

## Are “Equals” Happier Than “Less Equals”? A Couple Analysis of Similarity and Well-being

*Using Netherlands Kinship Panel Study dyadic couple data (n = 3,117), the authors investigated associations between partner dissimilarity in the socioeconomic and companionate domains and couples' well-being. They distinguished between 2 well-being indicators—life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction—assuming both indicators to be differentially related to the 2 life domains. They investigated whether Becker's (1973) hypothesis of the “efficiency” gains of household specialization has a sociological pendant in a link between specialization and well-being gains and found that greater socioeconomic dissimilarity was associated with lower life satisfaction for both partners. Although the authors expected dissimilarity in the companionate domain to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction, such an association was found only for family traditionalism: Partners less similar in this respect were less satisfied with their relationship. As assumed, life satisfaction was more strongly associated with dissimilarity in the socioeconomic domain, whereas relationship satisfaction was most affected by the companionate domain.*

Marriage is increasingly believed to be a union of equals, with homogamy—“like

marries like”—rather than complementarity—“opposites attract”—being the rule (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Kalmijn, 1998; Mare, 1991; Verbakel & Kalmijn, 2014). In the present study, we investigated how the couple's well-being is affected by (dis)similarity between partners.

In the literature on couple similarity and well-being a variety of different predictors have been used, ranging from personality characteristics, which have received by far the most research attention (Arránz Becker, 2013; Arrindell & Luteijn, 2000; Dyrenforth, Kashy, Brent, & Lucas, 2010; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Gonzaga, Carter, & Buckwalter, 2010; Shiota & Levinson, 2007); demographic characteristics, such as age and education (Tynes, 1990; Watson et al., 2004); to attitudes, norms, and values (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Some studies have found similarity between partners to be associated with marital satisfaction (e.g., Wilson & Cousins, 2003), whereas in others little or no such association has been found (Luo, 2009; Luo et al., 2008; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Watson et al., 2004). Still others have found that personality similarity and marital satisfaction are negatively associated (Shiota & Levinson, 2007). Relationship outcomes have been found to be better predicted by each partner's individual characteristics than by similarity measures (Arránz Becker, 2013; Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2004). Overall, the literature is equivocal and provides only mixed support for the association between couple similarity and well-being (Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Gaunt, 2006).

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We suggest three potential explanations for this unsatisfactory state of affairs. First, a couple's well-being may be related with similarity in some aspects but not in others (Luo, 2009; Watson et al., 2004). Second, different well-being outcomes have been used. Whereas the main focus has been on marital or relationship satisfaction (see Arránz Becker, 2013, and Luo et al., 2008, for recent overviews), measures of life satisfaction also figure in the literature (e.g., Arrindell & Luteijn, 2000; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Finally, different methods and analytical strategies have been used, each with their own drawbacks and limitations (cf. Arránz Becker, 2013; Luo, 2009; Humbad, Donnellan, Iacono, McGue, & Burt, 2013). Moreover, many studies use small and often selective samples. One serious drawback is that in the majority of studies individual partners, rather than members of a dyad, are investigated, and thus the interdependencies between partners are ignored (e.g., Stutzer & Frey, 2006; Treas, van der Lippe, & Tai, 2011; some notable exceptions are Arránz Becker, 2013 and Dyrenforth et al., 2010).

We aim to improve on the literature by addressing all three potential sources of confusion. In the present study we first distinguished between two contrasting influence domains, each presumably playing an important role in the lives of couples: (a) the *socioeconomic domain* and (b) the *companionship and emotional affinity* between the partners, which we call the *companionate domain*. Second, we considered life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction as two distinct but mutually related expressions of the overarching concept of (subjective) well-being. As we discuss below, empirical evidence suggests that the socioeconomic domain is more strongly associated with life satisfaction, whereas relationship satisfaction is more influenced by the companionate domain. Finally, we derived our sample from the large-scale, nationally representative, multi-actor data set of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; <http://www.nkps.nl>) and took the couple dyad as our unit of research, enabling us to analytically distinguish the effects of the partners' respective individual characteristics from the similarity effects between partners while controlling for the interdependencies within couples (Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Subjective Well-being: Life Satisfaction and Relationship Satisfaction*

Life satisfaction has been identified as a distinct construct within the overarching notion of subjective well-being, representing an individual's global cognitive evaluation of the quality of his or her life as a whole (Pavot & Diener, 2008). Whereas evidence shows that life satisfaction is strongly linked with personality characteristics, physical and mental health, and relational factors, in the socioeconomic domain, factors such as employment status and job satisfaction contribute to life satisfaction as well (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Pavot & Diener, 2008). Employment and work satisfaction are important sources for obtaining a feeling of personal identity and achieving a satisfying life, and the well-being advantages of being employed over being nonemployed have been amply documented (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Schoen, Rogers, & Amato, 2006).

In previous decades a common assumption was that women's employment might negatively affect marital quality (Brines & Joyner, 1999). Although in the older literature this assumption has received some empirical support, more recent research suggests that relationship quality is not (anymore) dependent on economic factors such as wives' employment. In their study of wives' employment and spouses' marital happiness, Schoen et al. (2006) found that structural sociodemographic variables had little effect on marital happiness. Instead, couple-oriented factors and factors related to the daily interaction between the partners seem to be the prime predictors of relationship quality (Chi, Epstein, Fang, Lam, & Li, 2013). Attitudes regarding gender roles and family life, as well as interpersonal interaction styles, have been found to affect relationship quality (Amato & Booth, 1995; Chi et al., 2013; Faulkner, Davey, & Davey, 2005; Oldenbak & Figueredo, 2009). Emotional support and companionship are well-known sources of marital happiness and are likely to be fostered by shared norms and attitudes (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Arránz Becker, 2013; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Stutzer & Frey, 2006).

In an empirical sense, then, life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction seem to be distinct dimensions of the overall construct of subjective well-being, but there is also evidence for an

association between the two concepts: People who are satisfied with their life in general also perceive their romantic relationship as more satisfactory and vice versa (Scott, Ragan, Rhoades, & Markman, 2012).

In the present study we assumed that life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, though mutually related, are two different indicators of well-being, each potentially tapping into different domains of the couples' lives. More specifically, we assumed that differences in couple members' socioeconomic characteristics, rather than relationship satisfaction, affect life satisfaction, whereas attitudinal dissimilarity affects relationship satisfaction rather than life satisfaction. We put both assumptions to empirical test.

*The socioeconomic domain.* According to Becker's (1981) well-known theory of household specialization, couples pursue a joint strategy to maximize "household efficiency." Women predominantly invest in domestic production, whereas men mainly invest in capital that raises market efficiency. Becker's theory has focused on the economic gains of specialization, which may explain why the association between subjective well-being and household specialization has only sporadically been investigated. In their longitudinal study about the causal relationship between marriage and subjective well-being, Stutzer and Frey (2006) found that a relative large income difference between the spouses was beneficial for both partners' life satisfaction and that dual-earner couples were less satisfied with their lives than were couples in which one partner was employed full time while the other partner did not participate or participated only occasionally in the labor market. Apart from Stutzer and Frey's study, it has been mainly older studies that have reported well-being or marital stability gains attributed to a relatively gender-traditional division of socioeconomic resources (Booth & Edwards, 1985; D'Amico, 1983; Weisfeld, Russell, Weisfeld, & Wells, 1992).

More than 40 years have passed since Becker (1973, 1981) developed his specialization theory. Socioeconomic dissimilarities between female and male partners in a relationship have diminished (Komter, Keizer, & Dykstra, 2012), and socioeconomic equality between marriage partners is increasing. Although men are still the main breadwinners in most Western European countries, and women are still primarily responsible for caring and household chores

(Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Coltrane, 2000), other societal changes cannot be ignored. Women's labor market participation, educational level, earning capacity, and economic independence from their husbands have increased substantially (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Poortman & Kalmijn, 2002; Sweeney, 2002).

Recent research evidence seems to undermine the specialization view that wives' employment is lowering marital gains. Schoen et al. (2006), for instance, found that women's employment was beneficial rather than detrimental to marital stability, whereas Poortman and Kalmijn (2002) demonstrated that the beneficial effects of specialization have been decreasing over time. We therefore assumed that Beckerian specialization may have lost some of its attraction to contemporary couple members not only in terms of economic efficiency but also in terms of the couple's well-being.

In this study we gave Becker's original economic hypothesis of household specialization a sociological twist by focusing on possible links between specialization and well-being gains. Our first hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) was as follows: The life satisfaction—and, to a lesser extent, the relationship satisfaction—of both couple members will be lower when the dissimilarities between both partners' income (Hypothesis 1A) and hours worked per week (Hypothesis 1B) are larger.

*The companionate domain.* As we stated at the outset of the article, the empirical evidence for an association between couple similarity and well-being is mixed. Luo et al. (2008) used dyadic data to compare the independent contributions to relationship satisfaction of actor and partner effects and couple similarity in personality characteristics and values and found evidence for all three. However, Watson et al. (2004), who used couple data from 291 newlyweds, found that similarity had very little effect on relationship satisfaction. Luo (2009), using dyadic data from 117 couples who recently started dating, found that couple similarity overall made a relatively small contribution to relationship satisfaction beyond self and partner scores. Whereas Watson et al. and Luo used small, nonrepresentative samples, Arránz Becker (2013) and Dyrenforth et al. (2010) used large, representative samples. Both studies found that each partner's individual characteristics and personality predicted well-being better than did dyadic similarity measures.

Most studies of similarity and well-being have focused on personality characteristics (Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Gonzaga et al., 2007, 2010; Luo et al., 2008). Some included attitudes, such as religious or political beliefs (Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Watson et al., 2004), but did not pay much attention to family and gender orientations despite their particular relevance to partner relationships. Only a few studies have involved family- and gender-related predictors (Amato & Booth, 1995; Faulkner et al., 2005). Faulkner et al. (2005), for instance, found that husbands with more traditional gender roles were less satisfied with their marriage, whereas wives whose husbands worked more hours reported lower marital satisfaction. Arránz Becker (2013) included measures of gender role orientations, family support, and “marriage affinity” and found that dissimilar views on these attitudes were associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Gaunt (2006) examined (among other variables) similarity in values, gendered personality traits, and family role attitudes. She found that, overall, greater similarity between partners was associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction, especially on the gendered personality and values domains. In the present study we included the three types of attitudes also included in Arránz Becker’s study: (a) gender role attitudes, (b) family support, and (c) family traditionalism (a concept similar to Arránz Becker’s marriage affinity).

Previous research has found that women have more modern gender role attitudes than their male counterparts (Komter et al., 2012), reducing the similarity in this respect. Given that women tend to be more dissatisfied with the balance between each partner’s share in family work (James, Barnett, & Brennan, 1998), the supposedly negative role of dissimilarity in gender role attitudes may differ between male and female couple members. We therefore expected women in particular to be more dissatisfied with their relationship—and, to a lesser extent, with their lives—when the dissimilarity in gender role attitudes between the partners is larger (Hypothesis 2A).

Research evidence shows that men generally have stronger family support norms compared with women (Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006). At the same time, men give less actual family support than do women (Dykstra et al., 2006). A reason for this gender difference could be that it is

easier for men to endorse strong family support norms because they do not have a substantial share in actually providing support. If men have stronger family support norms while at the same time acting less in accordance with these norms compared with their female partners, this might negatively affect women’s relationship satisfaction. Our hypothesis regarding family support norms, then, was that women in particular will be more dissatisfied with their relationship—and, to a lesser extent, with their lives—when the dissimilarity in family support norms between the partners is larger (Hypothesis 2B).

Partner dissimilarity on attitudes relating to the partners’ marital ideals may be particularly relevant to the avoidance of tension because they reflect important values for the relationship. How traditional are the partners when it comes to living together outside marriage or divorce when there are small children? How much freedom do they allow their children in choosing a marriage partner? Our hypothesis regarding family traditionalism read as follows: Couple members will be more dissatisfied with their relationship—and, to a lesser extent, with their lives—when the dissimilarity in family traditionalism between them is larger (Hypothesis 2C).

### *Other Influences*

Because in some studies educational couple similarity has been found to contribute to well-being, we included it as a control variable (Stutzer & Frey, 2004; Tynes, 1990; Weisfeld et al., 1992). Over the course of a partner relationship, satisfaction with life and relationship satisfaction tend to decline and then to rise again; we therefore included duration of the marriage and relationship duration squared as control variables (Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Another reason to include these variables is that partners in a relationship may become more similar over time (Arránz Becker, 2013). Brines and Joyner (1999) found that unmarried cohabiting couples tend to value ideals of personal autonomy and relational equity more and to benefit less from specialization compared with married people. We ran preliminary analyses testing the assumption that the effects of dissimilarity would be larger for married than for unmarried couples. Because none of the moderation effects for union status were significant, we decided not to formulate hypotheses about the potential



impact of union type but to include union type as a control variable instead. Finally, we controlled for having children in the household, given that this factor has been shown to negatively affect couples' well-being (e.g., Moor & Komter, 2012).

## METHOD

### *Sample Selection and Characteristics*

Our analyses were based on the first wave of the public release file of the NKPS. The NKPS is a large-scale, multi-actor panel survey on family ties among a representative sample of 8,161 adults age 18–79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). The data were collected by means of computer-assisted interview schedules. Data from the first wave were collected between 2002 and 2003. The overall response rate of the first wave was 45%, which is lower than in comparable surveys in other Western countries but similar to comparable large-scale family surveys in the Netherlands (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2002; Dykstra et al., 2005). The multi-actor setup of the NKPS offers useful data with which to examine the extent to which differences between the female and male partner in a couple are differentially associated with their life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction because both the female and the male partner reported on their own satisfaction as well as on their own socioeconomic and companionate characteristics. For our study we selected coresident couples who were between 20 and 70 years of age; the reason for doing so was that a substantial number of the partners in our data only received questions on work and income when they coresided with the main respondent. Two thousand three hundred five individuals in our data did not have a partner and were therefore excluded from our analyses. Another 602 couples did not live together. Three hundred forty-eight respondents fell outside our age boundaries, which left us with 5,508 partnered respondents. Because 1,189 partners did not participate in the NKPS, this reduced our sample to 3,779 couples. Yet another 310 couples had to be excluded because of a lack of information on both partners' life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Of the remaining 3,469 couples, 352 couples did not provide information on their socioeconomic or companionate characteristics. Therefore, our final sample included 3,117 couples.

Because of survey nonresponse as well as our need to have each individual partner's information on life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, couples who felt comfortable about their (family) life and relationship might be over-represented in our sample. Preliminary analyses (not shown) revealed that the relationship satisfaction of individuals whose partner participated in the survey was higher compared with the relationship satisfaction of individuals who either did not permit their partners to be contacted or whose partners did not return the questionnaire.

Furthermore, couples in our sample varied in the duration of their relationship. Some couples had just recently started living together, whereas others had been married for more than 40 years. Our sample might be selective because couples who were dissatisfied with their relationship may have ended their relationship and therefore were not included in our sample. To test this, we compared the relationship satisfaction of couples with different relationship durations. Preliminary analyses (not shown) revealed that with longer duration of the relationship, couples, on average, reported lower relationship satisfaction (with a slight increase for couples who had been together more than 30 years).

Couples might also "converge" over time, that is, become more similar to each other the longer their relationship lasts. In the companionate domain this is indeed the case (results not shown). In preliminary analyses we also tested whether differences in the socioeconomic and companionate domains were differentially related to couple members' life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction according to the duration of their relationship. The results revealed only marginal differences, with a slightly more negative link between dissimilarity and relationship satisfaction in the companionate domain the longer the couple was together (results not shown). We perceived more closely following up on this finding to be beyond the scope of this study.

## *Measures*

### *Dependent Variables.*

*Life satisfaction.* Male and female partners were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements related to life satisfaction: (a) "My life is ideal in most respects," (b) "My living circumstances are excellent," (c) "Everything taken together, I am satisfied with my life,"

and (d) "If I could live my life again, I would change very little." Answers to each question ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Answers were recoded so that higher scores indicated higher life satisfaction (recoded scores ranged from 0 to 16). This scale has been validated in other data sets (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 2008). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .87.

*Relationship satisfaction.* Male and female partners were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements related to relationship satisfaction: (a) "We have a good relationship," (b) "The relationship with my partner makes me happy," (c) "Our relationship is strong," and (d) "The relationship with my partner is very stable." Answers to each question ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Answers were recoded so that higher scores indicate higher relationship satisfaction (recoded scores ranged from 0 to 16). This scale has been developed on behalf of the NKPS, and its reliability and validity have been tested in pilot studies (Verweij, 2002). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .95.

In preliminary analyses we tested the extent to which life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are two distinct concepts. The correlations between the two concepts were .37 and .33 for women and men, respectively, showing that they are conceptually related. A principal-components factor analysis of the eight items constituting life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction was conducted using promax rotations. These analyses revealed two distinct factors (eigenvalues > 1), with the four items constituting life satisfaction all having primary loadings > 0.8 on Factor I and < 0.04 on Factor II, whereas the four items constituting relationship satisfaction all had primary loadings > 0.5 on Factor 2 and < 0.09 on Factor I. We therefore concluded that the two measures represent conceptually related but distinct components of well-being.

#### *Within-Couple Independent Measures.*

*Income.* The male and female partners were asked, "What is your net monthly income from employment?" When respondents did not know the specific amount of money they earned, they were shown a classification card with which they could approximate their earnings. The difference between the lower and upper bound of each category on this card was €200 (≈227 USD). We

took the average of the lower and upper bound of the selected category as the net monthly income of respondents who did not know their exact income.

*Work hours.* Information on work hours of both partners was derived from the following question: "How many hours a week on average do you work? That is to say, actual hours worked, including overtime." When a respondent had several jobs, the numbers of hours of these jobs were added.

*Modern gender role attitudes.* The male and female partners were asked to indicate their level of agreement on four statements on gender roles: (a) "It's unnatural if men in a business are supervised or managed by women"; (b) "It's more important for boys than it is for girls to be able to earn a living later in life"; (c) "Working mothers put themselves first rather than their families"; and (d) "It's best to divide tasks and responsibilities in a relationship according to the customs, traditions, and rules that have always been in force." The answers to each statement ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Answers were recoded so that higher scores indicated more modern gender role attitudes (recoded scores range from 0 to 16). This scale has been validated in other data sets (De Jong & Liefbroer, 1998). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .73.

*Family support norms.* The male and female partners were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements on family support norms: (a) "One should always be able to count on family"; (b) "Family members should be ready to support one another, even if they do not like each other"; (c) "If one is troubled, family should be there to provide support"; and (d) "Family members must help each other, in good times and bad." The answers to each statement ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .79. The family support norms scale has been developed on behalf of the NKPS; its reliability and validity have been tested during pilot studies (Verweij, 2002). We reversed the coding so that higher scores indicate stronger family support norms.

*Family traditionalism.* The male and female partners were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five statements on traditionalism regarding family life: (a) "Men and woman are

allowed to live together outside of marriage,” (b) “Children are allowed to choose their own marriage,” (c) “Two men or two women are allowed to live together,” (d) “The parents’ opinion must play an important role in the choice of a partner for their child,” and (e) “Married couples with young children are not allowed to divorce.” The answers to each statement ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Answers were recoded so that higher scores indicate stronger traditionalism. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale is .76. The family traditionalism scale has been developed on behalf of the NKPS; its reliability and validity have been tested during pilot studies (Verweij, 2002).

*Within-Couple Control Variables.* Information about the male and female partner’s *educational attainment* was derived from the following question: “What is the highest level of education you achieved?” Answers to this question ranged from 1 (*did not complete elementary school*) to 10 (*post-graduate*). Preliminary analyses (not shown) using dummy variables for each educational level showed a linear association between educational attainment and life satisfaction for both male and female couple members. We therefore included educational attainment as a linear variable in our models.

*Between-Couples Control Variables.* *Relationship duration* was measured in years. The number of years since the beginning of the relationship was included in the analyses. We also included relation duration squared to test whether the association between relation duration and life satisfaction and relationship quality is nonlinear. With respect to *union status*, we differentiated between *cohabiting unmarried* (coded 0) and *married* (coded 1). Regarding parental status, we created a dummy variable, *resident children*, with a value of 1 if the couple had children living in their household.

### Analytic Plan

Data were analyzed using a modified form of the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM). The APIM is a dyadic relationship model that takes interdependencies between members of a dyad into account and models each dyad member’s effect on his or her own outcome (an actor effect) as well as on the partner’s outcome (a partner effect; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). We used

a modified form of the APIM not only by including actor and partner effects in the model but also adding a couple score for dissimilarity. Thus, our models tested the association between both couple members’ life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction and couple’s dissimilarity regarding socioeconomic and companionate characteristics while controlling for actor and partner main effects for each of the socioeconomic and companionate characteristics.

Our modified APIM model was a multilevel two-intercept model. The advantage of a such a model is that the effects for men and women can be read directly from the output (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The disadvantage, however, is that these models do not provide a direct test of whether the effects differ significantly for women and men. We therefore ran additional models including gender interactions. The results of these tests are shown in Tables 2 and 3 by means of subscripts and are briefly reported in the text itself. All models were estimated within Stata using *xtmixed*.

There is a vast literature on how best to measure (dis)similarity within relationships. Two types of congruence measures are often distinguished: (a) *level similarity*, with congruence measures such as algebraic, absolute, and squared difference scores, and (b) *shape similarity*, which is often measured by the profile correlation between the partners’ responses across items (Arránz Becker, 2013; Gaunt, 2006; Luo et al., 2008). Both types of measures have received substantive criticism (see, e.g., Edwards, 1994, for a discussion of level similarity and Humbad et al., 2013, for a discussion of shape similarity). Apart from these criticisms, calculating profile similarity correlations was impossible in the present study because two of our five key independent variables (income and work hours) did not consist of multiple items, thereby precluding correlation measures.

Alternative approaches to the study of similarity have been proposed. For instance, Edwards (1994) recommended that, when no a priori models are specified, one should explore the appropriateness of several different-level similarity congruence models—algebraic, absolute differences, and squared differences—subsequently testing higher order models and finally comparing plots of the raw data to those estimated by the model of interest. In this study we followed this approach with the exception of algebraic difference scores because

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (n = 3,117)*

Variable	Male		Female		ADS		Range
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Relationship satisfaction <sup>a</sup>	13.95	0.03	13.72	0.03	0.23	0.01	0–16
Life satisfaction <sup>a</sup>	11.25	0.03	11.48	0.04	0.23	0.01	0–16
Income <sup>a</sup>	1,578	14.72	715	9.67	863	13.25	0–7,000
Work hours <sup>a</sup>	31.39	0.23	15.96	0.19	15.43	0.22	0–60
Modern gender role attitudes <sup>a</sup>	12.13	0.03	12.80	0.03	0.67	0.03	0–16
Family support norms <sup>a</sup>	10.78	0.04	10.61	0.04	0.17	0.04	0–16
Family traditionalism <sup>a</sup>	4.56	0.04	4.22	0.04	0.34	0.02	0–20
Educational attainment <sup>a</sup>	6.35	0.03	5.87	0.03	0.24	0.01	1–10
Couple score							
	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>				Range
Relationship duration	22.65		0.17				0–65
Union status (1 = married)	0.83		0.01				0–1
Children in household (1 = yes)	0.55		0.01				0–1

Note. ADS = absolute difference score.

<sup>a</sup>Difference between score of the male and female partner is significant ( $p < .05$ ).

including these would lead to oversaturated models (few degrees of freedom). For an accurate understanding of actor–partner similarity it is essential to control for the main effects of actor and partner in APIM models (Kenny et al., 2006). Just as including the reference score of a dummy variable would make a model oversaturated, the same would happen if one would include a natural (algebraic) difference score as well as each partner's individual scores in the same model.

Thus, in preliminary analyses we compared only the appropriateness of absolute difference scores, squared difference scores, and models of higher order. For our measures in the socioeconomic domain, we found no substantial deviations from a linear pattern; the absolute difference scores were the best fitting model. For the companionate domain, we found that the combination of a linear and a quadratic pattern provided a slightly better fit to the association between relationship satisfaction and gender role attitudes and family norms than did a mere linear pattern. We therefore also added the quadratic terms to our model, but none of the quadratic effects were significant. Whereas the curvilinear pattern makes sense from a theoretical perspective, this curve was barely visible in the range of scores of the couples in our sample. We therefore decided not to report the quadratic effects in our final results. In sum, our dissimilarity scores consisted only of absolute difference scores while controlling for actor and

partner main effects, in accordance with Kenny et al.'s (2006) recommendation.

We conducted two sets of analyses; the first focused on life satisfaction and the second on relationship satisfaction. Each set of analyses comprised five models, one for each of the areas we investigated (income, work hours, modern gender role attitudes, family support norms, and family traditionalism). In these models, life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction were predicted by each partner's score on a certain variable (actor and partner effects) as well as the couple's dissimilarity score.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Results*

Table 1 contains summary statistics for the variables used in our models. Relationship satisfaction was very high: 13.95 for men and 13.72 for women. Average life satisfaction was somewhat lower: 11.25 for men and 11.49 for women. Women were significantly more satisfied with their life but significantly less satisfied with their relationship than their male partners. We observed household specialization with respect to income and work hours. The average income of the male partner was more than double the average income of the female partner (€1,578 [ $\approx$ 1,791 USD] vs. €715 [ $\approx$ 812 USD] a month, respectively). Women worked, on average, half the number of hours their male partners worked (31.38 vs. 15.96 hours, respectively). Average



Table 2. *Mixed Effects Regression Analysis for Life Satisfaction (n = 3,117)*

Variable	Model 1: Income	Model 2: Work hours	Model 3: Modern gender role attitudes	Model 4: Family support norms	Model 5: Family traditionalism
<b>Men</b>					
Dissimilarity	−0.01 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	0.05 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Actor effect	0.01 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.00)***	0.10 (0.02)*** <sup>a</sup>	0.08 (0.01)*** <sup>a</sup>	−0.08 (0.02)*** <sup>a</sup>
Partner effect	−0.00 (0.00) <sup>b</sup>	−0.01 (0.00) <sup>b</sup>	−0.01 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	−0.00 (0.02) <sup>b</sup>	0.02 (0.02) <sup>b</sup>
Constant	6.76***	6.62***	5.89***	5.89***	7.56***
<b>Women</b>					
Dissimilarity	−0.01 (0.00)***	−0.01 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Actor effect	0.01 (0.00) <sup>b</sup>	0.01 (0.01) <sup>b</sup>	0.11 (0.02)*** <sup>b</sup>	0.06 (0.02)*** <sup>b</sup>	−0.09 (0.02)*** <sup>b</sup>
Partner effect	0.01 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	0.02 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>	0.01 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>
Constant	5.85***	5.58***	4.82***	5.03***	6.86***

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. All models controlled for educational attainment (actor, partner, and dissimilarity), relationship duration, relationship duration squared, union status, children in household (for these four factors, both actor and partner effects), and relationship satisfaction (for this factor, actor effects).

<sup>a</sup>Significant difference between partner effect for female couple member and actor effect for male couple member.

<sup>b</sup>Significant difference between actor effect for female couple member and partner effect for male couple member.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

differences in the companionate domain were much smaller, but the male partner had less egalitarian gender role attitudes, stronger family support norms, and more traditional family attitudes compared with the female partner. The male partner had attained a higher average level of education than the female partner. The average relationship duration of the couples in our sample was over 22 years. The majority of couples in our sample were married (83%). Finally, more than half of the couples had children living in their household.

### *Multivariate Results*

*Results concerning life satisfaction.* In Table 2 we report the results for life satisfaction. We controlled for educational attainment, relationship duration, union status, having children in the household, and relationship satisfaction. In line with our expectations expressed in Hypothesis 1, partner dissimilarity in terms of income and work hours was significantly negatively related to life satisfaction. The negative association between dissimilarity and couple members' life satisfaction did not significantly differ between the male and the female partner. In addition to the role of dissimilarity, it was mainly the socioeconomic characteristics of the male partner—and, to a lesser extent, of the female partner—that mattered for both partners' life satisfaction: both partners reported higher life satisfaction when the male earned more

money and worked more hours. Furthermore, women's income was positively associated only with their own life satisfaction, not with their partner's. Women's work hours were not associated with their own life satisfaction, but they were negatively related to their male partners' life satisfaction.

In the companionate domain we did not find evidence for any significant role of dissimilarity. Dissimilarity in terms of neither gender roles nor of family support norms and family traditionalism was significantly associated with life satisfaction. In this domain, we found evidence only for some actor effects: Both partners reported higher life satisfaction when they themselves had more modern gender role attitudes, stronger family norms, and lower levels of family traditionalism. Both male and female couple members were unaffected by the level of their partner's gender role attitudes, family support norms, and family traditionalism.

*Results concerning relationship satisfaction.* In Table 3 the results for relationship satisfaction are shown. We included controls for educational attainment, relationship duration, union status, having children in the household, and life satisfaction. We found no significant associations between dissimilarity and income or work hours. Apparently, dissimilarity in the socioeconomic domain is not significantly related to relationship satisfaction.

Table 3. *Mixed Effects Regression Analysis for Relationship Satisfaction (n = 3,117)*

Variable	Model 1: Income	Model 2: Work hours	Model 3: Modern gender role attitudes	Model 4: Family support norms	Model 5: Family traditionalism
<b>Men</b>					
Dissimilarity	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.02)*	-0.07 (0.02)**
Actor effect	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.10 (0.02)*** <sup>a</sup>	0.10 (0.02)*** <sup>a</sup>	-0.06 (0.02)*** <sup>a</sup>
Partner effect	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.06 (0.03)* <sup>b</sup>	0.05 (0.02)*** <sup>b</sup>	0.04 (0.02)** <sup>b</sup>
Constant	13.72***	13.59***	13.34***	11.85***	14.10***
<b>Women</b>					
Dissimilarity	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.06 (0.02)***	-0.09 (0.03)***
Actor effect	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.02 (0.03) <sup>b</sup>	0.11 (0.02)*** <sup>b</sup>	-0.02 (0.02) <sup>b</sup>
Partner effect	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.02 (0.03) <sup>a</sup>	0.04 (0.02)** <sup>a</sup>	-0.02 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>
Constant	13.31***	13.13***	12.98***	11.25***	13.97***

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. All models controlled for educational attainment (actor, partner, and dissimilarity), relationship duration, relationship duration squared, union status, children in household (for these four factors, both actor and partner effects), life satisfaction (for this factor, actor effects).

<sup>a</sup>Significant difference between partner effect for female couple member and actor effect for male couple member.

<sup>b</sup>Significant difference between actor effect for female couple member and partner effect for male couple member.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

We found significant dissimilarity associations in the companionate domain, although some are not in line with our hypotheses. We did not find support for Hypothesis 2A, which assumed that women in particular would be more dissatisfied when the dissimilarity in gender role attitudes between the partners is larger. Dissimilarity between partners in terms of gender role attitudes was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction for either of the partners. Furthermore, men reported higher relationship satisfaction when they themselves had more modern gender role attitudes, but they were less satisfied with their relationship when their partners had more modern gender role attitudes. Women were unaffected by both their own level of gender role attitudes and that of their partner.

The results regarding family support norms did not confirm Hypothesis 2B, which postulated that women in particular would report lower relationship satisfaction when the dissimilarity in family support norms between the couple members is larger. On the contrary, larger dissimilarity in family support norms was positively associated with both couple members' relationship satisfaction, and this did not differ significantly between the female and male couple members. In addition, both women and men reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction when they themselves—and, to a somewhat lesser extent, their partners—had stronger family support norms.

In line with Hypothesis 2C, dissimilarity in family traditionalism was negatively related to both partners' relationship satisfaction, and this was similar for the male and the female couple members. In addition, we found that the male's relationship satisfaction was higher when he held less traditional values himself and when his female partner held more traditional values. The female partner was affected neither by her own traditional values nor by her partner's family traditionalism values.

## DISCUSSION

In this study we investigated the association between (dis)similarity between couple members and their well-being. The existing research evidence on the relationship between couples' well-being and similarity in various domains is equivocal: Some scholars have found associations between couple similarity and well-being whereas others have failed to find such relationships. We suggested three possible explanations for this state of affairs: (a) different influence domains have been studied, which may be differentially associated with well-being; (b) different outcome variables have been used, which may be differentially related to the influence domains; and (c) different methods and analytical strategies have been used, all of which have their own drawbacks and limitations. It was our aim to contribute to the literature by addressing all three potential sources of confusion.

We did this first by making a distinction between two life domains that, in our view, capture two sets of contrasting characteristics, each playing a significant role in the lives of couple members: (a) the socioeconomic domain of work and income and (b) the companionate domain of attitudes and norms. The domain of work and employment is an important source of well-being for both women and men (Pavot & Diener, 2008), and particular types of attitude, namely, those related to gender roles and family life, might be better predictors of couple well-being than other types of attitude that have been investigated so far (cf. Gaunt, 2006).

Second, we distinguished between two indicators of well-being: (a) life satisfaction and (b) relationship satisfaction, assuming that these indicators are differentially related to the two domains. In contrast to what some older studies have suggested, the gains of household specialization (Becker, 1981) have diminished over time (Poortman & Kalmijn, 2002; Schoen et al., 2006) and seem to be only weakly related to relationship satisfaction whereas attitudes regarding gender roles and family life do tend to be associated with it (Arránz Becker, 2013; Faulkner et al., 2005; Oldenbak & Figueredo, 2009). Life satisfaction, on the other hand, has been found to be associated with socioeconomic factors in the sphere of work and employment (Pavot & Diener, 2008; Schoen et al., 2006).

Third, we aimed to make some methodological contributions by deriving our sample from a large-scale, nationally representative, multi-actor data set (the NKPS), allowing us to take the couple dyad as our unit of analysis in examining the link between the partners' well-being and their similarity on the two domains.

In line with our theoretical assumptions, we found that life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction were analytically distinct but mutually related concepts. Also in line with our theoretical argument was the finding that dissimilarity in the socioeconomic domain mainly affected the couple's life satisfaction, whereas dissimilarity in the companionate domain was more strongly associated with relationship satisfaction.

We investigated whether Becker's (1973) original hypothesis of the efficiency gains of household specialization has a sociological pendant in a link between specialization and well-being gains. In contrast with the Beckerian assumption of a positive association between

dissimilarity and marriage gains, we assumed that socioeconomic dissimilarity between the partners would be negatively related to their life satisfaction. Although we found both women and men to be still more satisfied with their lives when the male partner earned more and worked more hours, their life satisfaction was indeed lower when the dissimilarities between the partners were larger, thereby confirming Hypotheses 1A and 1B.

With regard to the companionate domain, we found no support for Hypothesis 2A, which assumed that women in particular would be more dissatisfied with their relationship when the dissimilarity in gender role attitudes was larger. Another finding was that men reported stronger relationship satisfaction when they had more modern gender roles themselves, confirming findings by Faulkner et al. (2005), but weaker relationship satisfaction when their partner had more modern gender role attitudes.

Hypothesis 2B, which stated that in particular women would be more dissatisfied with their relationship when the dissimilarity in family support norms between the partners was larger, also was not supported by the data. On the contrary, we found that both men and women reported higher relationship satisfaction when their family support norms were more dissimilar. If it is true that it is easier for men to endorse strong family support norms because their female partners are most likely to actually provide family support and if the latter do not experience this as too big a burden, then both couple members' relationship satisfaction might benefit from a relatively traditional distribution of family support norms between the male and the female partners.

Dissimilarity in family traditionalism proved to be negatively related with both the male and female partners' relationship satisfaction, which was in line with Hypothesis 2C. Moreover, men were more satisfied with their relationship when they had less traditional family values themselves, but they were also happier when their female partners had more traditional values. This pattern resembles our findings on gender roles. Both sets of results suggest that men who cherish modern gender and family beliefs feel happier in their relationships themselves; apparently for men a certain level of gender and family modernity contributes to their own relational well-being. On the other hand, they still prefer a partner who is more traditional.

The results of this study suggest that similarity in the companionate domain is not the prime determinant of the couple's relationship satisfaction, which is in line with results of Watson et al. (2004), Luo (2009), and Luo and Zhang (2009). Women and men's own gender role attitudes, family support norms, and family traditionalism are more strongly associated with their own and their partners' relationship satisfaction (cf. Arránz Becker, 2013; Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2004).

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, our analyses were based on Dutch data from couple relationships. The Netherlands is a relatively traditional country in terms of (the outlook on) the division of paid and unpaid labor between women and men and gender roles (Komter et al., 2012). It would be interesting to find out whether, in less traditional countries, couple dissimilarities would affect well-being differently. Second, our data were of a cross-sectional nature; therefore, we were unable to determine whether differences in, for instance, the companionate domain have an impact on couple members' well-being or whether the reverse might also be true, that is, that couple members' well-being affects these differences (cf. Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Third, our sample was selective of couples who were, on average, involved in well-established relationships and who were very satisfied with their life and relationship. As we touched upon in the METHOD section, differences between couple members seem to play out differently for individuals in a well-established relationship than for those who are in an earlier stage of their relationship. Future studies should investigate in more detail how relationship duration affects the association between couple similarity and well-being.

In recent studies on the similarity–well-being link methodological considerations concerning the choice of measures of couple (dis)similarity tend to override theoretically driven arguments for the choice of influence domains and of outcome variables (cf. Arránz Becker, 2013; Humbad et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2008; Luo & Klohn, 2005). In the present study we have provided a theoretical rationale for choosing two contrasting life domains and two different outcome variables. Our empirical results confirm our theoretical arguments for doing so.

The fact that the socioeconomic and the companionate domains proved to be differentially

associated with our two well-being indicators has implications for future research and theory building. First, specifying the links between life domains and well-being indicators may yield better interpretable and more consistent research results on the (dis)similarity–well-being association than has been the case so far. Second, the fact that socioeconomic (dis)similarity seems to be a better predictor of a couple's well-being than (dis)similarity in the companionate domain suggests that the partners' well-being resides in shared socioeconomic contributions to family life rather than in shared attitudes and beliefs.

Among contemporary Dutch couples, unions of equals are happier than unions of less equals. In the 21st century too much household specialization apparently does not contribute to couple members' well-being.

#### NOTE

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