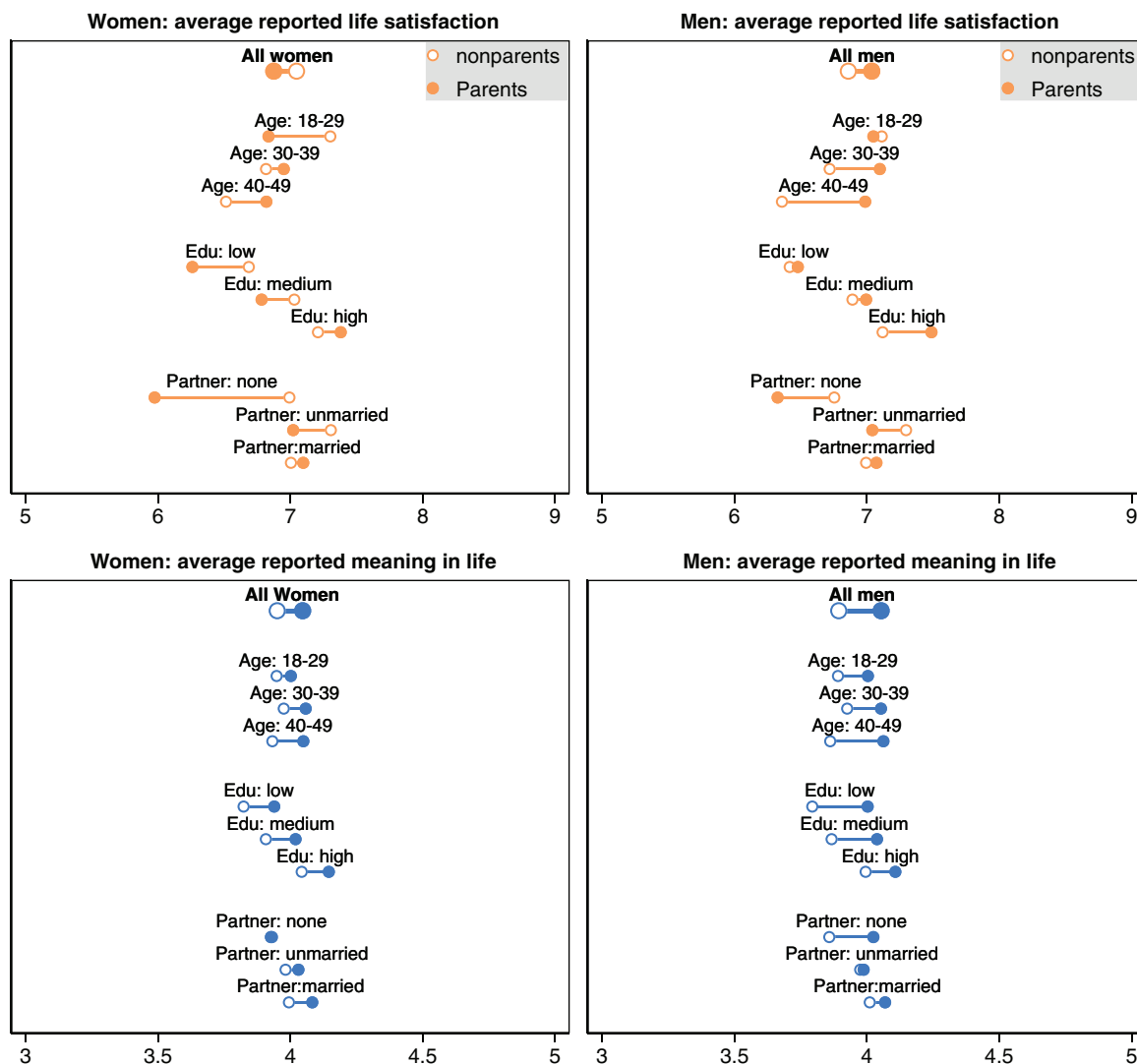


FIGURE 1 | Comparison of life satisfaction and meaning in life levels between parents and nonparents across groups by age, education, and partnership status ($n_{\text{women}} = 23,121$; $n_{\text{men}} = 20,600$). Life satisfaction ranges from 0 to 10, meaning in life from 1 to 5. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jont.13116)]

To test heterogeneity in the association between parenthood and well-being, we estimated interaction effects between the coefficient of parenthood and the four markers of context: age, education, partnership status, and country cluster, as described below.

6.4 | Measures for Satisfaction and Meaning

We used single-item measures for both life satisfaction and meaning in life. To assess life satisfaction, respondents were asked, “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” They were asked to indicate their satisfaction with life using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*dissatisfied*) to 10 (*satisfied*). This measure has been shown to have appropriate external validity and has been widely used in cross-cultural studies of life satisfaction (Aassve et al. 2012; Diener et al. 1999; Pollmann-Schult 2018a). Sense of meaning in life was measured with the following statement: “I generally feel that what I do in my life is

valuable and worthwhile” (Huppert et al. 2009), using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This item has been used in previous studies on meaning or purpose in life (Burns 2020; Kern et al. 2015) and is well-suited to the theoretical estimand (Lundberg et al. 2021) of meaning in life, particularly the aspects of significance and purpose (Martela et al. 2023; Oishi and Westgate 2022). For descriptive analyses (Figures 1 and 2), we used unstandardized values. For the regression analyses, both variables were standardized to facilitate the comparison of parenthood coefficient sizes across models with different outcomes. Table 1 shows the descriptive results for life satisfaction and meaning in life (standardized values).

6.5 | Measures for Parenthood

The main explanatory variable was measured by the presence of children in the household. Round 3 of the ESS data did not allow differentiation between biological, step, or adopted children

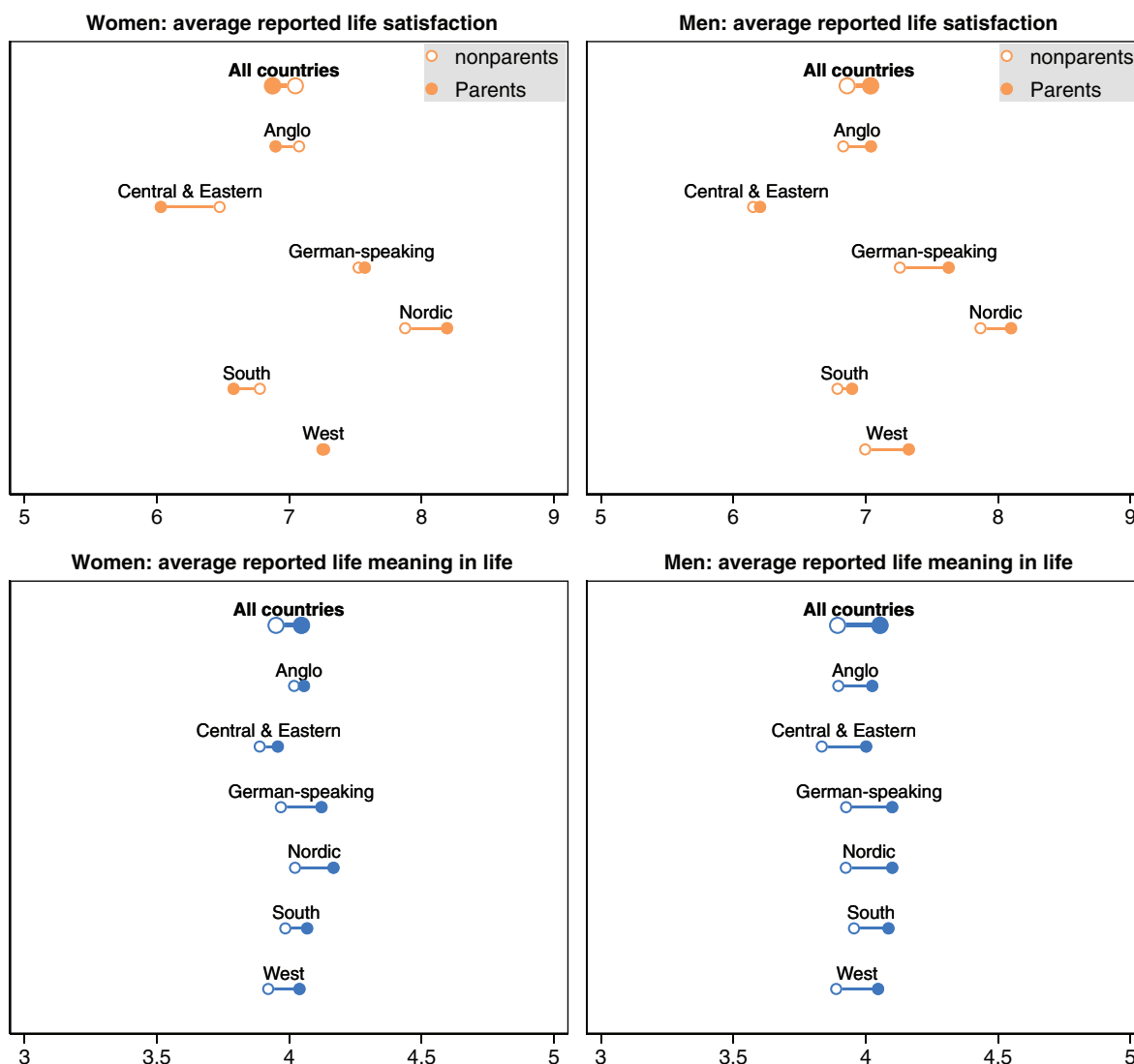


FIGURE 2 | Comparison of life satisfaction and meaning in life levels between parents and nonparents across country clusters ($n_{\text{women}} = 22,380$; $n_{\text{men}} = 19,932$). Israel was not included in these analyses because it could not be grouped into any of the country clusters. Life satisfaction ranges from 0 to 10, meaning in life from 1 to 5. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

and did not provide information on noncustodial parenthood. Hence, the analyses focus solely on the impact of having minor children at home rather than the broader target concept of parenthood (for a similar approach, see Glass et al. 2016; Pollmann-Schult 2018a). A binary variable distinguished between people with and without children in the household, referred to as “parents” (those with children in the home) and “nonparents” (those without children in the home) for simplicity. An additional variable accounted for the number of children in the household (1, 2, 3+). A direct measure of biological parenthood was available in ESS round 6, which was analyzed separately as a robustness check.









6.6 | Control Variables

Theoretical considerations and previous research suggest that several variables affect fertility and people’s well-being and might, therefore, confound the association of interest (e.g.,

Glass et al. 2016; Pollmann-Schult 2018a; Ugur 2020). These control variables help isolate the association between parenthood and well-being from alternative pathways—for example, ruling out the possibility that parents report higher life satisfaction or meaning simply because they are more likely to have partners. However, these control variables cannot capture all potential alternative pathways, particularly given the cross-sectional nature of our data. Therefore, our results provide correlational evidence, and we refrain from making causal claims.

The first potential confounder we considered was national context, as people in different countries exhibit variation in fertility behavior (Balbo et al. 2013) and factors such as national culture or social policies can influence well-being (e.g., Huppert et al. 2009; Mínguez 2017). To address this, we ran models with country-level fixed effects to account for any observed or unobserved cross-country variability in general levels of life satisfaction and meaning in life.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive results for life satisfaction and meaning in life.

	<i>n</i>	Mean	sd	Histogram
Life satisfaction				
Women: no children in HH	9160	0.12	0.88	
Women: with children in HH	13,874	0.05	0.98	
Men: no children in HH	11,481	0.04	0.92	
Men: with children in HH	9017	0.11	0.93	
Meaning in life				
Women: no children in HH	9160	0.01	0.99	
Women: with children in HH	13,874	0.13	0.93	
Men: no children in HH	11,481	-0.06	0.99	
Men: with children in HH	9017	0.14	0.87	

Note: All variables are standardized.

Second, We Considered Several Individual Characteristics:

Respondents' Education and Social Background: These may be confounders affecting both the likelihood of becoming parents and the two outcome variables. Respondents' level of education was grouped into three categories: 11 or fewer years of schooling, 12–14 years, and 15 or more years. Social background was captured via parental education and parental occupation. Parental education was measured as the highest level of education attained by either the mother or father and was included in the regression models as a factor variable with five levels, following the ISCED classification (data on years of education was not available for parents). Parental occupation was measured as the highest occupation of either the mother or father when the respondent was aged 14. Occupation was grouped into four categories—no parent employed, low, medium, and high occupation—represented as dummy variables in the regression.

We refrained from including other variables of respondents' SES, such as employment situation or financial strain, as they may be mediators between parenthood and well-being. For example, parenthood may lead to financial strain, which, in turn, reduces well-being. Therefore, financial strain is a mediator variable that should not be controlled for (U. Kohler et al. 2023; Rohrer 2018).

6.7 | Partner Status

Partnership status, which affects both fertility and well-being, was controlled for by distinguishing between three categories: (1) individuals without a partner in the household, (2) those with a partner in the household to whom they are not married, and (3) those with a spouse in the household (legally registered civil unions were treated as equivalent to marriages).

6.8 | Religiosity

In many societies, religious people tend to have more children and experience greater well-being (Eichhorn 2012; Frejka and Westoff 2008). Religiosity was captured by self-assessment on a scale from 0 (*not at all religious*) to 10 (*very religious*).

Age: The link between age and well-being may be complex and nonlinear (Buecker et al. 2023). To account for this, age was controlled using dummy variables for 3-year age groups (18–20, 21–23, etc.).

ESS round: To account for any potential differences across time, the models controlled for the ESS round using a dummy variable that distinguished between rounds 3 and 6.

7 | Analysis of Heterogeneity in the Association Between Parenthood and Well-Being: Measures for Context

Compared to the control variables, the variables used as interaction terms were grouped into fewer categories. This was done to provide the higher statistical power needed for estimating interaction coefficients and to allow for more interpretable results. The coefficient of parenthood was estimated separately for parents aged 20–29, 30–39, and 40–49.

Education was categorized into three groups: 11 or fewer years of schooling, 12–14 years, and 15 or more years. For effect heterogeneity by partnership, we used the three-category variable described above. Finally, countries were clustered into six regions based on geography and sociocultural similarities (see Table S1 in the Supporting Information S1: Appendix). Countries in the same cluster tend to share important contextual factors for parenting, such as gender and fertility norms or family policies (Begall et al. 2023; Billingsley and Ferrarini 2014; Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014; Thévenon 2011). According to Matysiak and Węziak-Białowolska (2016), societal support for work–family reconciliation in terms of attitudes and policy tends to be high in Nordic countries, medium-high in Western European and English-speaking countries,

medium-low in German-speaking countries, and relatively low in most countries in Southern Europe as well as Central and Eastern Europe.

8 | Model Specifications

The main models are specified as follows in Equation (1):

$$meaning_{ic} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * children_in_hh_i + \beta_2 * X_i + \alpha_c + \epsilon_{ic} \quad (1)$$

where:

- $meaning_{ic}$ is the standardized measure of meaning for individual i in country c (to be replaced with $satisfaction_{ic}$ for models on life satisfaction)
- $children_in_hh_i$ is a binary indicator for having children in the household (1 for those with children in the household, 0 for those without)
- X_i is a vector of control variables for individual i (see list of control variables below)
- α_c are country fixed effects
- ϵ_{ic} is the error term

Concerning the test of heterogeneity in the association between parenthood and well-being, Equation (2) shows the model specification for the example of heterogeneity by education level:

$$meaning_{ic} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 children_i + \sum_{j=1}^2 \beta_{2j} edu_{ij} + \sum_{j=1}^3 \beta_{3j} * (edu_{ij} \times children_i) + \beta_4 X_i + \alpha_c + \epsilon_{ic} \quad (2)$$

where $\sum_{j=1}^2 \beta_{2j} edu_{ij}$ is the main term for education, a three-category variable captured with a baseline category and two dummy variables, β_{21} and β_{22} . The rest is as in Equation (1).

9 | Results

9.1 | Descriptive Findings: Parenthood, Life Satisfaction, and Meaning in Life

Figure 1 shows levels of life satisfaction and meaning in life, comparing parents and nonparents across groups by gender, age, education, and partnership status. Overall, women and men had similar levels of life satisfaction and meaning. Among the traits studied, life satisfaction varied most strongly by education level, with more educated individuals reporting higher satisfaction. For meaning, group differences were generally smaller, but higher education was still associated with greater levels of meaning.

For all women combined, life satisfaction was highest among nonparents, whereas among men, satisfaction was highest for parents. For women and men, the difference in satisfaction between parents and nonparents differed across sociodemographic groups. Generally, for the group where parenting may be comparatively less challenging—those who are older,

have higher education, and are married—parents reported higher satisfaction levels than nonparents. Conversely, among women in the most challenging circumstances—low age, low education, and no partner—being a parent was associated with lower life satisfaction. For men in those groups, the association between parenthood and satisfaction was either close to zero or negative.

The bottom panels of Figure 1 show that meaning in life was higher for parents than nonparents, a pattern that was remarkably consistent across gender and sociodemographic groups. The only exceptions were women without a partner and cohabiting men, who reported about equal levels of meaning whether they were parents or not.

Figure 2 illustrates patterns across country clusters. For both women and men, satisfaction levels varied substantially, with the highest levels observed in the Nordic countries and the lowest in Central and Eastern European countries.

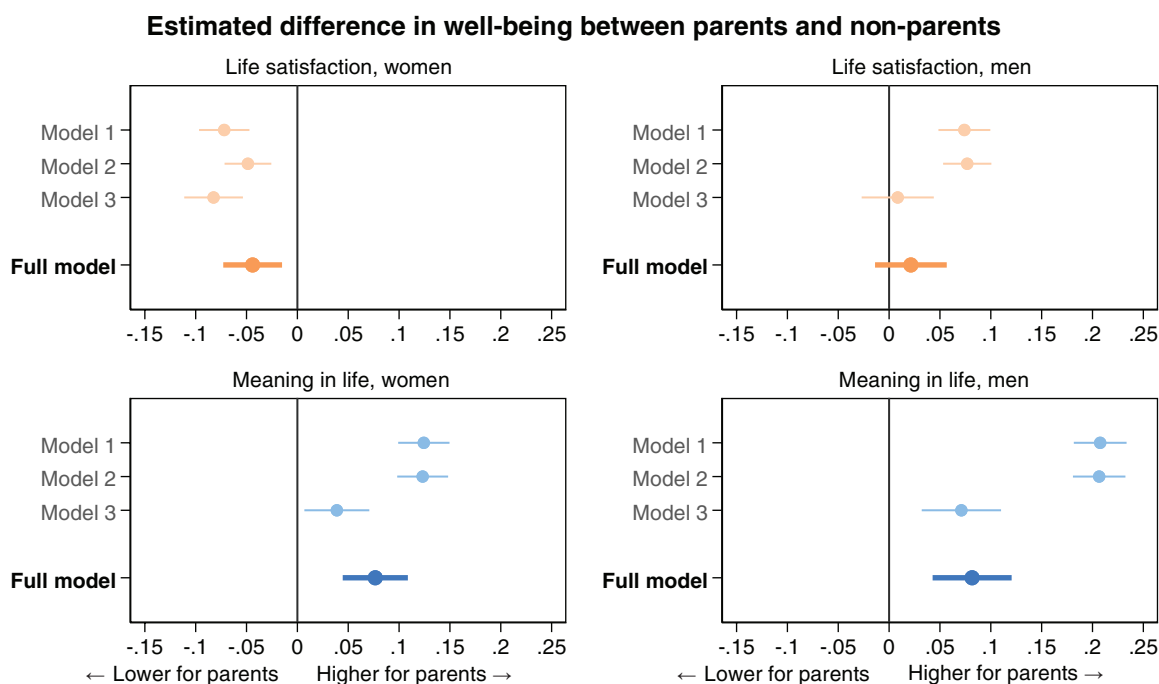
Among women, parenthood was associated with higher satisfaction in the Nordic countries and lower satisfaction in English-speaking, Southern European, and Central and Eastern European countries. In Western European and German-speaking countries, differences in parenthood were minor. Among men, parenthood was associated with higher satisfaction across all country clusters, but the difference was small in Southern European countries and minimal in Central and Eastern European countries.

Levels of meaning in life were quite similar across country clusters. In tendency, levels of meaning were lowest in Central and Eastern European countries and highest in Nordic and German-speaking countries. Importantly, parenthood was associated with higher meaning for women and men in all country clusters. The difference by parenthood status was comparatively small for women in English-speaking and Central and Eastern European countries but similarly large across all other groups.

9.2 | Multivariate Findings: Parenthood, Life Satisfaction, and Meaning in Life

Figure 3 shows the regression coefficients for the relationship between living with children and the standardized variables life satisfaction and meaning in life, calculated separately for women and men. The figure plots the coefficients from stepwise regression models, going from bivariate models to full models. In the following, we focus on the full models, which adjusted for all control variables, including country-level fixed effects. Full tables are provided in the Supporting Information S1:Appendix.

In line with previous research on parenthood and life satisfaction, we identified a life satisfaction “penalty” for mothers. The coefficient of -0.044 means that mothers' life satisfaction was lower than that of women without children by 4.4% of a standard deviation. For men, the link between fatherhood and life satisfaction was not statistically significant and had a positive point estimate. The difference in coefficients for women and men was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).



Note: Coefficients of the binary variable of having children in the household (1=yes, 0=no) are shown. Reading example: the coefficient for mothers and life satisfaction is -.04 in the full model. Given that outcome variables are standardized, this means that mothers' life satisfaction estimated 4 % of a standard deviation lower than that of women without children. Model 1 is bivariate; Model 2 adds country-level fixed effects and control for the ESS-round; Model 3 adds age, partnership status and religiosity; the full model adds respondents' education and social background.

FIGURE 3 | Comparing the coefficient of parenthood on life satisfaction and perceived meaning in life ($n_{\text{women}} = 23,034$; $n_{\text{men}} = 20,498$). Life satisfaction and meaning in life were standardized to facilitate comparisons across both outcome variables. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

In contrast, for both women and men, living with children was considerably and significantly associated with greater meaning in life. The heightened meaning in life among parents was observed to be similar for men and women, 7.9% and 8.3% of a standard deviation, respectively (the difference in coefficients for women and men was not statistically significant). However, the difference in the coefficients of parenthood on life satisfaction versus meaning in life was larger for women than men but was statistically significant for both groups (women: $p < 0.001$; men: $p < 0.01$; despite the overlapping confidence intervals, see e.g., Payton et al. 2003). In sum, the results show that living with children was more positively associated with perceived meaning in life than with life satisfaction, particularly for women, which provides support for Hypothesis 1. Finally, the difference between the parenthood—satisfaction link and the parenthood—meaning link was greater for women than men, supporting Hypothesis 3.

9.3 | Differences by Age, Education, Partnership Status, and Country Cluster

Figure 4 plots the coefficients of having children in the household for life satisfaction and meaning in life separately for women and men. The top-left panel shows that the coefficient of having children in the home for life satisfaction varied considerably with age, education, and partnership status and included positive and negative associations. Comparing women and men

(top-left and top-right panels), most point estimates went in the same direction. However, there was less variation among men, with none of the coefficients reaching statistical significance, indicating that life satisfaction did not substantially differ between fathers and nonfathers.

A closer examination of women's life satisfaction (top-left panel) reveals that mothers aged 18–30 expressed significantly lower life satisfaction than nonmothers in the same age group. The coefficient of parenthood on life satisfaction also differed based on women's educational attainment. Mothers with low and medium levels of education reported significantly lower life satisfaction than nonmothers, whereas there was no difference in life satisfaction between highly educated mothers and nonmothers. Finally, mothers were much less satisfied than single women without children, but this was not the case for those with a partner. For married women, results even hinted toward a positive link between parenthood and life satisfaction ($p < 0.05$). Overall, these patterns align with previous research indicating that the link between parenthood and life satisfaction is more negative under challenging circumstances.

The top-right panel plots the coefficients for life satisfaction among men. The results showed patterns similar to women's life satisfaction—a more positive parenthood coefficient among those who were older, more highly educated, and married—but the group differences were generally smaller.

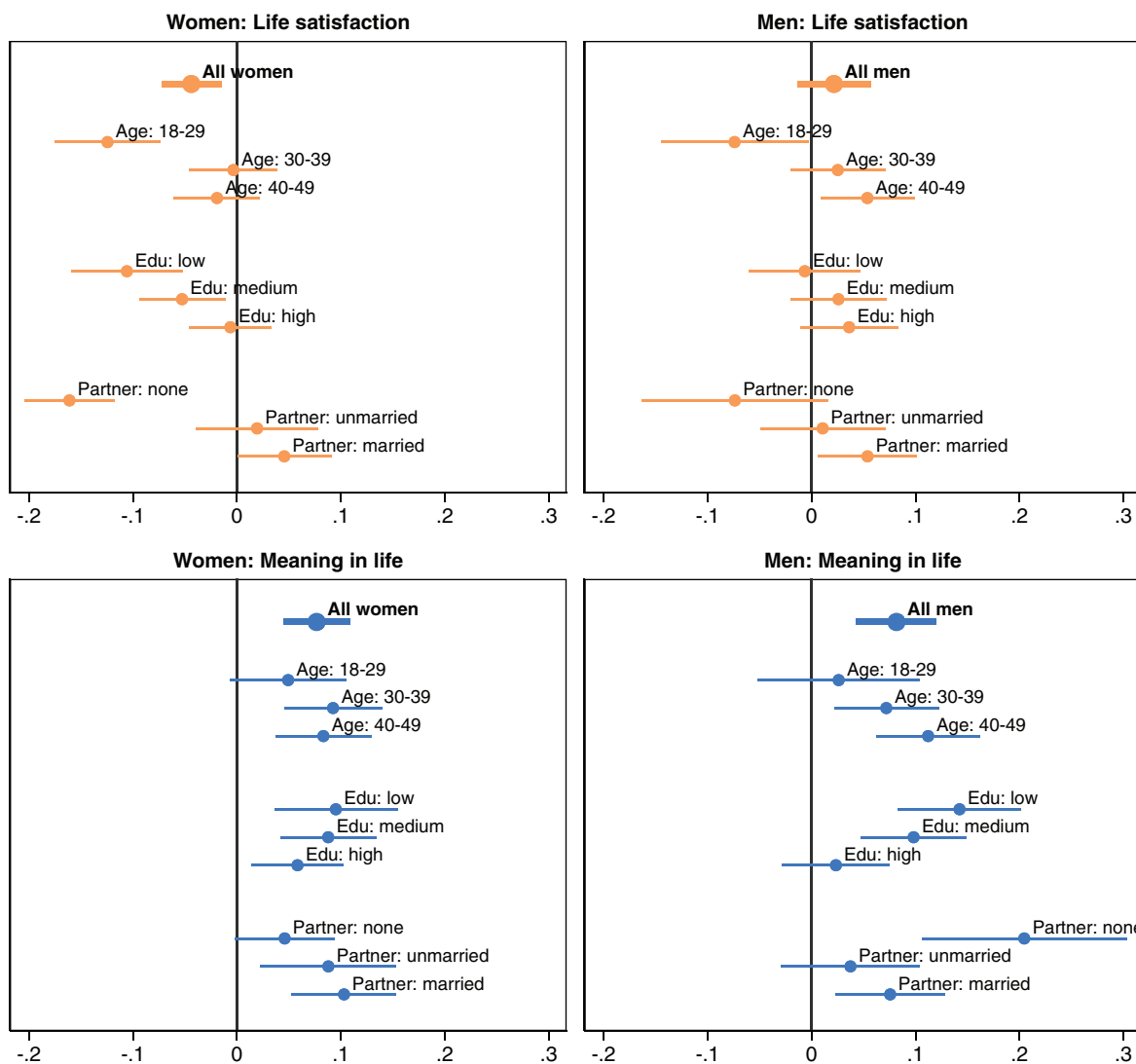


FIGURE 4 | The coefficients of children in the home on life satisfaction and meaning in life, with heterogeneity estimated by age, education, and partnership status ($n_{\text{women}} = 23,034$; $n_{\text{men}} = 20,498$). The results are from separate models for each of the interaction variables (age, education, and partnership status). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.13116)]

The bottom-left panel shows the coefficients for the association between having children in the home and women's perceived meaning in life. The point estimates were positive for almost all groups, with no substantial or statistically significant differences between them. This suggests that having children is consistently associated with higher meaning in life for women across the various groups examined.

For men and meaning in life (bottom-right panel), point estimates were also consistently positive but close to zero and statistically nonsignificant for some groups. The estimated parenthood coefficient was comparatively small and not statistically significant for the youngest age group, the highly educated, and partnered but unmarried fathers. Results for those with lower education and the (very small) group of unpartnered fathers were at least weakly in line with the idea that parenthood is a particularly important source of meaning for those in more challenging circumstances. In particular, single fathers with their higher meaning in life and lower life satisfaction

stand out, but this finding should be interpreted with caution due to the large confidence intervals.

Finally, looking at country differences in Figure 5, the link between women's parenthood and satisfaction strongly varied between the six country clusters: a strong negative coefficient was observed in Central and Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, in Southern Europe. In English-, German-speaking, and Western European countries, the estimated coefficient of parenthood was substantially small and far from statistical significance. In contrast, mothers in Nordic countries expressed much higher life satisfaction than nonmothers. These results are in line with previous findings emphasizing that parenthood is more strongly linked to positive satisfaction in areas with supportive family policies.

For men, we found lower satisfaction among parents than nonparents only in Central and Eastern European countries and no differences by parenthood status in Southern Europe and English-speaking countries. Finally, fathers experienced higher

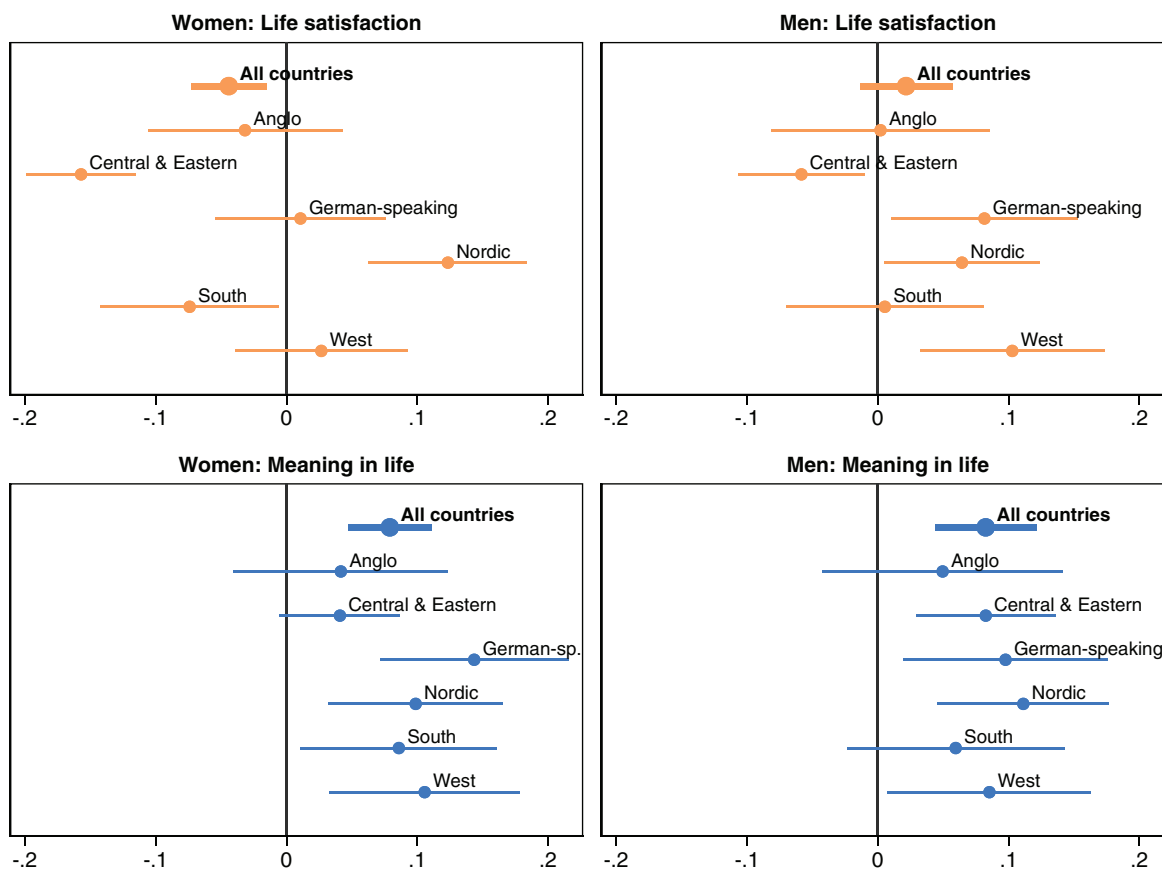


FIGURE 5 | The coefficients of children in the home on life satisfaction and meaning in life, with heterogeneity estimated by country cluster ($n_{\text{women}} = 22,380$; $n_{\text{men}} = 19,932$). Israel was not included in these analyses because the country cannot be grouped into any of the country clusters. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

life satisfaction in Nordic countries, Western Europe, and German-speaking countries.

Meaning in life was higher among parents than nonparents in all country clusters, with similar patterns for men and women. The coefficient was not statistically significant everywhere, but there is no evidence for relevant heterogeneity by region: no region's estimated coefficient differed significantly from the coefficient estimated for all countries jointly.

In summary, the results generally support Hypothesis 2; namely, there is more heterogeneity by context in the parenthood—satisfaction link than in the parenthood—meaning link. This is particularly evident for women, where there is considerably more variation in the parenthood—satisfaction than in the parenthood—meaning link by sociodemographic characteristics and by country context. For men, the pattern suggested by Hypothesis 2 shows for country context, but not for sociodemographic context. In Sum, there was more heterogeneity in the association between parenthood and life satisfaction than in its association with perceived meaning in life, and this pattern is more evident for women than men. This provides considerable support for Hypotheses 2 and 3.

10 | Robustness Checks

To check the robustness of our findings, we conducted several additional tests. First, we ran the analyses using a larger age

range (from 18 to 59 instead of 18 to 49 as in the main analyses). As shown in Figure S1 in the Supporting Information S1: Appendix, the results remained stable.

Second, the main analyses examined the role of the presence of children in the household. As a robustness check, we tested whether the results held when measuring biological parenthood. In round 3 of the ESS (but not in round 6), respondents were asked, “Have you ever given birth to/fathered a child?” Using this measure allowed us to test whether the association with parenthood extends beyond everyday parental activities. The results of this test are shown in Figure S2 in the Supporting Information S1: Appendix. For women, the findings remained unchanged. For men, there was a statistically significant negative association between parenthood and life satisfaction, whereas the measure of children in the household was significantly linked to satisfaction (and the coefficient was positive).

Using the information on biological parenthood allowed us to extend our analyses to parents of all ages, regardless of the presence of children in the household. Therefore, the third robustness check replicated the models from the second check but removed the age restriction on the sample (Figure S3 of the Supporting Information S1: Appendix). For women, the findings once again remained unchanged. For men and life satisfaction, the coefficient was negative but statistically nonsignificant.

Finally, we estimated the role of the number of children in the household, yielding results that were generally consistent with our initial findings (Figure S4 of the Supporting Information S1: Appendix). Women with one, two, or more children in the household experienced lower life satisfaction than those with no children (the point estimate was smaller and not statistically significant for the group with three or more children) and higher meaning in life. For men, the association between having children in the home and life satisfaction was statistically nonsignificant, regardless of the number of children. Those with children in the home had consistently higher meaning in life, again, regardless of the number of children.

Importantly, the main conclusion—that parenthood is more positively associated with meaning in life than with life satisfaction—remained consistent across all robustness checks.

11 | Discussion

Against the backdrop of the “parenthood–happiness puzzle” and its variation across sociodemographic and institutional contexts, we contrasted the role of parenthood in shaping life satisfaction and meaning in life using large-scale survey data from more than 43,000 individuals across 30 European countries. The results showed that mothers and fathers tend to experience greater meaning in life than women and men without children. In contrast, mothers experienced lower life satisfaction than women without children, and satisfaction levels were about equal for men with and without children. This indicates that the distinction between these two components of well-being may be particularly important for women.

In line with theory and previous research, more detailed analyses revealed a connection between parenthood and lower life satisfaction for groups in more challenging or less privileged circumstances, such as young, single parents, people with lower levels of education, or residents of countries with less supportive work–family reconciliation conditions, such as those in Central and Eastern or Southern Europe (Billingsley and Ferrarini 2014; Matysiak and Węziak-Białowska 2016; Thévenon 2011). In contrast, the coefficients for meaning in life were positive and statistically significant in most cases. Hence, our analyses reveal the novel and socially important finding that parents consistently reported higher meaning in life across nearly all examined social groups and all country groups.

Our differential results for life satisfaction and life meaning align with previous research. Prior studies on meaning in life have largely relied on qualitative approaches or quantitative analyses conducted within single countries using relatively smaller samples (Baumeister et al. 2013; Hudde 2025; Nelson et al. 2013; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020; Oishi et al. 2020; Umberson and Gove 1989). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to test these predictions using large-scale, international data while also accounting for heterogeneity across social groups and country clusters. Our empirical findings shed light on parents' evaluation of life and contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the role of parenthood in shaping different aspects of well-being in contemporary contexts.

The results are further in line with theoretical predictions and models of well-being. Research in psychology has emphasized the theoretical importance of distinguishing between different aspects of well-being, especially satisfaction and meaning, and our results underscore the importance of this distinction empirically (e.g., Baumeister 1991; King and Hicks 2021; Oishi and Westgate 2022; Ryan and Deci 2001; Schnell 2020). Theoretical considerations suggest that parenthood relates differently to life satisfaction and meaning in life by shifting one's perspective from a present-day orientation to a future orientation, from “receiving” to “giving,” and by providing individuals with tasks that serve a greater purpose and contribute to the pursuit of important goals. Whereas examination of the specific mechanisms is left to future research, our results show that different aspects of well-being have different associations with parenthood and that these associations vary across different social contexts that are central to sociological research. Hence, our findings highlight that psychological and sociological theoretical perspectives can mutually benefit from one another by theoretically and empirically distinguishing different aspects of well-being and by considering variation across social circumstances.

Our findings are subject to limitations. First, as we used cross-sectional data, we were unable to identify within-person changes in response to parenthood, and the analyses do not permit causal claims. For instance, there could be a selection effect, whereby individuals' baseline levels of life satisfaction and meaning in life affect their likelihood of becoming parents (see Hudde 2025). We are not aware of any suitable cross-country panel studies that measure both of these central outcomes. However, our findings are in line with a recent panel study conducted in Germany, which tracked satisfaction and meaning in life from before parenthood to 5 years after the birth of the first child (Hudde 2025).

Second, in a similar vein, the data do not distinguish between planned and unplanned parenthood or between nonparents who voluntarily choose to remain child-free and those who are involuntarily childless. These factors may influence life satisfaction and meaning in life and could also vary with contextual factors. Again, addressing these questions would require cross-country panel data studies.

Third, as with any multicountry study, we cannot entirely rule out that variation—or lack thereof—across countries may reflect cultural differences in interpreting life satisfaction and meaning (Hadler et al. 2015; Martela et al. 2023) or linguistic differences in the translated questionnaire wording (for details, see ESS Translation Guidelines rounds 3 and 6).

Fourth, the central items in our analysis were measured on different scales: respondents could express life satisfaction on a more detailed 0–10 scale, whereas perceived meaning in life was measured on a less granular 1–5 scale.

Finally, our study focused exclusively on two components of well-being. While life satisfaction and meaning in life are often considered the most central aspects of well-being, they are not the only components (e.g., Oishi and Westgate 2022).

A particularly promising avenue for future research would be examining how the identified patterns relate to fertility *behaviors*. For instance, how might people's expectations regarding the effects of parenthood on life satisfaction versus meaning in life influence their decisions to become parents or have additional children? Sociologists, demographers, and commentators sometimes wonder why most people choose to have children despite the fact that parenthood does not necessarily lead to improvements in life satisfaction. One potential explanation is that parents-to-be may misjudge how parenthood will affect their satisfaction. However, it is also possible that the main explanation lies not in false expectations but rather in the accurate anticipation that parenthood will have a more positive effect on meaning in life than on life satisfaction. If this is true, some individuals may choose parenthood not to maximize happiness but to increase their perceived meaning in life.

To investigate these questions further, future quantitative research could utilize survey panel studies to track changes in life and well-being expectations surrounding parenthood. By including these items in panel studies, researchers could assess whether expectations are predictive of actual fertility behavior. Additionally, qualitative studies could explore how parents and nonparents in different life circumstances perceive and articulate life satisfaction and meaning. Such analyses could also distinguish between our theorized *temporal*, *relational*, and *behavioral* dimensions of parenthood. While our study tested heterogeneity across several characteristics, there are others we were unable to address. For instance, it seems reasonable to assume that it makes a difference whether a certain family situation was planned and desired, or not. Future research could investigate whether meaning in life is particularly low among people with unrealized fertility desires.

Finally, two findings for men might warrant more in-depth analyses. First is the substantially higher meaning in life of single fathers compared to single men without children. This finding should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size in this group and the wide confidence interval of the estimator. However, since male singlehood is associated with lower well-being and health, and research on single-father families remains limited, this tentative finding invites further investigation (e.g., Coles 2015; Kaplan and Kronick 2006). Second, while no association was identified between life satisfaction and the presence of children in the household, a negative association was observed between biological fatherhood and the presence of children in the household. In contrast, meaning in life was positively associated with both measures of fatherhood. This finding suggests particularly low satisfaction among fathers of nonresident children, which could be a topic for further exploration in future research.

In many Western societies, the number of children people have often falls below their desired or ideal number (Beaujouan and Berghammer 2019). Policymakers aiming to address this gap and raise fertility may take interest in our findings. While well-being has become a central focus in various research areas and in policy, life satisfaction is often treated as the sole indicator, especially in the policy arena (OECD 2024). This emphasis has drawn criticism for undervaluing other aspects of well-being, including meaning in life (Seligman 2011). A discourse that recognizes meaning in life as central to well-being could enable and

encourage people to pursue paths that they consider valuable and meaningful despite stress and effort—parenthood being a prime example.

12 | Conclusion

Whereas previous sociological and demographic studies on parenthood have focused on life satisfaction and often overlooked the dimension of meaning in life, our study examines both of these central components of subjective well-being. At first glance, parenthood might look like a trade-off: it brings meaning but takes satisfaction. Given that most people assign similar importance to satisfaction and meaning in life (Oishi and Westgate 2022), this appears to create a dilemma. However, closer examination reveals that the dilemma only exists in certain contexts, as parenthood is linked to higher meaning in life across diverse populations, but is linked to lower life satisfaction only for some groups. Specifically, the results suggest that when parenting is less intense or less challenging—as experienced by fathers, those with higher education, and those living in countries with supportive welfare states—parenthood is associated with higher meaning and similar or even higher satisfaction. These findings underscore the demand for family-friendly policies that enhance the life satisfaction of parents, especially women in less privileged social positions. Overall, the Nordic countries serve as an example that when people are provided with supportive contextual conditions, parenthood can enhance both meaning and satisfaction, thereby contributing to a “good life.”

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.