What does it mean to live a good life? This question has been debated and written about by many philosophers, thinkers and novelists throughout the course of humanity. In the field of psychology, two main conceptualizations of the good life have predominated: a happy life (often referred to as “hedonic well-being”), full of stability, pleasure, enjoyment and positive emotions, and a meaningful life (often referred to as “eudaimonic well-being”), full of purpose, meaning, virtue, devotion, service and sacrifice. But what if these aren’t the only options?

In recent years, a long-neglected version of the good life has been receiving greater research attention: the psychologically rich life. The psychologically rich life is full of complex mental engagement, a wide range of intense and deep emotions, and diverse, novel, surprising and interesting experiences. Sometimes the experiences are pleasant, sometimes they are meaningful, and sometimes they are neither pleasant nor meaningful. However, they are rarely boring or monotonous.

In a new study, Shigehiro Oishi and his colleagues propose that psychological richness is a neglected aspect of what people consider a good life and set out to assess how much people around the world actually desire such a life. The researchers asked people living in nine diverse countries the degree to which they value a psychologically rich life, a happy life and a meaningful life.

They found that many people’s self-described ideal lives involve psychological richness. When forced to choose a life, however, the majority chose a happy life (ranging from 49.7 percent to 69.9 percent) and a meaningful life (14.2 percent to 38.5 percent). Even so, a substantial minority of people still favored the psychologically rich life, ranging from 6.7 percent in Singapore to 16.8 percent in Germany.

These numbers went up when the desire for a psychologically rich life was measured indirectly. To fully understand what a person wishes their lives might have been, it is important to explore what people wish they had avoided in their lives. Therefore, Oishi and his colleagues asked people what they regret most in their lives and whether undoing or reversing this regrettable life event would have made their lives happier, more meaningful or psychologically richer.

They found that about 28 percent of Americans said that undoing the regrettable event would have made their lives psychologically richer. For instance, one person wrote that they regretted “not going to a four-year college to get a degree. I feel like I missed out on some interesting experiences.” In Korea, the percentage was even higher, which 35 percent of participants saying that undoing the regrettable event would have made their lives psychologically richer [compared to happier (27.6 percent) or more meaningful (37.4 percent)].

These findings suggest that while most people do strive to be happy and have meaning and purpose in
their lives, a sizable number of people are content merely living a psychologically rich existence. Indeed, other emerging research suggests that for a lot of people, the intensity of the experience matters more than merely how “positive” or “negative” it was. As Oishi and colleagues conclude, “we believe that taking the psychologically rich life seriously will deepen broaden, and yes, enrichen our understanding of well-being.”