

RESEARCH REPORT

# Mind the Gap

## The Authenticity Gap and the Science of Living Authentically

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# Executive Summary

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The question this paper addresses is deceptively simple: does living below your most important values cost something? The answer, drawn from two studies spanning nearly 37,000 people, is yes — and the costs are specific, measurable, and larger than existing measures of authenticity would predict.

The **Authenticity Gap** is the distance between the life a person most wants to live — measured value by value across sixteen empirically derived domains — and the life they are actually living: a structured, importance-weighted comparison between aspiration and enactment.

## Five findings stand out:

- **The gap predicts meaning beyond trait authenticity.** In 808 adults, importance-weighted gap scores nearly doubled the explained variance in meaning — from 9% to 19% on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire and from 12% to 24% on the PERMA meaning framework — controlling for whether participants felt generally authentic. Happiness scores tracked alignment closely, consistent with the view that happiness emerges as a byproduct of living one's values.
- **Enactment outweighs aspiration.** Within the gap, what people are currently living (current life scores) predicts well-being roughly twice as strongly as what they aspire to (ideal life scores).
- **Not all gaps cost the same.** Scope, Eudemonia, and Belonging carry the heaviest psychological costs (all  $p < .001$ ). Workcentrism and Luminance are effectively inert. Affluence and Cosmos show a counterintuitive reversal: larger aspiration gaps in these domains correlate with better well-being, likely reflecting the motivational functions of high aspiration.
- **The gap is partly structural.** Across 35,956 naturalistic users, gaps vary systematically by gender, income, and age. Women carry larger gaps on values constrained by inequality. Men carry larger gaps on romantic partnership. Higher income closes most gaps — but widens the romantic partnership gap.
- **The gap shifts with age, asymmetrically.** Ambition-related gaps narrow; connection-related gaps widen. The values that open with age are among the most costly for well-being.

The gap is not a judgment. It is information. And, as the data show, it is information worth having.

# Understanding the Authenticity Gap

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Most people, if asked, can tell you what they value — family, creative expression, financial security, making a difference in the world. Values clarification, the work of naming what you care about, has become a staple of coaching, counseling, and organizational development for good reason. Knowing your values is a meaningful first step.

But it is only a first step. For many people, it is where the work stops.

What rarely gets measured is the distance between the values someone holds and the life they are actually living. A person can know with complete clarity that they value creative expression and still spend their days in work that offers none. They can know that family matters and still find their lives structured in ways that make pursuing it nearly impossible. Clarity about values and alignment with values are two different things — and confusing them is one of the most common oversights in how we think about well-being, meaning, and personal growth.

This paper is about that distance. We call it the Authenticity Gap.

## What the Authenticity Gap Is — and Is Not

The Authenticity Gap is a measure of the discrepancy between a person's ideal life — how they most want to live across sixteen core values — and their current life — how they are actually living those same values today. It is not a measure of self-awareness. It is not a personality trait. It is not a satisfaction score. It is a structured comparison, value by value, between aspiration and enactment. The distinction matters because each of those related constructs already has a literature, and the Authenticity Gap is not a repackaging of any of them.

Trait authenticity — the dispositional sense of living in accordance with one's true self — is a relatively stable, personality-like characteristic (Wood et al., 2008). Someone high in trait authenticity generally feels that their actions reflect who they are, but the feeling is global, not specific: it does not tell you which values are aligned and which are not. Feeling authentic in a general sense and actually living your most important values are related but meaningfully distinct experiences — a distinction Study 2 demonstrates empirically.

Life satisfaction measures how good things feel overall, a global evaluation of one's circumstances. The Authenticity Gap is more granular and more actionable. Two people can report identical life satisfaction scores while carrying very different gap profiles — one misaligned primarily on financial abundance, another on service to others, another on community belonging.

Values clarification — identifying what you care about — is a prerequisite for measuring the gap, not a substitute for it. Knowing that Scope (a desire for a broad, stimulating, exploratory life) is your highest value tells you what you want. The Authenticity Gap tells you how far your current life is from delivering it.

The study of values as drivers of human behavior has a long tradition in social science (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992, 2012; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), and a parallel literature on authenticity, person-environment fit, and values congruence has consistently shown that alignment between internal priorities and lived experience is associated with greater meaning, motivation, and well-being, while persistent misalignment is linked to stress, disengagement, and diminished purpose (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Rogers, 1961; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Wood et al., 2008). Existing measures tend to assess this alignment globally — through general authenticity scales (Wood et al., 2008) or behaviorally framed valued action (Wilson et al., 2010). The Values Bridge builds on this foundation by operationalizing misalignment at the level of specific values rather than broad life domains, and by weighting that misalignment according to each person's own priorities. For a fuller account of the theoretical traditions informing the instrument, see *The Theoretical Roots of the Values Bridge* on our [research page](#).

## **The Sixteen Values**

The Authenticity Gap is measured using the Values Bridge Assessment, which evaluates sixteen empirically derived values across two dimensions: how central each value is to a person's ideal life, and how present each value is in their current life. Both dimensions are assessed on a seven-point scale, with each value measured by three to four items. The sixteen values, and their definitions, are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Sixteen Values Assessed by the Values Bridge**

| <b>Value</b>          | <b>Definition</b>   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Achievement</b>    | Drive for success, accomplishment, and demonstrated competence                    |
| <b>Affluence</b>      | Prioritization of wealth and financial security                                   |
| <b>Agency</b>         | Desire for autonomy and self-determination over life decisions                    |
| <b>Beholderism</b>    | Importance placed on aesthetics in one's environment, possessions, and appearance |
| <b>Belonging</b>      | Investment in friendship, community, and social connection                        |
| <b>Belovedness</b>    | Prioritization of romantic partnership as a central organizing force in life      |
| <b>Cosmos</b>         | Desire for spiritual or religious faith to guide decisions and provide meaning    |
| <b>Eudemonia</b>      | Orientation toward pleasure, leisure, recreation, and present-moment enjoyment    |
| <b>Familycentrism</b> | Prioritization of immediate family in shaping life decisions and time allocation  |
| <b>Luminance</b>      | Desire for fame, public visibility, and widespread recognition                    |
| <b>Non Sibi</b>       | Commitment to helping others through direct, personal impact                      |
| <b>Place</b>          | Attachment to a specific location or type of environment as a life priority       |
| <b>Radius</b>         | Aspiration to contribute to systemic change at a societal or global scale         |
| <b>Scope</b>          | Desire for a broad life characterized by stimulation, novelty, and exploration    |
| <b>Voice</b>          | Drive for creative self-expression and authentic personal visibility              |
| <b>Workcentrism</b>   | Centrality of work as an organizing principle of identity and daily life          |

These values were derived through iterative qualitative and quantitative development, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses across large samples. Internal consistency is high across all sixteen scales (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .856-.983$  for the Ideal Life dimension; comparable for Current Life), and the sixteen-value structure has been validated across demographically diverse samples. Companion papers on our [research page](#) describe the psychometric validation in detail (*Measuring What Matters: Validation of the Values Bridge Assessment*) and examine patterns of

values conflict and harmony across generations and income groups (*Values in Conflict and Harmony: Understanding Tensions and Alignment in Human Motivation*).

## **How the Gap Is Calculated**

For each of the sixteen values, the gap is the difference between a person's ideal life score and their current life score. But not all values count equally — and this is the design decision at the heart of the instrument.

Intuitively, falling short of your most important values should matter more than falling short of values you care about less. The weighting reflects this directly: a person's top-ranked value receives nearly twice the weight of their lowest-ranked one. Each value's weighted gap is then expressed as a percentage of the maximum possible misalignment, making scores comparable across individuals regardless of absolute response levels.

To take a concrete example: if Scope is your top-ranked value, and you score a 6 on how central broad, stimulating exploration is to your ideal life but only a 3 on how present it is in your current life, that three-point gap is weighted nearly twice as heavily as it would be if Scope were your lowest-ranked value. The overall Authenticity Gap score is the average of absolute weighted gaps across all sixteen values, expressed on a 0-100 scale.

This approach is empirically validated, not merely theoretical: as Study 2 shows, importance-weighted gap scores produce significantly stronger associations with meaning and well-being than unweighted scores. Your most important values count most, and the math reflects that. Full formulas appear in Appendix B.

## **The Two Studies**

The findings reported here draw on two complementary datasets.

Study 1 is a naturalistic sample of 35,956 adults (aged 18–99) who completed the Values Bridge Assessment as part of normal use of the tool. It is demographically diverse — spanning generations from Gen Z through Boomers, income levels from under \$50,000 to \$150,000 or more, and a range of gender identities — and reflects genuine variation in life circumstances and values priorities. Study 1 characterizes the landscape of the Authenticity Gap: which values carry the most misalignment, and how that misalignment varies by age, gender, and income.

Study 2 draws on a sample of 808 adults recruited through Prolific Academic, an online behavioral research platform, after filtering for attention-check failures and implausible ages. Unlike the naturalistic sample, this dataset includes validated criterion measures: meaning in life, assessed by both the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) and the PERMA framework (Butler & Kern, 2016); general happiness, assessed by a single validated item also from the PERMA framework; decisional conflict, assessed by the Decisional Conflict Scale (O'Connor, 1995); and

trait authenticity, assessed by the Authentic Living subscale of the Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008). Study 2 examines what the gap costs — how values misalignment predicts meaning, well-being, and decisional conflict, and whether it does so above and beyond the more general sense of feeling authentic.

Together, the two studies offer a picture that neither could provide alone: the scope and texture of the gap as it appears in everyday life, and the psychological stakes of living with it.

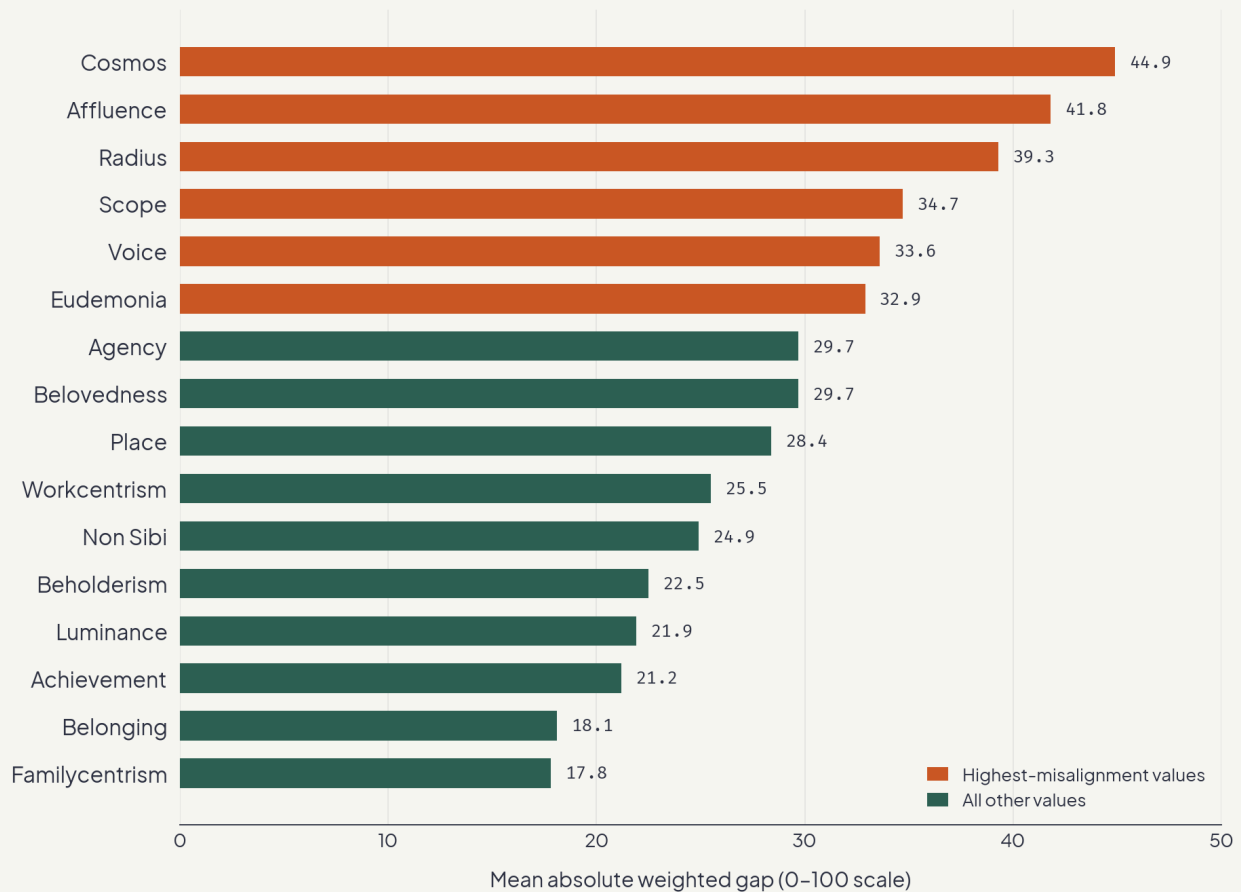
# Study 1 — The Landscape of the Gap

*What 35,956 people reveal about values misalignment in everyday life*

We begin with the descriptive but foundational question: what does the Authenticity Gap actually look like at scale? Which values are people most misaligned on? Does the gap shift across different stages of life? Does it vary by gender or income? These are not merely demographic curiosities — they speak to whether the gap is primarily a psychological phenomenon, shaped by personality, mindset, or motivation, or whether it is also shaped by the conditions of people's lives. The answer, as we will show, is unambiguously both.

## **The Values People Are Furthest From Living**

Across 35,956 participants, the mean overall Authenticity Gap score was 31.2 out of 100, meaning the average person is living at roughly 69% alignment with their ideal life across the sixteen values. But this composite figure obscures enormous variation at the value level — and the pattern is not random. Figure 1 shows the mean absolute weighted gap score for each of the sixteen values, ranked from highest to lowest misalignment.



**Figure 1. Mean Absolute Authenticity Gap by Value**

Mean absolute weighted gap scores across all sixteen Values Bridge values, ranked descending. Values in rust mark the six largest mean gaps; values in patina show the remaining ten. Scores are expressed on a 0-100 scale where higher numbers indicate larger misalignment.  $N = 35,956$ .

Cosmos — the desire for spiritual or religious faith to guide decisions and provide meaning — carries the largest mean absolute gap ( $M = 44.9$ ), but this finding requires careful interpretation. Cosmos is also the most polarizing value in the dataset, with a standard deviation of 52.6 — by far the highest of any value. Unlike most values, where the gap primarily reflects wanting more than one is living, Cosmos generates large gaps in both directions. The likely explanation is a population that divides along religious lines: people with strong faith orientations who feel spirituality is less central to their daily decisions than they would like, and people with little religious orientation who feel their lives are more faith-structured than they want — through family expectations, cultural context, or community obligations. The high mean absolute gap reflects not a universal spiritual hunger, but a near-universal difficulty landing where one actually wants to be on this dimension.

Affluence ( $M = 41.8$ ) and Radius ( $M = 39.3$ ) follow — the desire for financial abundance and the aspiration to contribute to systemic societal change, respectively. Both require conditions beyond individual intention to enact. Scope ( $M = 34.7$ ) — the desire for a broad, stimulating, exploratory life

— and Voice ( $M = 33.6$ ) — creative self-expression and authentic personal visibility — round out the top five.

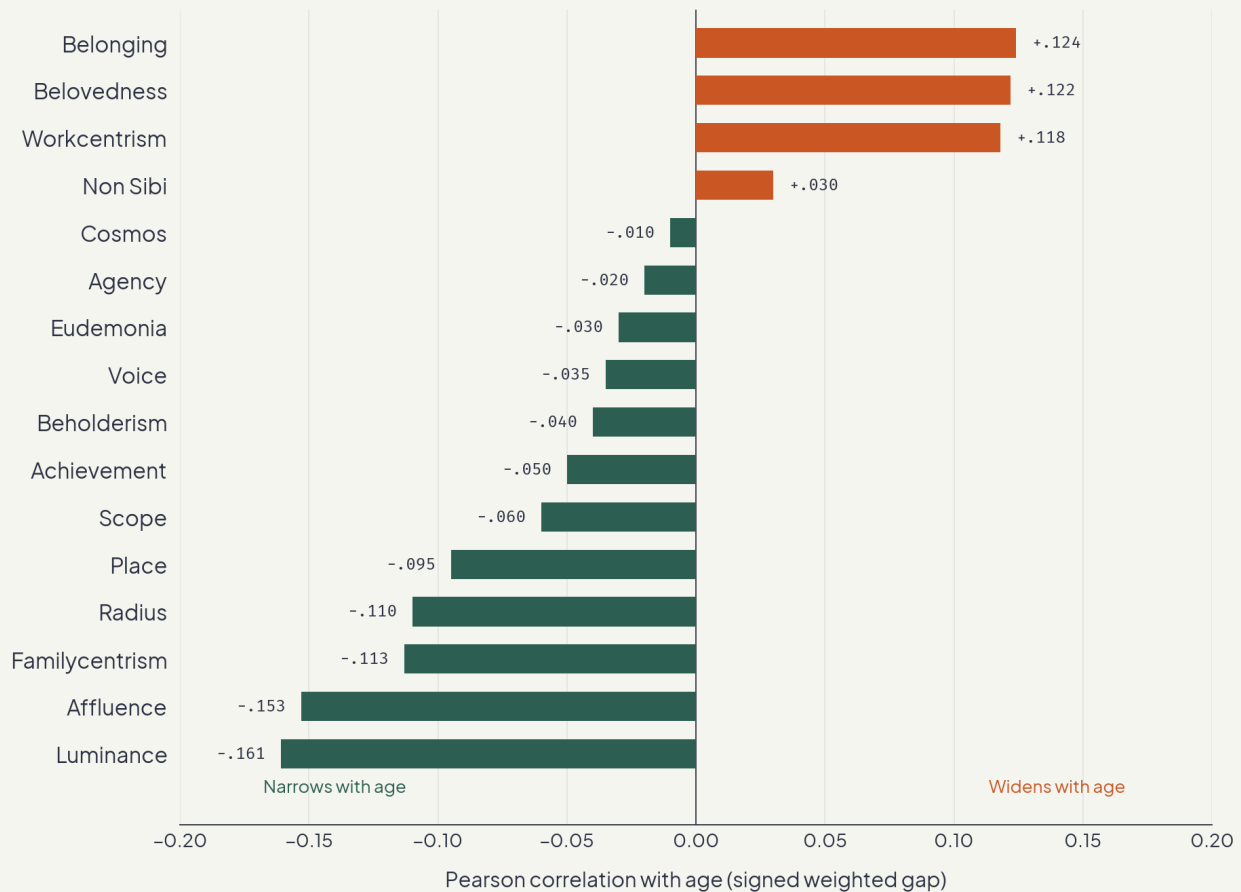
At the other end, Familycentrism ( $M = 17.8$ ) and Belonging ( $M = 18.1$ ) show the smallest mean absolute gaps. People are, on average, living closer to their ideals for immediate family prioritization and community connection than for any other value — consistent with a relational buffer hypothesis: connection-oriented values appear to be more accessible and more consistently enacted than ambition- or resource-dependent ones.

One finding stands apart in its directional quality. Workcentrism — the centrality of work as an organizing principle of identity and daily life — is the only value in the dataset with a negative mean signed gap ( $M = -0.67$ ). A negative signed gap means that, on average, people are living more of this value than they ideally want. In a cultural moment saturated with discourse about finding meaning through work and purpose-driven careers, the data deliver a quiet corrective: the average person is already more work-centric than they want to be.

## **How Age Shapes the Gap**

The overall Authenticity Gap shows a modest negative correlation with age ( $r = -.071, p < .001$ ) — misalignment decreases somewhat as people grow older. The generational breakdown matches: Gen Z and Millennials carry nearly identical mean gap scores (31.6 and 31.7, respectively), Gen X shows a modest reduction (30.1), and Boomers the lowest overall gap (28.7). At the composite level, alignment does appear to improve gradually across the lifespan.

But the value-level picture is more interesting, and more human, than a simple narrowing story.



**Figure 2. Correlation Between Age and Value-Specific Authenticity Gaps**

Pearson correlations between age and each value's signed weighted gap score. Negative correlations (patina) indicate values where misalignment narrows with age; positive correlations (rust) indicate widening.  $N = 35,956$ .

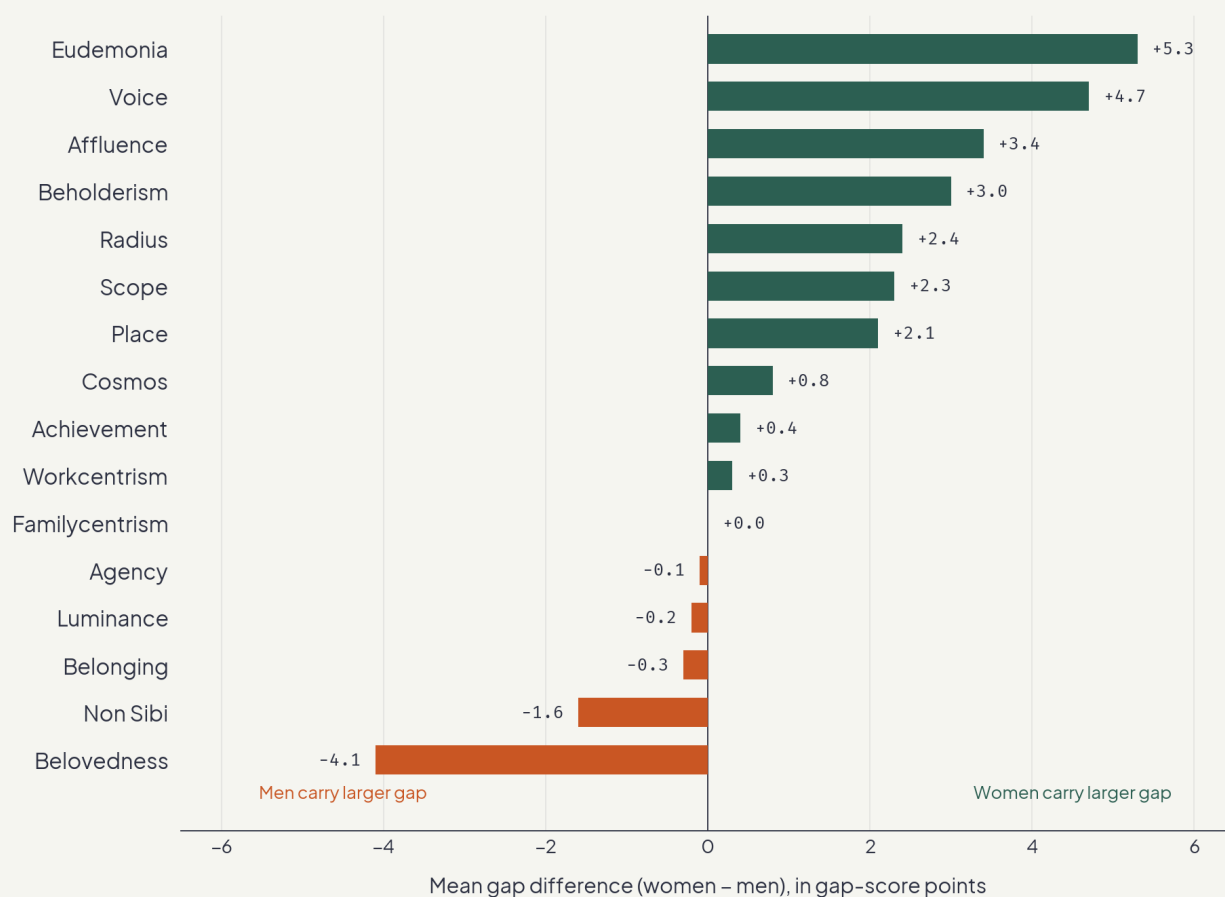
The values that narrow most strongly with age are Luminance ( $r = -.161$ ) and Affluence ( $r = -.153$ ), followed by Familycentrism ( $r = -.113$ ), Radius ( $r = -.110$ ), and Place ( $r = -.095$ ). The pattern is largely coherent: most are ambition- or resource-dependent values — fame, financial abundance, societal impact, environment — that appear to become more realistic, or less central, as people move through adulthood. Familycentrism narrows for a different reason: older participants tend to be living the settled, family-oriented lives they want.

The values that widen most strongly with age are Belonging ( $r = +.124$ ), Belovedness ( $r = +.122$ ), and Workcentrism ( $r = +.118$ ). The Belonging and Belovedness findings carry particular emotional weight: older people experience more misalignment on community connection and romantic partnership as a central life force, not less. Social networks thin with age. Romantic partnership becomes less available for many people through loss, separation, or the natural attrition of long-term relationships. Connection gaps do not close with time. For many people, they open. The Workcentrism trend likely reflects older participants approaching retirement and wanting more work centrality than late-career life delivers.

The practical implication is that "the gap narrows with age" is true in aggregate but misleading in specifics. Ambition aligns. Connection erodes. These are different problems requiring different responses, and conflating them under a general narrative of age-related growth does a disservice to both.

### How Gender Shapes the Gap

Women in this sample carry a modestly larger overall Authenticity Gap than men (31.5 vs. 30.0). Participants identifying as Non-Binary or Other carry the largest overall gap of any gender group (33.6), a finding that warrants dedicated attention in future research.



**Figure 3. Gender Differences in Value-Specific Authenticity Gaps**

Mean differences in absolute gap scores between women and men across the sixteen values, in gap-score points. Positive bars (patina) indicate larger gaps for women; negative bars (rust) indicate larger gaps for men. *N* = 35,956.

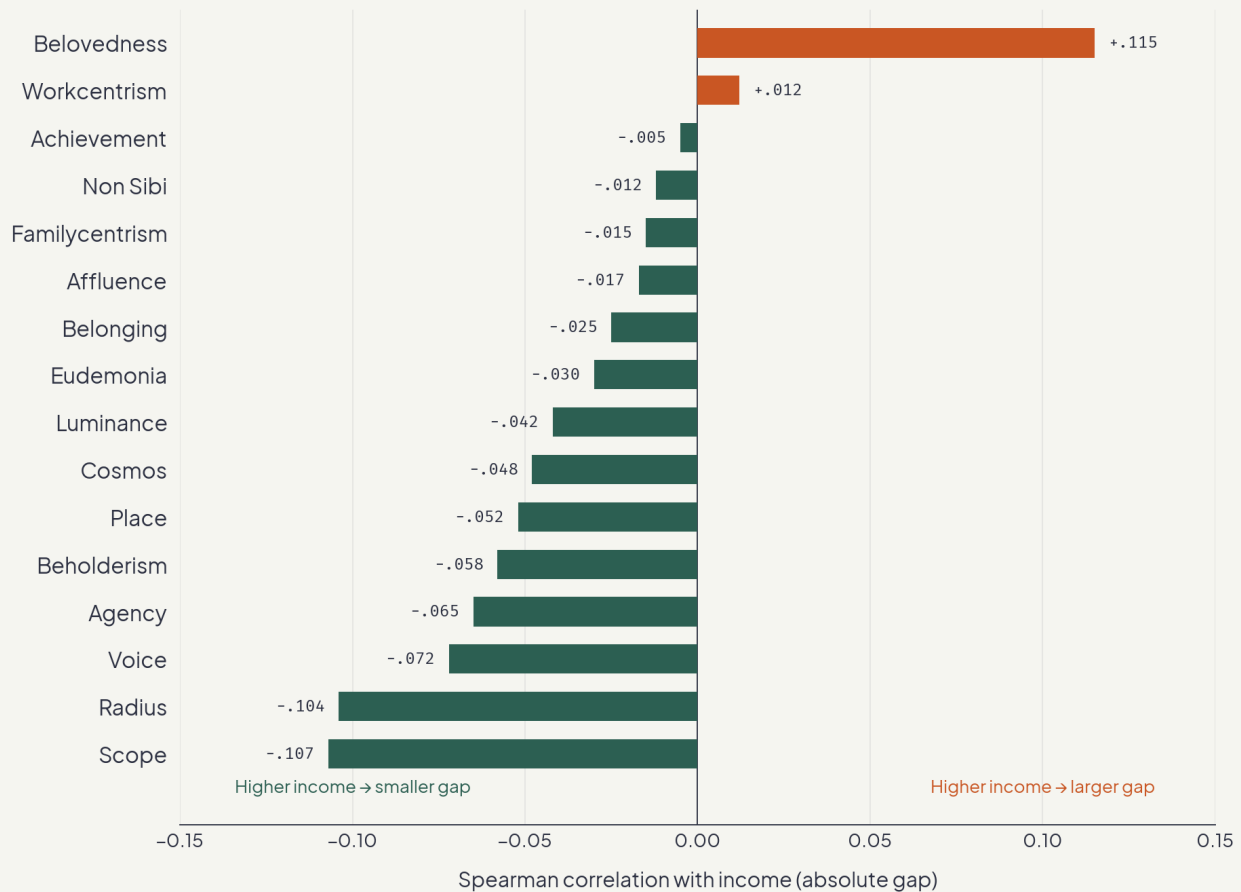
Women carry substantially larger gaps on Eudemonia (+5.3 points), Voice (+4.7), Affluence (+3.4), Beholderism (+3.0), Radius (+2.4), Scope (+2.3), and Place (+2.1), all differences significant at *p* < .001. These values share a common structure: they require time, financial resources, autonomy, and environmental conditions to enact. The values where women carry the largest gaps are, almost without exception, the values most constrained by structural inequality.

Men carry larger gaps on only two values: Belovedness (−4.1 points) and Non Sibi (−1.6). The Belovedness finding is the more striking. Men in this sample carry meaningfully larger gaps on romantic partnership as a central organizing force in life — they want more of it, relative to what they are living, than women do. This pattern aligns with a wider conversation about men's underserved social and romantic needs.

Four values show no statistically significant gender difference: Agency, Luminance, Familycentrism, and Belonging. The picture is not that one gender is more or less authentic than another — it is that the terrain of misalignment differs systematically by gender in ways that map closely onto structural realities.

### **How Income Shapes the Gap**

If the gender findings suggest that structural conditions shape the Authenticity Gap, the income findings make the same argument in starker terms. Across income levels, the overall Authenticity Gap declines in a clean, monotonic gradient: participants earning under \$50,000 annually carry a mean gap of 34.0; those earning \$150,000 or more carry 29.8. Higher income buys more alignment, on average, across the full range of values.



**Figure 4. Income and Value-Specific Authenticity Gaps**

Spearman correlations between household income level and each value's absolute gap score. Negative correlations (patina) indicate that higher income is associated with smaller gaps; positive correlations (rust) indicate widening with income.  $N = 35,956$ .

The values most sensitive to income are Scope ( $\rho = -.107$ ) and Radius ( $\rho = -.104$ ). Both require freedom, flexibility, and resources to enact — a broad, stimulating, exploratory life and meaningful contribution to systemic change are difficult to sustain on a constrained budget. Voice, Agency, Beholderism, Cosmos, Place, and Luminance show similar negative associations — higher income creates conditions that make values enactment more possible.

Two findings cut against this trend. The Affluence gap is barely sensitive to income at all ( $\rho = -.017$ ): people at every income level feel they are living less financial abundance than they would ideally like, and higher income does not substantially close that gap. Aspirations appear to scale with resources. The Belovedness gap shows a striking positive association with income ( $\rho = +.115$ ): wealthier individuals carry larger gaps on romantic partnership as a central life force than lower-income individuals do — they want more of it, relative to what they are living.

## **What Study 1 Tells Us**

Three findings emerge from the naturalistic sample. First, the Authenticity Gap is not uniformly distributed across values — some generate chronic and widespread misalignment, others are more consistently enacted, and one runs in reverse (*Workcentrism*): people are living more of it than they want. Second, the gap shifts with age in ways that complicate simple narratives of age-related growth. Third, and most importantly, the gap is shaped by structural conditions. The conditions of people's lives — their gender, their income, their access to time and resources and autonomy — shape how close they can get to living what they most value.

These findings have practical implications we return to in the closing section. Now we turn to the question Study 1 cannot answer: what does the gap actually cost?

## Study 2 — What the Gap Costs

*How values misalignment predicts meaning, happiness, and decisional conflict*

Knowing that people carry gaps — and that those gaps vary by value, age, gender, and income — raises the question that matters most for anyone considering these findings in a clinical, coaching, or organizational context: does the gap actually cost something? Is a person who is deeply misaligned on their most important values measurably worse off than one who is not? And if so, is that effect real in its own right, or does it simply reflect the fact that people who feel generally inauthentic also tend to report lower well-being?

Study 2 pairs the Values Bridge with the four validated criterion measures listed previously in *The Two Studies*: meaning in life (MLQ and PERMA), general happiness, decisional conflict, and trait authenticity. The inclusion of trait authenticity as both a criterion variable and a statistical control is central to the study's design — it lets us test whether the Authenticity Gap predicts well-being above and beyond the general feeling of being authentic.

### **Not All Gaps Cost the Same**

The first and most practically important finding from Study 2 is that the psychological consequences of values misalignment are not uniform across values. Some gaps carry heavy costs for meaning and happiness. Others carry almost none. And two values show a pattern that runs in the opposite direction entirely.

Figure 5 shows a correlation heatmap of the associations between importance-weighted gap scores for each of the sixteen values and the five criterion variables; negative correlations with meaning and happiness indicate that larger gaps predict worse outcomes, while positive correlations with decisional conflict indicate larger gaps predict greater difficulty making decisions.



**Figure 5. Value-Specific Weighted Gaps and Criterion Variables — Correlation Heatmap**

Pearson correlations between importance-weighted gap scores for each value and five criterion variables. Rust indicates negative correlations; patina indicates positive correlations; intensity reflects magnitude. Values are sorted by the magnitude of their MLQ Meaning correlation. Prolific sample,  $N = 808$ .

Full numerical values, including criterion correlations and mean absolute weighted gaps, appear in Appendix A. Three patterns emerge, each telling a different story about how values misalignment operates psychologically.

**The high-stakes values.** A cluster of values shows strong, consistent negative associations with meaning and happiness. Scope carries the largest associations of any value with both meaning in life ( $r = -.363$  on the MLQ,  $r = -.359$  on PERMA) and happiness ( $r = -.385$ ). Eudemonia follows closely — gaps on pleasure, leisure, and present-moment enjoyment predict meaningful reductions in both MLQ meaning ( $r = -.305$ ) and happiness ( $r = -.350$ ). Belonging, despite generating among the smallest mean absolute gaps in Study 1, shows some of the steepest criterion associations:  $r = -.286$  with MLQ meaning and  $r = -.367$  with happiness. Also in this cluster: Achievement, Beholderism, Non Sibi, Radius, Voice, Agency, and Place — each showing consistent negative associations with meaning and happiness, and most showing positive associations with decisional conflict.

One feature of this cluster stands out. Belonging's associations with meaning and happiness are among the strongest in the entire dataset, yet its association with trait authenticity is essentially zero ( $r = -.012$ ). The cost of a Belonging gap is not mediated by feeling generally inauthentic — it is a direct relational deprivation effect. For practitioners working with clients on social isolation or relational well-being, this finding provides empirical grounding for treating connection as a primary site of authenticity work, not a secondary one.

**The aspiration values.** Two values show associations that run in the opposite direction from the rest of the dataset. Affluence and Cosmos both show positive associations with happiness and, for Cosmos, with meaning in life. Larger gaps on these values are associated with better well-being, not worse. A likely explanation is that people with large positive gaps in these domains tend to be high-aspiration individuals, and aspiration itself can fuel engagement and a sense of direction even when desire goes unmet. Both Affluence and Cosmos do show positive associations with decisional conflict, suggesting that aspiration in these domains creates real cognitive friction without generating the emotional costs that characterize the high-stakes cluster.

**The neutral values.** Workcentrism and Luminance show near-zero associations with meaning and happiness. Gaps on work centrality and the desire for public visibility simply do not predict well-being in either direction at a level distinguishable from chance.

## The Gap and Decisional Conflict

The decisional conflict findings tell a somewhat different story than meaning and happiness. The values most strongly associated with decisional conflict are Eudemonia ( $r = +.164$ ), Achievement ( $r = +.140$ ), Voice ( $r = +.136$ ), Belonging ( $r = +.122$ ), and Non Sibi ( $r = +.115$ ). Misalignment on these values doesn't only reduce well-being — it creates active uncertainty about how to direct one's choices. For practitioners using the Values Bridge in coaching or counseling, the decisional conflict associations offer a specific clinical signal: a client presenting with difficulty making major life decisions may be carrying significant gaps on Voice, Achievement, or Eudemonia — and those gaps may be the underlying source of their indecision.

## The Gap Beyond Feeling Inauthentic

The most important question Study 2 was designed to answer is whether the Authenticity Gap captures something real and distinct, or whether it is simply a more elaborate measure of what trait authenticity already captures. The answer is unambiguous: the gap is distinct, and its distinctness matters.

Table 2 presents hierarchical regressions predicting each of the four outcome variables. Trait authenticity was entered in Step 1, the overall weighted Authenticity Gap in Step 2. The  $R^2$  change ( $\Delta R^2$ ) represents the additional variance the gap explains beyond trait authenticity.

**Table 2. Incremental Validity of the Weighted Authenticity Gap Above Trait Authenticity**

| Outcome                 | R <sup>2</sup> Step 1 | R <sup>2</sup> Step 2 | $\Delta R^2$ | F-change          |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Meaning in Life (MLQ)   | .086                  | .187                  | .101***      | F(1,805) = 99.69  |
| Meaning in Life (PERMA) | .120                  | .237                  | .117***      | F(1,805) = 123.55 |
| Happiness               | .063                  | .209                  | .146***      | F(1,803) = 148.15 |
| Decisional Conflict     | .014                  | .027                  | .012**       | F(1,804) = 10.26  |

Note. Step 1 predictor: Trait Authenticity. Step 2 adds Overall Weighted Authenticity Gap. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Full regression results, including standardized beta coefficients for both predictors at each step, appear in Appendix C. The pattern across outcomes is consistent and striking. For MLQ meaning, trait authenticity alone accounts for 8.6% of variance; adding the weighted Authenticity Gap brings the explained variance to 18.7%, an increase of 10.1 percentage points ( $p < .001$ ). Both predictors remain independently significant in Step 2, confirming that they capture genuinely distinct variance.

For PERMA meaning, the pattern is even stronger: trait authenticity explains 12.0% of variance; adding the gap brings it to 23.7% ( $\Delta R^2 = .117$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The happiness findings are compelling in their own right, but happiness is best understood here as a consequence of meaning, not a goal in itself. The gap's relationship with happiness (explained variance rising from 6.3% to 20.9%,  $\Delta R^2 = .146$ ) reinforces the broader argument: when people live closer to what matters most to them, happiness follows as a natural byproduct. Pursuing alignment is not the same as pursuing happiness, but the data suggest the former tends to produce the latter.

The weighted gap and trait authenticity are nearly orthogonal in this sample ( $r = .005$ ), meaning they measure almost entirely independent dimensions of a person's relationship with their values. To put it plainly: feeling authentic is not the same as living authentically. The gap measures the difference.

## Does Importance–Weighting Matter?

A reasonable methodological question is whether the importance-weighting procedure actually improves the instrument's validity, or whether a simpler unweighted gap score would perform comparably. The data provide a clear answer.

Table 3 compares criterion correlations for the importance-weighted gap score against the unweighted version — the mean of absolute differences between ideal and current life scores across all sixteen values, without adjustment for each value's importance to the individual.

**Table 3. Criterion Correlations — Weighted vs. Unweighted Overall Gap**

| Outcome             | r (Weighted) | r (Unweighted) | Difference | p (Steiger's z) | N   |
|---------------------|--------------|----------------|------------|-----------------|-----|
| Meaning (MLQ)       | -.316        | -.280          | -.037      | < .001***       | 798 |
| Meaning (PERMA)     | -.339        | -.299          | -.040      | < .001***       | 798 |
| Happiness           | -.381        | -.343          | -.038      | < .001***       | 796 |
| Decisional Conflict | +.108        | +.090          | +.018      | < .001***       | 797 |
| Trait Authenticity  | +.005        | +.029          | -.024      | < .001***       | 798 |

*Note.* Differences tested using Steiger's (1980) z-test for dependent correlations from the same sample. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The weighted gap outperforms the unweighted gap across every well-being outcome, and the differences are statistically significant despite the two measures correlating at  $r = .992$  (Steiger's z, all  $p < .001$ ). The practical implication is clear: what you most want to be living matters more than what you somewhat want to be living, and a measure that reflects this produces a more valid assessment of how misalignment affects well-being.

## What People Live vs. What They Want

A natural question follows from the gap construct itself: does its predictive power come more from how much someone aspires to a value (ideal-life scores) or from how much they currently live it (current-life scores)? Both contribute to the gap, but they may not contribute equally to well-being.

To test this, we computed each participant's mean ideal-life (IL) and mean current-life (CL) score across all sixteen values, then correlated each composite separately with the four criterion variables. Differences between paired correlations were tested using Steiger's z for dependent overlapping correlations.

**Table 4. Ideal–Life vs. Current–Life Predictive Comparison**

| Outcome             | r (IL) | r (CL) | Steiger's z | p      | N   |
|---------------------|--------|--------|-------------|--------|-----|
| MLQ Meaning         | .355   | .607   | -11.98      | < .001 | 830 |
| PERMA Meaning       | .387   | .649   | -12.86      | < .001 | 830 |
| Happiness           | .320   | .602   | -13.22      | < .001 | 828 |
| Decisional Conflict | -.130  | -.240  | 4.50        | < .001 | 829 |

*Note.* r (IL) and r (CL) are Pearson correlations between participant-level mean Ideal-Life and Current-Life composites, respectively, and each criterion variable. The IL-CL correlation in this sample was  $r = .744$ .

For every outcome, current-life scores correlated approximately twice as strongly with well-being as ideal-life scores did, and every difference was highly significant. What people are currently living predicts their well-being roughly twice as strongly as what they want to be living.

The aggregate pattern holds at the value level for most values, with two notable exceptions. For Affluence, the asymmetry reverses: ideal-life scores positively predict well-being ( $r = .12$ – $.15$ ) while current-life scores do not ( $r = .03$ – $.07$ ), directly supporting the aspiration interpretation offered earlier — wanting affluence appears motivationally beneficial in ways that having it does not. For Cosmos, both components positively predict well-being at similar magnitudes, suggesting a different mechanism: engagement with the spiritual dimension may matter regardless of whether aspiration outpaces practice. The Workcentrism finding is also clarified. Its near-zero gap correlations reflect IL and CL contributions canceling rather than Workcentrism being unrelated to well-being — both wanting and living work centrality predict happier outcomes, but the discrepancy between them does not.

The implication is direct: alignment is achieved primarily through changes in what is actually lived, not through stronger aspiration. Wanting something more does not substitute for living it more — a point we return to in the closing section.

## What Study 2 Tells Us

Four conclusions emerge from Study 2 that matter for practitioners, organizations, and individuals. First, the psychological cost of the Authenticity Gap is real, substantial, and specific — gaps on high-stakes values predict meaningful reductions in meaning and happiness, while not all gaps cost the same. Second, the Authenticity Gap captures something trait authenticity does not: when added to trait authenticity, the gap nearly doubles the explained variance in meaning and triples it in happiness, and the two constructs are nearly orthogonal. Third, importance-weighting matters — the algorithm's core design decision is validated empirically across all well-being outcomes. Fourth, current-life scores predict well-being roughly twice as strongly as ideal-life scores, indicating that the gap's effect is driven more by what people are living than by what they aspire to.

Together, Studies 1 and 2 give us a detailed picture of what the Authenticity Gap is, how it is distributed across the population, and what it costs. The remaining question is what to do about it.

# Closing the Gap

*Practical mechanisms, implications, limitations, and what comes next*

Studies 1 and 2 establish that the Authenticity Gap is a measurable, consequential, and empirically distinct feature of how people relate to their values. It varies systematically with the conditions of people's lives. It predicts meaning and well-being above and beyond the general sense of feeling authentic. And the specific values driving it matter — not all gaps cost the same, and not all gaps respond to the same interventions.

What the data cannot directly tell us is how to close the gap. The studies are cross-sectional, so causal claims about reducing the gap await longitudinal and experimental research. What the data can tell us — combined with the theoretical foundations of the instrument and the clinical experience of practitioners working with it — is what mechanisms are most likely to matter and where the leverage points are.

## What the Evidence Suggests About Closing the Gap

**Enactment matters more than aspiration.** A central finding from Study 2 is that what people are currently living predicts their well-being roughly twice as strongly as what they aspire to (Table 4). Living a value is not just psychologically distinct from wanting it — it carries categorically more weight in shaping meaning, happiness, and decision-making. Interventions focused on values clarification alone are therefore necessary but insufficient. Clarifying that Scope is your highest value does not close the Scope gap. Restructuring time, relationships, and environments to allow broader, more stimulating engagement with life does.

This has a practical corollary: partial enactment is more powerful than it looks. A person who cannot immediately redesign their life around Scope can nonetheless introduce small, concrete experiences of stimulation and exploration — a new project, a weekend in an unfamiliar place, a conversation that stretches their thinking. Because current life so substantially outweighs aspiration in predicting well-being, small changes in what is actually lived carry more weight than large changes in what is aspired to.

**Structural conditions are legitimate intervention targets.** The income and gender findings have a direct implication for practice. If women carry larger gaps on Eudemonia, Voice, and Scope because caregiving demands, financial constraints, and professional norms make those values harder to live — and the data strongly suggest they do — then coaching and counseling approaches that focus exclusively on internal reframing address only part of the problem. The gap is not always a sign of insufficient motivation or unclear values. For many people, it is a sign of insufficient access to the conditions that make their most important values livable.

**Connection deserves primary attention, not secondary.** The age and criterion findings together tell a consistent story about relational values. Belonging and Belovedness gaps widen with age

rather than narrowing. The Belonging gap carries among the steepest costs for meaning and happiness of any value. And Belovedness shows a unique pattern: men carry larger gaps than women, and wealthier people carry larger gaps than less wealthy ones, suggesting that conventional markers of success and stability do not reliably bring romantic partnership into alignment. Relational well-being should be treated as a primary site of authenticity work, not a background variable.

**The Workcentrism finding as an underused lever.** The finding that people are already living more work-centrism than they ideally want — the only value with a negative mean signed gap — has a practical implication rarely foregrounded in coaching or professional development. For many clients, the path toward greater authenticity runs not through finding more meaning in work, but through deliberately reducing work's dominance over the rest of life. Helping clients identify what work is displacing may be more valuable than helping them find more purpose within it.

## Implications for Practice

The Authenticity Gap is not a theoretical construct that happens to have practical applications. It was built from real-world assessment data, validated against outcomes practitioners care about, and designed to produce actionable information at the level of individual values rather than aggregate scores.

**For coaches and counselors.** The Values Bridge Authenticity Gap profile complements existing well-being and authenticity measures with a more granular diagnostic picture. Because the gap is computed at the value level, it doesn't just tell a practitioner that a client is misaligned — it specifies where, and (combined with the criterion findings from Study 2) how much that misalignment is likely costing them. The incremental validity findings are particularly relevant for practitioners who already use trait authenticity or values clarification tools: the data establish that the gap adds something those tools do not provide. The reversed associations for Affluence and Cosmos offer a clinical signal: clients with strong aspirations toward financial abundance or spiritual meaning, even alongside a significant gap, may be drawing on that aspiration as a motivational and meaning-making resource.

**For educators and career counselors.** The age findings suggest that the values alignment conversation looks different at different life stages. For younger adults — Gen Z and Millennials, who carry the largest overall gaps — the gap is often widest on ambition-related values like Scope, Radius, and Voice, which also tend to narrow with age. For older adults, the gap may be widening on connection-related values precisely when professional demands are at their peak. The gender findings have direct implications for equity in practice: if women systematically carry larger gaps on values constrained by structural inequality, then career and educational counseling that treats values alignment as a purely individual project is missing a systemic dimension.

**For organizations.** The Workcentrism finding has direct organizational implications. A workplace culture that maximizes work centrality — implicitly or explicitly asking employees to organize their identity and lives around professional output — may be actively widening the Authenticity Gap, even while delivering short-term performance. What employees want is not more work centrality but more of the values it displaces: Eudemonia, Scope, Belonging, Voice. The decisional conflict findings are also organizationally relevant: employees carrying significant gaps on Achievement, Voice, or Agency show greater difficulty making decisions aligned with their values, which may manifest as friction during periods of organizational change or strategic redirection.

**For individuals.** If you have read this far and found yourself in the data — recognizing the specific values where your gap is largest, or seeing your age, gender, and income group reflected in the patterns — the most important thing the research suggests is this: the gap is not a judgment. It is information. It tells you which values matter most to you, how far your current life is from delivering them, and approximately what that distance is costing in meaning and well-being. None of that is a verdict on your choices or your character. It is a starting point for the specific, concrete work of designing a life closer to the one you most want to live. The data also suggest that this work does not require wholesale life transformation. Partial enactment — small, consistent experiences of your highest-priority values — moves the needle in ways that accumulate.

## **Limitations and What We Don't Yet Know**

The findings reported here are robust across two samples and consistent with the theoretical framework from which the instrument was developed. They are also subject to limitations that future research should address directly.

**The cross-sectional design.** Both studies capture a single moment in time. The criterion associations reported in Study 2 are correlational, not causal. They show that greater misalignment co-occurs with worse well-being outcomes, but not that reducing the gap produces improvement. Longitudinal studies tracking participants before and after coaching, therapeutic, or life-design interventions are needed to confirm the directionality of these effects.

**Sample characteristics.** The naturalistic sample reflects the population of people who voluntarily seek out a values assessment tool — a group likely higher in self-reflection, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status than the general population. The income distribution skews toward higher earners. Cross-cultural validation studies are needed to test whether the sixteen-value structure and the Authenticity Gap construct generalize across cultural contexts.

**The reversed associations for Affluence and Cosmos.** Value-level analysis supports the aspiration interpretation for Affluence (ideal-life scores predict well-being where current-life scores do not) but suggests Cosmos operates through a different mechanism, with both components contributing similarly. Longitudinal designs and replication remain needed to confirm aspiration's motivational function and identify what drives the Cosmos pattern.

**The weighting scheme.** The current rank-order weighting scheme is a linear approximation of importance, validated empirically in this paper. Future research should examine whether empirically derived weights produce stronger criterion associations and whether the optimal weighting scheme varies across populations or life stages.

### **Final Thoughts: Authenticity as Design**

There is a persistent cultural narrative about authenticity that frames it as something to be discovered — a true self waiting beneath the surface, accessible through sufficient introspection. In this view, the work of becoming more authentic is primarily a work of looking inward.

The data in this paper tell a different story. They suggest that authenticity is not primarily a matter of self-knowledge, though self-knowledge is necessary. It is a matter of alignment — of building conditions in which what you most value can actually be lived. The Authenticity Gap does not measure how well you know yourself. It measures how close your life is to the life your values call for.

This reframing has consequences. The work of authenticity is not only internal but external — it involves time, resources, relationships, environments, and structures. The gap is not a sign of personal failure or insufficient self-awareness. It is a sign of the distance between a life fully aligned with one's values and the life that current conditions make possible.

The gap is not, ultimately, a problem to be solved once and filed away. It is an ongoing signal — a measure of what matters most and how far the current moment is from honoring it. Used well, it is one of the most specific and actionable pieces of self-knowledge a person can have. It does not tell you who to be. It tells you what to build.

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## Appendix A: The Sixteen Values — Criterion Correlation Profiles

The table below presents each of the sixteen Values Bridge values alongside its mean absolute weighted gap in the naturalistic sample ( $N = 35,956$ ), and criterion correlations from the Prolific sample ( $N = 808$ ). Values are sorted by mean absolute gap, descending.

| Value          | Mean Gap | MLQ      | PERMA    | Happiness | Dec. Conflict | Trait Auth. |
|----------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| Cosmos         | 44.9     | .159***  | .106**   | .044      | -.032         | .084*       |
| Affluence      | 41.8     | .126***  | .117***  | .149***   | .011          | .052        |
| Radius         | 39.3     | -.193*** | -.212*** | -.196***  | .088*         | -.042       |
| Scope          | 34.7     | -.363*** | -.359*** | -.385***  | .069*         | -.046       |
| Voice          | 33.6     | -.171*** | -.168*** | -.166***  | .136***       | -.125***    |
| Eudemonia      | 32.9     | -.305*** | -.310*** | -.350***  | .164***       | -.106**     |
| Agency         | 29.7     | -.175*** | -.177*** | -.174***  | .080*         | -.060       |
| Belovedness    | 29.7     | -.087*   | -.078*   | -.072*    | -.037         | .059        |
| Place          | 28.4     | -.166*** | -.205*** | -.279***  | .069*         | .040        |
| Workcentrism   | 25.5     | .044     | .032     | .023      | -.041         | .056        |
| Non Sibi       | 24.9     | -.194*** | -.202*** | -.229***  | .115**        | -.014       |
| Beholderism    | 22.5     | -.209*** | -.210*** | -.235***  | .071*         | -.145***    |
| Luminance      | 21.9     | -.056    | -.043    | -.039     | -.015         | -.073*      |
| Achievement    | 21.2     | -.242*** | -.231*** | -.162***  | .140***       | -.180***    |
| Belonging      | 18.1     | -.286*** | -.307*** | -.367***  | .122***       | -.012       |
| Familycentrism | 17.8     | -.097**  | -.101**  | -.115**   | .071*         | -.025       |

*Note.* Mean Gap from naturalistic sample ( $N = 35,956$ ). Criterion correlations from Prolific sample. Positive correlations with MLQ, PERMA, and Happiness for Cosmos and Affluence indicate reversed pattern (larger aspiration gap associated with better outcomes). \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Appendix B: Technical Note on the Weighting Formula

For each value, the weight assigned to a participant's gap is:

$$\text{Weight}(r) = 1 + (16 - r) / 16$$

where  $r$  is the rank of the value in the participant's ideal-life profile, from 1 (most central) to 16 (least central). Weights decay linearly from 1.9375 (rank 1) to 1.0 (rank 16).

The weighted gap for each value is:

$$\text{Weighted Gap}(i) = [(\text{IL mean}(i) - \text{CL mean}(i)) / 6] \times \text{Weight}(r) \times 100$$

where IL mean and CL mean are the participant's mean scores across the three to four items measuring that value's centrality to ideal life and current life, respectively, and 6 is the maximum possible difference on a 1-7 scale. The result expresses misalignment as a percentage of the maximum possible weighted gap for that value. The overall Authenticity Gap score is the mean of the absolute weighted gap scores across all sixteen values.

Tied IL means receive average ranks (e.g., values tied for ranks 3 and 4 each receive rank 3.5), standard practice in rank-based weighting. Difference-score approaches of this general form have been critiqued on methodological grounds (Edwards & Parry, 1993); the weighting and percentage-of-maximum transformations applied here address several of those concerns by preserving directional information and standardizing across response scales. Empirical validation is reported in Study 2 (Table 3): importance-weighted scores produce significantly stronger criterion associations than unweighted scores across all well-being outcomes (Steiger's  $z$ , all  $p < .001$ ).

## Appendix C: Full Incremental Validity Regression Tables

The following tables present complete hierarchical regression results for each criterion outcome. Step 1 enters Trait Authenticity; Step 2 adds the Overall Weighted Authenticity Gap. Standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) are reported throughout.

**Table C1. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Meaning in Life (MLQ)**

|                      | Step 1 $\beta$ | Step 2 $\beta$      |
|----------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Trait Authenticity   | .295***        | .295***             |
| Overall Weighted Gap | –              | –.317***            |
| R <sup>2</sup>       | .086           | .187                |
| $\Delta R^2$         | –              | .101***             |
| F (overall)          | 75.82***       | 92.47***            |
| F change             | –              | F(1,805) = 99.69*** |
| N                    | 808            | 808                 |

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table C2. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Meaning in Life (PERMA)**

|                      | Step 1 $\beta$ | Step 2 $\beta$       |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Trait Authenticity   | .349***        | .349***              |
| Overall Weighted Gap | –              | –.342***             |
| R <sup>2</sup>       | .120           | .237                 |
| $\Delta R^2$         | –              | .117***              |
| F (overall)          | 109.87***      | 124.89***            |
| F change             | –              | F(1,805) = 123.55*** |
| N                    | 808            | 808                  |

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table C3. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Happiness**

|                      | Step 1 $\beta$ | Step 2 $\beta$       |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Trait Authenticity   | .252***        | .252***              |
| Overall Weighted Gap | –              | –.382***             |
| R <sup>2</sup>       | .063           | .209                 |
| $\Delta R^2$         | –              | .146***              |
| F (overall)          | 54.03***       | 106.25***            |
| F change             | –              | F(1,803) = 148.15*** |
| N                    | 806            | 806                  |

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table C4. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Decisional Conflict**

|                      | Step 1 $\beta$ | Step 2 $\beta$     |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Trait Authenticity   | –.120***       | –.120***           |
| Overall Weighted Gap | –              | .111**             |
| R <sup>2</sup>       | .014           | .027               |
| $\Delta R^2$         | –              | .012**             |
| F (overall)          | 11.45***       | 11.10***           |
| F change             | –              | F(1,804) = 10.26** |
| N                    | 807            | 807                |

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .