

Happiness and Marital Status: Globally and Across Contexts

Rachel Margolis¹
Mikko Myrskylä²

Abstract

The literature on marital status and subjective well-being has neglected comparative analysis and especially non-Western contexts. This paper examines the relationship between well-being and marital status cross-nationally. We test how the relationship between well-being and marital status varies by gender, contexts with varying levels of acceptance of divorce, and whether the relationships between marriage and happiness and cohabitation and happiness are different in contexts with varying stages of acceptance of cohabitation. Examining more than 50,000 respondents from 42 countries, we find that globally, being married or cohabiting is associated with higher happiness, and being divorced or widowed is associated with lower happiness than the never-married. The positive associations for marriage and cohabiting are larger for men than for women, and the negative associations for divorce and widowhood are larger for women than for men. Country-specific analyses reveal that the strength of the association between marriage and happiness is correlated with the level of development of the country, and the level of acceptance of divorce and cohabitation. We find that the strongest positive associations between marriage (and cohabitation) and happiness are in the most developed countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Australia, followed by mostly middle income countries who had smaller but positive associations between marriage and happiness. The least developed countries in our analysis, and those with low degrees of acceptance of divorce and cohabitation, had low or insignificant associations between marriage and well-being.

¹ Population Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, 239 McNeil Building, 3718 Locust Walk, Philadelphia PA 19104

² Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Konrad-Zuse-Strasse 1, 18057 Rostock, Germany