

American Life Histories

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Abstract :

What does it take to live a meaningful life? We exploit a unique corpus of over 1,400 life narratives of older Americans collected by a team of writers during the 1930s. We combine detailed human readings with large language models (LLMs) to extract systematic information on critical junctures, sources of meaning, and overall life satisfaction. Under specific conditions, LLMs can provide responses to complex questions that are indistinguishable from those of human readers, effectively passing a version of the Turing Test. We find that sources of life meaning are more varied than previous research suggested, underlining the importance of work and community contributions in addition to family and close relationships (emphasized by earlier work). The narratives also highlight gendered disparities, with women disproportionately citing adverse family events, such as the loss of a parent, underscoring their role as keepers of the kin. Our research expands our understanding of human flourishing during a transformative period in American history and establishes a robust and scalable framework for exploring subjective well-being across diverse historical and cultural contexts.