

What Do People Want?

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What Do People Want?

How satisfied you are with your life

Your rating of your life on a ladder, where the lowest rung is "worst possible life for you" and the highest rung is "best possible life for you"

How happy you feel

Your freedom from physical pain

Your financial security

Your stature in your community

Whether you're getting enough sleep

Your ability to have an impact on the world

A few aspects of life people may want

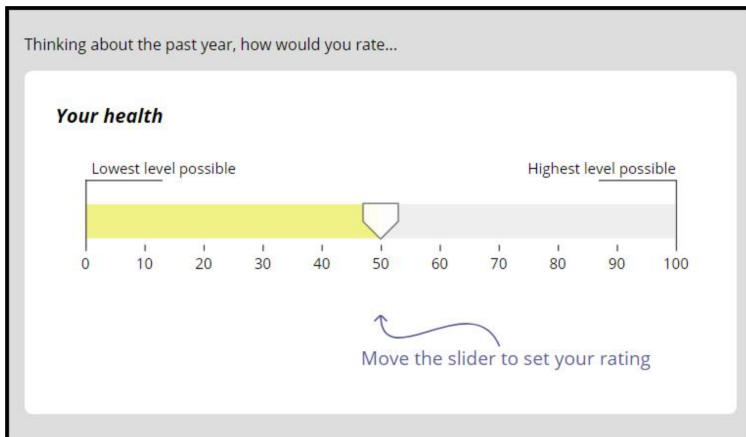
Age-old question:

- Eudaimonia / Virtue (Aristotle)
- Hedonism (Bentham, Kahneman)
- Capability / Objective Lists (Sen, Nussbaum, Maslow)
- Preference Satisfaction (standard economic theory)

Our approach:

- Use economic tools, focusing on *marginal* value
- Empirically driven, "hands-off" regarding what matters most

We Elicit (a) Ratings of Current Levels



Captures current circumstances

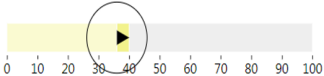
We Elicit (b) Stated Choice Across Pairs of Marginal Rating Changes

Which option do you think you would choose?

Option 1

Your health

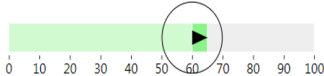
increases **+4** from 36 to **40**



Option 2

Your financial security

increases **+5** from 60 to **65**



Measuring what aspect changes matter most to respondents

What People Tell Us They Want Most

Aspect	Rank (#/126)
Your children's health	1
Your spouse/partner's health	2
The health of your parents and siblings	3
The people who have been most important to you in your life still being alive	4
Your children being able to live happy lives	5
The overall well-being of your family	6
Your family living a wonderful life	7
The happiness of you and your family	8
Your ability to protect your loved ones	9
The overall well-being of you and your family	10

Top 10 aspects based on marginal utility

Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Background and Literature
- 3 Survey Design
- 4 Empirical Framework
- 5 Results
 - Top Aspects and Groups
 - Supply vs Demand
- 6 Conclusion

Related Literature & Our Contribution

Well-being Measurement

- Easterlin (2013); Kahneman & Deaton (2010); Layard (2005)

Preferences from Stated Choice

- Burbano, Padilla, & Meier (2024); Arad et al. (2024); **Benjamin, Heffetz, Kimball, Szembrot (2014) [BHKS]**

BHKS (2014)

- Focus on comparing aspects of well-being
- Pioneered preference measurement methodology, but with 'slightly higher,' 'somewhat higher,' etc.
- Linear probability model with identical preferences

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Our Contribution

- Implementation of methodology laid out by BHKS
- Meaningful incorporation of levels
- Binary choices with numerical quantities
- Comprehensive coverage and categorization
 - 126 aspects from 2,152
- Rich hierarchical model
 - Individual heterogeneity

Survey Overview

Scale

- 3,351 US-based MTurk respondents
- Over 1 million choices
- Rich demographic data

Two complementary tasks

- Current levels
 - Where are people now?
- Marginal trade-offs
 - What improvements matter most?

Survey Overview

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Two complementary tasks

- Current levels
 - Where are people now?
- Marginal trade-offs
 - What improvements matter most?

A long list of aspects

- 126 aspects covering core dimensions
 - Drawn from comprehensive list of 2,152

Themes

- Family well-being (*Happiness of your family*)
- Health (*Your physical health*)
- Security (*Your financial security*)
- Personal growth (*Your knowledge and skills*)
- Social connections (*Your sense of connection with other people*)
- Life satisfaction (*How satisfied you are with your life*)

Aspect Selection

Aspect	Reason for inclusion
How satisfied you are with your life	Literature
Your rating of your life on a ladder, where the lowest rung is "worst possible life for you" and the highest rung is "best possible life for you"	Literature
How happy you feel	Stat Agency (UK ONS)
Your freedom from physical pain	Stat Agency (Gallup)
Your financial security	Comprehensiveness
Your stature in your community	Comprehensiveness
You getting enough sleep	Natural Trade-off
You having an impact on the world	Natural Trade-off

From Choices to Marginal Utilities: Conceptual Framework

Individual utility

- Vector of aspect levels \mathbf{w}_i
- Individual utility function $u_i(\mathbf{w}_i)$
- Marginal utility $M_{ij} = \frac{\partial u_i(\mathbf{w}_i)}{\partial w_{ij}}$ for aspect j

First-order approximation

- Small changes Δw_{ij}
- Value of change: $\Delta u_i \approx M_{ij} \Delta w_{ij}$

Which option do you think you would choose?

Option 1

Your health

increases **+4** from 36 to **40**

Option 2

Your financial security

increases **+5** from 60 to **65**

☐ This decision does not make sense

Binary choices

- Choose between aspects j and j'
- Choose j if $M_{ij} \Delta w_{ij} > M_{ij'} \Delta w_{ij'}$

From Choices to Individual Preferences

Individual preferences

- Allow for systematic differences in preferences and response error
- Account for choice consistency through response error

Hierarchical Structure

- $m_{ij} \sim N(\mu_j, \sigma_j)$: log marginal utility
- μ_j : aspect mean
- σ_j : aspect-specific variation

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Choice probability

- $\mathbb{P}[\text{Choose option improving aspect } j] = \mathbb{P}[M_{ij}\Delta w_{ij} - M_{ij'}\Delta w_{ij'} + e_{ijj'q} > 0]$

Response error

- $e_{ijj'q} \sim N(0, \sigma_{e_i})$
- $\sigma_{e_i} \sim \text{lognormal}(\mu_e, \sigma_e)$

Results

What Do People Want? Top Aspects (1-10)

Aspect Estimates				
Aspect (Rank # / 126)	\mathcal{M}_j	LB - UB	e^{σ_j}	Grouping
Your children's health (1)	27.16	(17.94 - 41.5)	83.27	Family Well-being
Your spouse/partner's health (2)	9.59	(6.99 - 13.75)	38.35	Family Well-being
The health of your parents and siblings (3)	8.78	(7.01 - 11.33)	13.36	Family Well-being
The people who have been most important to you in your life still being alive (4)	8.19	(6.49 - 10.46)	12.46	Relationships
Your children being able to live happy lives (5)	8.15	(6.13 - 10.94)	26.25	Family Well-being
The overall well-being of your family (6)	7.32	(6.15 - 8.8)	6.42	Family Well-being
Your family living a wonderful life (7)	5.98	(5.09 - 7.02)	5.06	Family Well-being
The happiness of you and your family (8)	5.94	(5.14 - 6.96)	4.44	Summum Bonum
Your ability to protect your loved ones (9)	5.73	(4.79 - 6.91)	7.84	Financial
The overall well-being of you and your family (10)	5.71	(4.82 - 6.79)	5.37	Summum Bonum
How happy you feel (31)	2.05	(1.94 - 2.19)	2.14	Feelings
How satisfied you are with your life (32)	2.02	(1.92 - 2.13)	1.85	Summum Bonum
Your rating of your life on a ladder where the lowest rung is "worst possible life for you" and the highest rung is "best possible life for you" (37)	1.88	(1.75 - 2.02)	2.60	Summum Bonum
You not feeling anxious (42)	1.62	(1.48 - 1.77)	3.51	Feelings
The extent to which you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile (61)	1.05	(0.99 - 1.11)	1.89	Meaning and Fulfillment

What Do People Want? Top Aspects (11-20)

Aspect Estimates				
Aspect (Rank # / 126)	\mathcal{M}_j	LB - UB	e^{σ_j}	Grouping
Your health (11)	5.12	(4.38 - 6.02)	5.78	Health
The happiness of your family (12)	5.02	(4.51 - 5.59)	4.54	Family Well-being
You being able to support your family financially (13)	4.65	(4.16 - 5.16)	4.40	Financial
Your financial security (14)	4.45	(3.78 - 5.28)	5.43	Financial
You having enough money to pay for healthcare and/or medicines that you or your family need (15)	4.29	(3.59 - 5.18)	7.82	Financial
Your ability to take care of your family (16)	4.09	(3.55 - 4.78)	4.76	Financial
You not worrying about money (17)	3.92	(3.4 - 4.52)	4.53	Financial
You having enough money to buy food that you or your family need (18)	3.87	(3.22 - 4.67)	8.01	Financial
Your physical health (19)	3.74	(3.38 - 4.16)	4.20	Health
You having a strong bond with your children (20)	3.57	(2.7 - 5.01)	38.49	Relationships
How happy you feel (31)	2.05	(1.94 - 2.19)	2.14	Feelings
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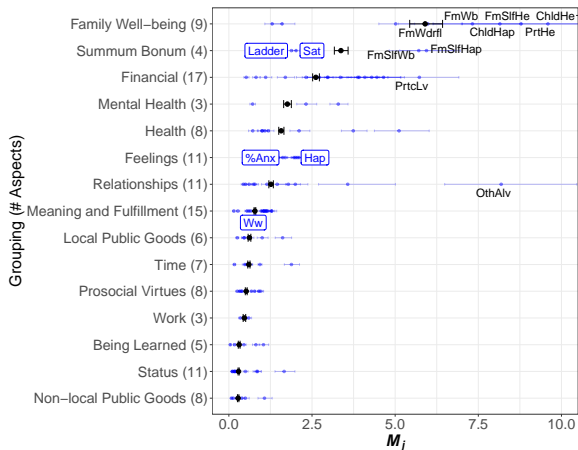
What Do People Want? By Group

Group Estimates			
Grouping (# Aspects)	\mathcal{M}_j	LB - UB	e^{σ_j}
Family Well-being (9 aspects)	5.90	(5.44 - 6.43)	16.40
Summum Bonum (4 aspects)	3.37	(3.17 - 3.58)	3.53
Financial (17 aspects)	2.62	(2.52 - 2.72)	5.87
Mental Health (3 aspects)	1.76	(1.65 - 1.88)	3.52
Health (8 aspects)	1.57	(1.5 - 1.66)	4.94
Feelings (11 aspects)	1.43	(1.39 - 1.48)	2.94
Relationships (11 aspects)	1.27	(1.2 - 1.34)	7.83

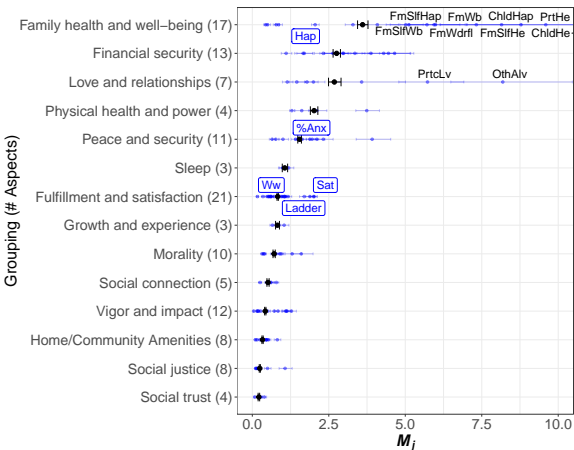
Meaning and Fulfillment (15 aspects)	0.78	(0.76 - 0.81)	3.42
Local Public Goods (6 aspects)	0.62	(0.58 - 0.66)	5.73
Time (7 aspects)	0.60	(0.57 - 0.64)	4.43
Prosocial Virtues (8 aspects)	0.52	(0.49 - 0.55)	4.65
Work (3 aspects)	0.47	(0.43 - 0.51)	4.09
Being Learned (5 aspects)	0.31	(0.28 - 0.34)	6.77
Status (11 aspects)	0.29	(0.28 - 0.31)	6.91
Non-local Public Goods (8 aspects)	0.28	(0.26 - 0.3)	10.73

Grouping 126 Aspects

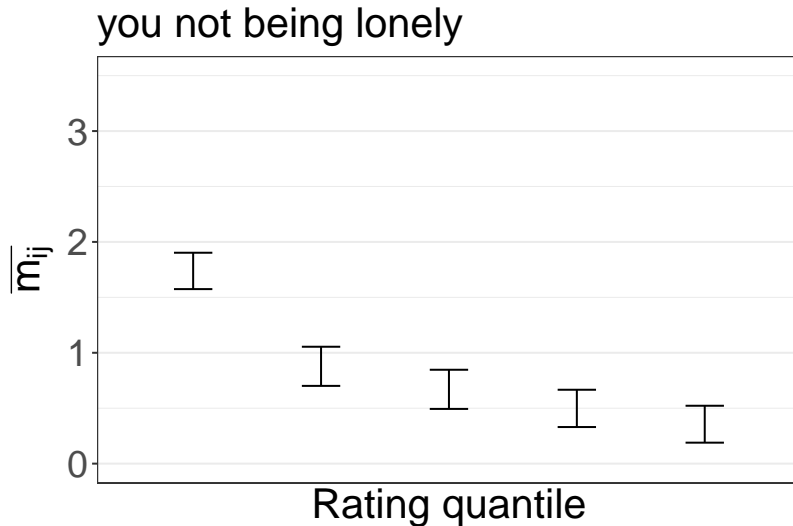
M_j estimates grouped Subjectively



M_j estimates grouped by Embeddings

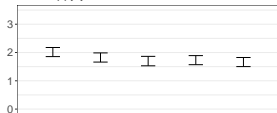


Marginal Utility Heterogeneity by Levels

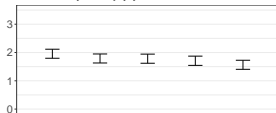


Marginal Utility vs Levels

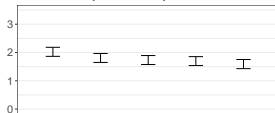
how happy you feel



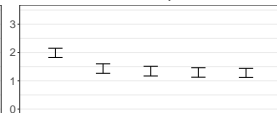
how much you enjoy your life



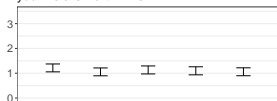
how satisfied you are with your life



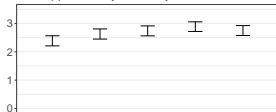
the absence of sadness in your life



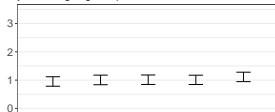
the extent to which you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile



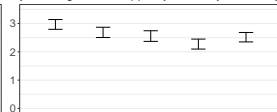
the happiness of your family



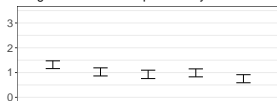
you being a good person



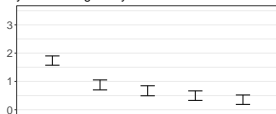
you being able to support your family financially



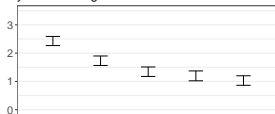
you feeling that you have enough time for the things that are most important to you



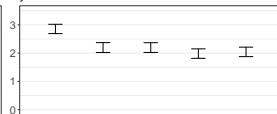
you not being lonely



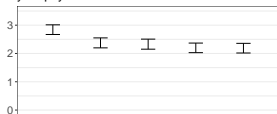
you not feeling anxious



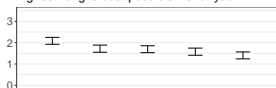
your mental health



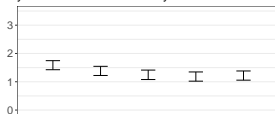
your physical health



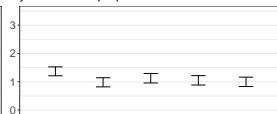
your rating of your life on a ladder where the lowest rung is worst possible life for you and the highest rung is best possible life for you



your sense of control over your life

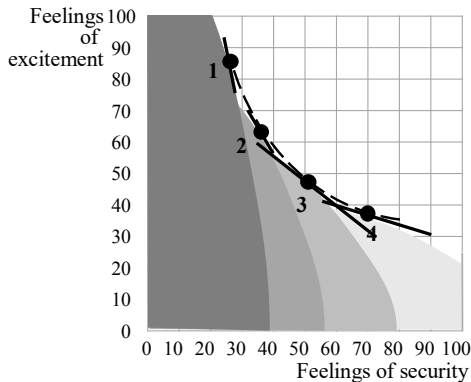


your sense of purpose

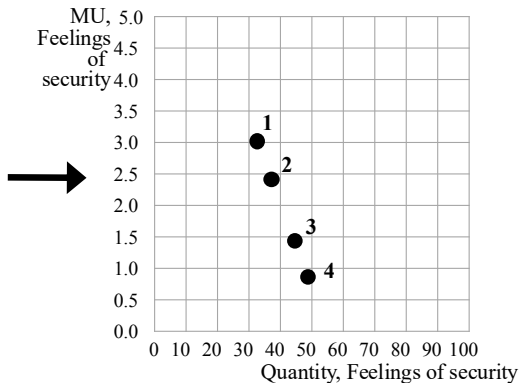


Understanding Cross-sectional Variation through Supply and Demand

Variation in “supply”
(same preferences, different feasible sets)

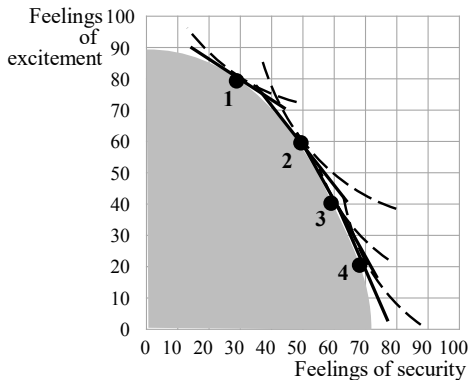


Level vs. Marginal utility:
Downward-sloping

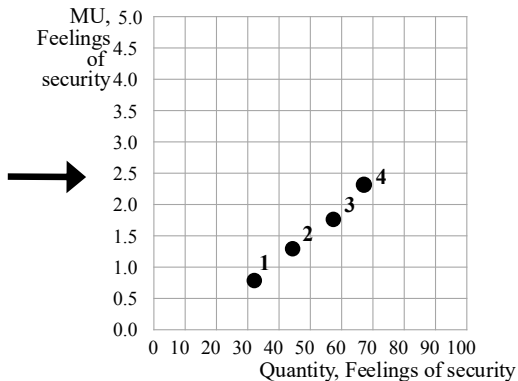


Understanding Cross-sectional Variation through Supply and Demand

Variation in “demand”
(difference preferences, same feasible set)



Level vs. Marginal utility:
Upward-sloping



Aspect Flagging (AF) Survey

- Separate data collection
- Aim: Measure aspect characteristics.
E.g.
 - Would someone downplay how much they want this aspect? (social desirability)
 - **Is variation across people driven by demand or supply differences?**
- Covers all 126 aspects

Characteristic: it's complex

Question: How complex is this aspect?

Your ability to climb a flight of stairs

<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Extremely Simple		Simple		In Between		Complex		Extremely Complex

Your nation doing the right thing in domestic policy

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Extremely Simple		Simple		In Between		Complex		Extremely Complex

How well you are able to learn new things

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
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AF Question for Supply vs Demand Dominance

For each aspect, think about **people you know who don't care much about getting more of it**. They might not care much about getting more for either of two reasons:

1. They already have plenty of it.
2. They don't value it much.

For each aspect below, of people who don't care much about getting more, what fraction have each reason?

- Low score → supply differences dominant
- High score → demand differences dominant

AF Question for Supply vs Demand Dominance

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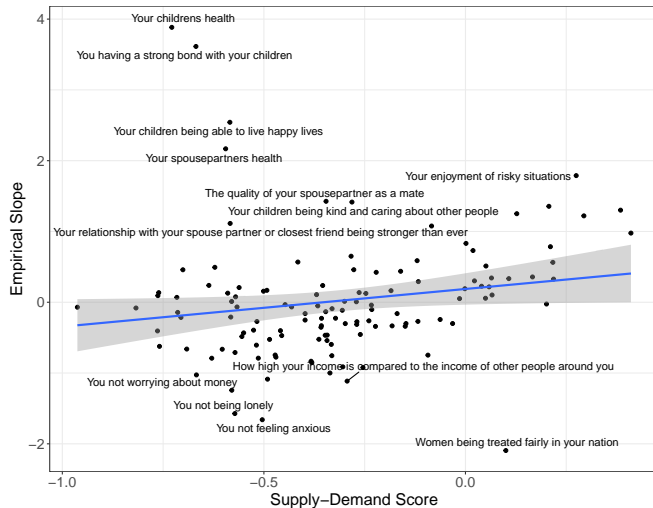
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x-axis: Average aspect score for supply-demand flag

y-axis: Slope of rating vs log MU



Understanding What People Want: Key Findings and Implications

What People Value Most

- Family well-being dominates
 - Health of loved ones
 - Financial security for family
- Personal aspects matter
 - Mental and physical health
 - Basic needs and security

Policy Implications

- Beyond individual focus
 - Family-level interventions
- Context matters
 - Current circumstances critical

Preference Heterogeneity

- High heterogeneity for aspects do with with spouses or children
- Low heterogeneity for broad well-being aspects
- Supply and demand patterns
 - Some aspects: scarcity drives desire
 - Others: want breeds abundance

Thank you!

For any comments or questions: tk2859@columbia.edu

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Philosophical Foundations: Three Traditional Approaches

Hedonism (Bentham, Kahneman)

- Happiness and pleasure are the ultimate good
- Bentham (1789): Greatest happiness principle
- Kahneman (1997): Experienced utility

Objective Lists (Nussbaum, Sen)

- Certain capabilities or functionings are intrinsically valuable
- Nussbaum's 10 Central Capabilities (2000)
 - Life; Bodily health; Bodily integrity; Senses, Imagination, Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other species; Play; Control Over One's Environment

Preference Satisfaction (Economics)

- Utility = what you choose
- Revealed and stated preference methods

Our Approach

- Speaks to all three:
 - *Hedonism*: includes standard SWB measures
 - *Objective Lists*: covers capability-like domains
 - *Preference Satisfaction*: stated choice tasks