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Together is better? Effects of relationship status and resources on young adults' well-being

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ABSTRACT

This study examines differences in well-being among young adults across relationship status. Multilevel regression analyses on two waves of data of the Dutch Panel Study of Social Integration ($N = 2818$) show that singles have the lowest level of well-being, followed by young adults who are steady dating, and cohabitors. Married young adults have the highest level. These differences are partially mediated by differences between young adults in their access to valued material, personal and social resources. Furthermore, the availability of some resources is more important for the well-being of young adults in a certain relationship status than for those in another relationship status. Gender differences are also discussed.

KEY WORDS: cohabitation • dating • marriage • life satisfaction • resource • single • subjective well-being • young adult

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Marital status has long been viewed as an important marker with respect to several measures of well-being. For a variety of reasons, married people tend to have fewer psychological problems, are healthier, and more satisfied with life than the non-married (Coombs, 1991; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Zimmermann & Easterlin, 2006). Marital status differences in subjective well-being have often been studied (Ribar, 2004). Subjective well-being is a general notion that refers to the affective and cognitive evaluation of life (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

The proliferation of alternative living arrangements (e.g., unmarried cohabitation, living apart together, or long term relationship without cohabitation) and the increase in divorce rates have blurred the once clear-cut distinction between married and unmarried adults. Marital status is still used as an indicator of people's relational involvement, although as Bumpass (1990) suggested, this indicator may be inadequate to capture the effects of romantic relationships on subjective well-being in modern societies.

The ambiguity of marital status is particularly apparent for young adults, because young adulthood is "a demographically dense period" (Rindfuss, 1991). Young adulthood is a period of life when many transitions occur in a relatively short time span. In addition, given that forming romantic relationships is a primary developmental task (Erikson, 1950), it is a period in which relational experimentation is widespread. Therefore, there is great diversity in relationship types among young adults, particularly in dating and unmarried cohabitation.

The correlation between these relationship types and subjective well-being during young adulthood, however, is relatively unexplored. Most studies focus on adults irrespective of age, or on older adults. Ross (1995) is a case in point. She took the diversity of relationship types into account by comparing people without a partner, people with a partner who is living outside the household, people who are cohabiting but unmarried, and married people. She considered these relationship statuses as a continuum of social attachment and found that people in more attached relationships were less psychologically distressed. She used a cross-sectional design, however, with a sample that ranged in age from 18–90 years. The effect of relationship status on distress was explained by differential access to social and economic support. Her study was replicated by Kamp Dush and Amato (2005), who used longitudinal data and focused on young adults. They confirmed Ross' conclusions. Kamp Dush and Amato also included measures of subjective well-being besides distress, such as life satisfaction. However, they did not explain the differences between relationship statuses, and their sample sizes were rather small. In our study we combine the strengths of both studies by using longitudinal data and by making efforts to explain the relationship status differences in subjective well-being.

The aims of this study are twofold. First, we address the question of whether there are differences in well-being between young adults who are single, steady dating, cohabiting unmarried, or married. Resembling the continuum of commitment proposed by Ross (1995) and Kamp Dush and Amato (2005), we expect single young adults to have a lower level of

well-being than steady daters, followed by those cohabiting unmarried and, finally, married parties, who are expected to have the highest level of well-being. The term *single* in this investigation refers to individuals without a partner. Also note that, from this point, unmarried cohabitation will be referred to simply as cohabitation.

Our second aim is to contribute to the explanation of these differences in well-being. In particular, we focus on the role played by the differential provision of resources. Resources are defined as "those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (. . .) or act as means to obtain centrally valued ends" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). They can be either material (e.g., income and home ownership) or non-material (e.g., social support, self-esteem, and sexual gratification). The greater access people have to valued resources, the higher their sense of well-being (Diener & Fujita, 1995). We expect that access to resources differs across relationship statuses and that this partially explains the differences in well-being for different relationship statuses.

Panel data from a representative sample of Dutch young adults are used to examine these issues. The Netherlands provides an interesting site for this research, because cohabitation is a popular and broadly accepted living arrangement. The Netherlands occupies an intermediate position, compared to other Western countries, with respect to the proportion of people who cohabit (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004) and the acceptance of cohabitation (Liefbroer & Fokkema, 2008; Waaldijk, 2005). Therefore, it constitutes a good starting point for studying differences in well-being between young adults in different types of partner relationships.

A resource perspective on well-being and partner relationships

The resource perspective offers a general explanation of variation in well-being. Resources enable or prevent someone to fulfil physical and psychological needs (Diener & Fuijta, 1995). Fulfilling needs enhances well-being. We suggest three broad categories of resources: material, social and personal (Diener & Fujita, 1995). Material resources are external possessions and things that facilitate obtaining those possessions (e.g., income, educational attainment, and employment). Personal resources are traits that facilitate, among other things, coping with stress. Examples are self-esteem, optimism, or neuroticism (Hobfoll, 2002; Kessler & Essex, 1982). Neuroticism can be considered as the lack of the resource of emotional stability (Hills & Argyle, 2001). People with a low level of neuroticism have fewer negative feelings and are better able to cope with stressful situations, leading to increased well-being (McCrae & Costa Jr, 1986). Social resources are elements such as social integration and social support that facilitate achieving valued outcomes.

The resource perspective can help to explain differences in well-being between single, dating, cohabiting and married young adults by pointing out

that the kind and level of resources that are available to individuals depend on their relationship status. After describing how resources can explain the beneficial effect of having a partner, we explain why people who are living together with their partner are likely to have a greater well-being than those who are not living together with their partner. Finally, we will compare married people with unmarried cohabitors.

Resources and partner relationships

We expect that single individuals have lower levels of all three types of resources when compared with partnered individuals. This can be explained in three ways. First, a partner provides resources that enhance a person's well-being. Some highly-valued resources, like love, intimacy and sexual gratification can be provided almost exclusively by a romantic partner. Some resources can also be provided by others; however the romantic partner is a more important resource provider (Cutrona, 1996; Kessler & Essex, 1982). The fact that the partner is often the primary provider of many valuable resources may partially explain why young adults with a partner are happier than young adults without one.

Another reason why partnered young adults are likely to have more resources is that a relationship could facilitate access to resources. Hobfoll (2002) uses the term "resource caravan" in his Conservation of Resources Theory to stress that the availability of some resources might lead to the acquisition of even more resources.

Resources provided by the partner may also have indirect well-being enhancing effects. One explanation for this mechanism could be that partners tend to share similar goals or aspirations. Moreover, discrepancies in goals and/or aspirations are likely to decrease over time as perceptions become more similar (Robins & Boldero, 2003). Thus, if one partner strives for gaining more resources of a particular kind, the other partner may be stimulated to strive for these resources as well, which in turn may increase the total amount of desired resources. This may enhance both partners' well-being.

In addition, Reis, Capobianco and Tsai (2002) and Huston (2000) describe that a person's behavior depends on both the self and the interpersonal situation. Interactions between partners likely influence cognitions, emotions and actions. Since a romantic relationship is a very intimate and important relationship, this mutual partner influence is potentially considerable. Therefore, partner interactions may stimulate the acquisition of resources. This thinking has received empirical support among married partners. For example, Bernasco, de Graaf and Ultee (1998) found that husbands generally facilitate their wife's career.

A partner relationship may increase access to personal resources. For instance, frequent and positive intimate interaction with one's partner increases self-esteem (Gove, Style & Hughes, 1990). Social resources are also directly and indirectly related to both well-being and relationship

status (Barrett, 1999). Entering a partner relationship is likely to significantly enlarge one's social network, which in turn leads to an increase in social support (Hurlbert & Acock, 1990). Therefore, singles may have fewer social resources because they have smaller social networks. This is found to be true for divorced people (Dykstra, 1999), but not so much for the never-married. Barrett (1999) showed that the never-married have more frequent interaction with neighbours, friends and relatives than married and previously married (young) adults. However, the never-married are less likely to have a confidant and have lower levels of perceived support. Taken together, married people may therefore have greater access to social resources than never-married and divorced singles. When this principle is applied to relationship status instead of marital status, people with a partner can be expected to have more social resources than singles.

So far, we have more or less assumed that relationships increase well-being (*relationship effect*), rather than higher well-being (i.e., having more resources) increasing the likelihood of entering a relationship (*selection effect*). Selection may be partially responsible for relationship status differences in well-being between relationships. The selection effect has been examined in several studies, but the effects tend to be small and inconsistent. For example, Mastekaasa (2006) found some evidence that college students with a lower level of psychological distress are more likely to enter marriage or cohabitation. In examining marriage, Hope, Rodgers and Power (1999), also present evidence of selection. Surprisingly, Kamp Dush and Amato (2005), found that unhappy young adults were somewhat more likely to enter a more committed relationship. Moreover, Lamb, Lee and DeMaris (2003) concluded that there was no selection effect of depression prior to marriage or cohabitation.

Therefore, the evidence supporting the selection effect is inconsistent. The alternative causal explanation, that entering relationships affects well-being, has received more support. Most longitudinal studies conclude that relationships increase well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Zimmermann & Easterlin, 2006). For example, Kim and MacKenry (2002) showed that entering marriage decreases the level of depressive symptoms, especially if it is the first marriage.

Living together

The resource perspective can also be used to explain well-being differences between people who are, and who are not, living together with their partner. We expect that those with a partner who are not living together, but are steady dating, have a lower level of well-being, because they have fewer resources. Since investments in the relationship increase the total amount of resources for both partners, this lower level of resources might partly reflect the fact that people invest less in a dating relationship than in a cohabiting relationship (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986). Furthermore, people who are living together benefit from economies of scale (Waite &

Gallagher, 2000) – sharing a household reduces costs per household member and thus increases the availability of material resources. In addition, people who are living together benefit from the material resources that their partner provides. This could be particularly true for women, since men are still the primary contributors to the household income (Oppenheimer, 2000). Moreover, people may feel more responsible for the household income if they are living together (Korenman & Neumark, 1991), particularly if a partner and children are depending on it (i.e., a resource caravan effect).

In addition to an increase in resources caused by the relationship, a selection effect might operate as well. Dating relationships within which partners invest and exchange many resources, are more likely to evolve into cohabitation or marriage. For instance, men with more material resources are more likely to get married (Clarkberg, 1999; Oppenheimer, 2000). In addition, selection based on personal resources is also possible. For example, Scollon and Diener (2006) examined the causal relationship between traits such as neuroticism and relationship satisfaction. They concluded that it is more likely that these traits affect relationship satisfaction than vice versa. Since unsatisfied couples are less likely to move their relationship to a more committed status (e.g., from dating to cohabiting), traits affect the likelihood of entering relationship statuses.

Marriage

Finally, the resource perspective can also explain why the level of well-being of married young adults is higher than the level of well-being of young adults who are cohabiting. Married individuals may have more resources than young adults who cohabit unmarried, for they enjoy legal and normative benefits that cohabitors lack (Bowman, 2004; Nock, 1995). Married people may benefit more from tax laws, and have more rights with respect to inheritance and parenthood (Bowman, 2004). Moreover, married people are likely to have more material resources than people in other relationship types, for married couples invest more in long-term financial security by accumulating pooled savings and capital investments (Oppenheimer, 2000). Married individuals, men in particular, also have a higher income than do the unmarried (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Explanations for this are that married men are more productive (Waite, 2000) or that marriage increases the likelihood of getting a promotion or bonus (Ahituv & Lerman, 2005). Married people differ from cohabiting people in terms of social resources as well. Married people may be more socially integrated. They are for example more involved in religion and religious activities (Waite & Lehrer, 2003, p. 263). Marriage is also a socially more approved institution than cohabitation, despite the high numbers of cohabiters. In many Western societies, a considerable proportion of people still oppose unmarried cohabitation, especially when the cohabiters have no plans to marry (Liefbroer & Fokkema, 2008). Therefore, cohabiters run the risk of obtaining fewer resources from people who disparage their living arrangement. In addition,

selection processes may create differences in well-being between cohabiting and married people. This is similar with selection among dating couples: only the well-functioning cohabiting couples get married. Our expectations are summarized in the following hypotheses.

- *H1*: Among young adults, well-being will be highest among those who are married, followed, in order, by cohabiting, steady dating, and single individuals.

- *H2*: Material, personal and social resources mediate the effect of relationship status on subjective well-being of young adults.

Moderating effects of resources

Our second hypothesis predicts that differences in resources will mediate the effect of relationship status on young adults' well-being. In addition to a mediating effect, however, there are also reasons to assume that material, social, and personal resources will moderate the effect of relationship status on subjective well-being. In particular, we expect that singles depend more on resources provided by friends, family, and others in the social network when compared with partnered young adults. Our expectation is that the latter group benefits specifically from resources provided by the partner.

Single people and people who are dating largely depend on their own material resources, while people who are living together have a partner they can fall back on to provide material resources for them. Therefore, the effects of having resources of one's own (e.g., being employed) might be larger for young adults who are not living together.

Considering social resources, in times of need, support provided by a partner is more important than support provided by friends to enhance the ability to cope with stress, and therefore provides a stronger buffer to the negative effects of that stress (e.g., Kessler & Essex, 1982; Lin, Woelfel & Light, 1985; Penninx et al., 1997). Not receiving much social support from friends, family, and the larger social network might be particularly detrimental for people who lack a romantic partner as an important support provider. Finally, we expect that personal resources will exert a moderating effect. Having a partner might be more important for people with fewer personal resources (Frazier & Cook, 1993). In summary:

- *H3*: Material, personal, and social resources play a moderating role in explaining the effect of relationship status on subjective well-being.

Gender differences

Although we expect that our hypotheses hold true for both men and women, it is possible that gender plays a moderating role. Gove (1972)

assumed that single men would be unhappier than single women, because men (more than women) tend to depend more on their partner for social support. Women generally receive more social support from friends and family and have a larger social network (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). Nevertheless, gender difference studies generate inconsistent results. For example, Chipperfield and Havens (2001) found that the loss of a spouse had more detrimental effects on men's life satisfaction than on women's. On the other hand, men also gained greater benefit from getting married than women. In addition, Marks (1996) found that single women had better psychological well-being than single men, but the reverse was true for married individuals. In other recent studies, no gender differences were found (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Simon, 2002; Strohschein, McDonough, Monette, & Shao, 2005). Given this inconsistency in the literature, we will pay explicit attention to gender differences and similarities in our results.

Method

Sample

Data for this study come from the Dutch Panel study on Social Integration in the Netherlands (PSIN) (Liefbroer & Kalmijn, 1997). In six waves – 1987, 1989, 1991, 1995, 1999, and 2005 – information was gathered through interviews and questionnaires about topics such as education, employment, and relational careers, social support and personality, among young adults born in 1961, 1965 or 1969. Information on a number of important resources (particularly personality traits and social support) was gathered in the 1987 and 1991 waves, but not in other waves. Therefore, data from only the 1987 and 1991 waves are analyzed in this investigation. Respondents were then between 18 and 30 years of age. In the 1987 wave, 63% of individuals approached participated (N = 1,775). This sample was largely representative of the Dutch population, although Liefbroer and Kalmijn (1997) found that married respondents born in 1969 and 1965 were somewhat underrepresented and that those born in 1961 were somewhat overrepresented. Furthermore, young adults living in cities, including students, and those with a non-Dutch origin were slightly underrepresented. In the 1991 wave 1,257 individuals participated. Taris, van der Vaart, and Dijkstra (1993) examined the samples in the 1987 and 1991 waves and concluded that people born in 1965, men, less educated people, and those who were unemployed in 1987, were somewhat more likely to drop out. However, panel attrition is not related to factors important to this study, such as relationship status or employment status. After excluding observations with missing data on any variable of interest, the final sample consists of 2,818 observations: 1,180 respondents participated in both waves and contribute two observations, and 458 respondents contribute one observation in 1987.

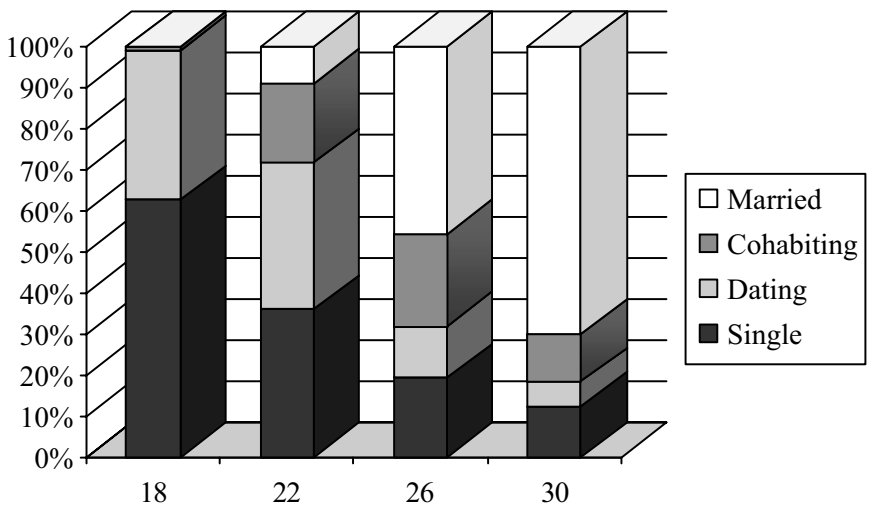
Measurement

Well-being. Subjective well-being is measured with four items of the "Satisfaction with Life" scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). This scale is used because it allows a global evaluation of subjective well-being. Because relationships are likely to be long-term processes with lasting consequences, we considered life satisfaction as more suitable for measuring subjective well-being than measures that focus on temporary changes in people's situations (e.g., positive and negative affect).

Items used are (i) "In most ways my life is close to my ideal", (ii) "The conditions of my life are excellent", (iii) "I am satisfied with my life", and (iv) "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life". Respondents indicated agreement on a seven-point scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). Cronbach's α is 0.83 in the 1987 and 0.85 in the 1991 wave.

Relationship status. Relationship status was determined using a series of questions on respondents' current and past relational involvement such as whether people are having a relationship with someone whom they call their partner. If participants reported having a partner, they were asked whether they lived together with this partner and whether they were married. We constructed a categorical variable with four levels of relationship status from participants' responses: "single" or having no romantic partner; "dating" when they have a partner, but do not share a household; "cohabiting unmarried" when they share a household without being married; and "married". Three respondents, who were married people but were not living with their spouse, were deleted from the sample. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the four relationship statuses by age categories. The proportion

FIGURE 1
Cumulative distribution of relationship status by age



of respondents who are single or dating decreases during young adulthood. The proportion of cohabiters increases until participants reach age 30 where it decreases. By age 30, the majority of the respondents are married.

Material resources. Several variables were measured to indicate the availability of material resources. First, the highest *level of education* was obtained at the time of the interview. This resource is measured separately for the respondent and for the partner (if there was a partner) as the number of years of education since the end of primary school. Scores can range from 0 (only primary school) to 11 (university). When not partnered, respondents were given the mean score on this variable.

The second material resource variable, *activity status*, describes whether respondents are enrolled in school full-time, employed, or neither. These mutually exclusive statuses are represented by three dummy codes: one each for *job*, *education*, and *no activity*. Participants who were enrolled in school full-time but were employed part-time, were classified as being in education. We also include a dummy variable indicating whether the partner has a job or not. If the respondent had no partner, *partner job* is coded as none. As no information was available on income, respondents' answers to a question on their subjective evaluation of the amount of money they had to spend were used as an indicator of their financial resources (with responses ranging from very little money to spend to very much).

Personal resources. Personal resources were measured with *neuroticism* and *self-esteem* scales. Neuroticism is measured by seven items of the Dutch translation of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (e.g., "Do you suffer from 'nerves'?"; Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985). Cronbach's α was 0.85 in 1987 and 0.87 in 1991. Self-esteem was measured with eleven items taken from a Dutch questionnaire of Helbing's scale (1987) (e.g., "I have a low opinion of myself"). Cronbach's α of .87–.88 indicates strong reliability. Both self-esteem and neuroticism are scored on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all applicable" to "completely applicable". Scale scores are transformed to range from 0 to 10.

Social resources. The availability of social resources is measured by questions on perceived social support from at most five persons with whom the respondent has a warm and personal relationship (based on Van Tilburg, 1988). The partner can be, and is likely to be, one of the mentioned persons. Two subscales are distinguished: *emotional support* and *instrumental support*. Emotional support taps the exchange of emotions of trust, acceptance, love, care, and empathy. Instrumental support focuses on tangible forms of support, like assistance with odd jobs (Hinson Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997). Again, scale scores are transformed to range from 0 to 10. Both scales are reliable; α for emotional support is .89 in both waves and is .83–.84 for instrumental support. The third social resource is social integration, operationalized by how often the respondent attends a religious activity. This variable *church visit* is a continuous variable, ranging 1–5 from visiting the church less than once a year (1) to more than once a week (5).

Other variables. Other included variables are *age*, *sex* (0 = female, 1 = male), *cohort*, *the presence of children*, and *dissolution of a past union*. Age is included, because well-being may change with age (Galambos & Krahn, 2008). It is measured in years, and scores were centered around the mean. Cohort is a categorical variable consisting of three birth cohorts: 1961, 1965, and 1969. In the analyses, two dummies represent this variable, with 1961 as the reference category. The presence of children (0 = no, 1 = yes) is included, because having children is strongly related to marital status. Besides, children can have a strong effect on well-being (Kohler, Behrmann, & Skytthe, 2005). The last variable, past union dissolution, indicates whether the respondent has been previously separated, divorced, or widowed (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Analytical strategy

There are either one or two observations from each respondent, depending on whether respondents participated in the first (1987) wave only or in both the 1987 and 1991 waves. Most respondents (72%) participated in both waves. Respondents' observations are pooled. To control for a lack of independence among observations, we tested our hypotheses using multilevel regression analysis with random effects. This method takes into account that most respondents provide data from several waves (Hox, 2002). Advantages of the multilevel design are (i) the full use of multiple-wave data, (ii) the ability to control for unmeasured heterogeneity in the data and (iii) the possibility to separate age and cohort effects. We estimated three models of increasing complexity. The first model tests the differences in life satisfaction between single, dating, cohabiting, and married respondents. Controls for sex, age, cohort, the presence of children, and past union dissolution are included in the model. In the second model, material, personal, and social resources are added to the equation, to test our second hypothesis on the mediating effects of resources. In the final model 3, interaction variables of resources and relationship status are added to model 2 to test the moderating effects of resources. We report the model with only the significant interactions.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 displays the mean scores and distribution of all variables for each relationship status and for the total sample. In addition, we tested whether the scores differed between the married and each of the other relationship statuses. We used analysis of variance if the variable of interest was continuous, and logistic regression if the variable was dichotomous.

First, respondents' subjective well-being differed by relationship status. As relationships became closer, subjective well-being increased as well. Second, as relationship type becomes more intimate, the proportion of females increases. This reflects the fact that females start living together at a younger age than males, because they are younger than their partner. Third, with respect to level of education, single respondents have the lowest

TABLE 1
Descriptives of dependent and independent variables by relationship status

Relationship status		Singles (N = 911)	Steady dating (N = 688)	Cohabiting (N = 436)	Married [ref.] (N = 783)	Total (N = 2818)
Life satisfaction (0–10)	M (SD)	6.75*** (1.92)	7.23*** (1.77)	7.69† (1.72)	7.90 (1.70)	7.33 (1.86)
Sex	% males	59.8***	50.9***	43.6	39.5	49.5
Age (years)	M (SD)	22.0*** (3.56)	22.2*** (3.08)	25.1*** (2.74)	27.4 (2.56)	24.0 (3.86)
Cohort						
1961	% 1961	15.8***	12.2***	36.5***	70.5	33.3
1965	% 1965	29.9	36.3***	42.9***	26.8	32.6
1969	% 1969	54.3***	51.5***	20.6***	2.7	34.1
Presence of children	% with kids	2.0***	1.0***	6.0***	51.9	16.2
Past union dissolution	% yes	6.9***	5.7*	9.2***	3.2	5.9
Level of education (0–11)	M (SD)	4.79*** (2.39)	5.09 (2.29)	5.71** (2.48)	5.28 (2.34)	5.14 (2.39)
Level of education partner (0–11)	M (SD)	n.a.	6.21*** (2.56)	5.80*** (2.83)	5.22 (2.53)	5.71 (2.65)
Activity status:						
Job	% job	42.7***	51.3***	78.9***	69.4	57.8
Education	% education	45.3***	38.5***	11.2***	2.4	26.5
No activity	% no activity	12.0***	10.2***	9.9***	28.2	15.7
Partner job	% job	n.a.	63.1***	83.5	81.7	75.4
Money to spend (0–5)	M (SD)	3.07*** (.91)	3.03*** (.96)	3.20 (.86)	3.24 (.78)	3.13 (.88)
Neuroticism (0–10)	M (SD)	4.19 (2.06)	4.23 (2.20)	4.11 (2.20)	4.31 (2.30)	4.22 (2.18)
Self-esteem (0–10)	M (SD)	6.97*** (1.71)	7.18** (1.69)	7.53 (1.61)	7.43 (1.63)	7.24 (1.68)
Emotional support (0–10)	M (SD)	7.00*** (1.80)	7.58 (1.45)	7.75 (1.49)	7.66 (1.43)	7.44 (1.60)
Instrumental support (0–10)	M (SD)	7.38*** (1.66)	7.90 (1.50)	8.00 (1.35)	7.95 (1.51)	7.76 (1.54)
Church visit (1–5)	M (SD)	2.09*** (1.39)	2.13*** (1.36)	1.55*** (.94)	2.36 (1.45)	2.09 (1.36)

†$p \leq 0.10$; *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

average level of education on average, and cohabiting respondents the highest, while dating and married young adults occupy an intermediate position. Fourth, when compared to cohabiting and married young adults, a smaller proportion of the single and dating young adults are employed and a larger proportion are involved in full-time education. In particular, very few married respondents are engaged full-time in education. Most respondents of the cohabiting (79%) and married groups (69%) are employed. Cohabiting and married respondents are a few years older than are the single or dating subsamples, and therefore are more likely to have made the transition to work. A relatively large proportion of the married respondents are involved in neither work nor education. Fifth, and along a similar line, single or dating respondents have less money to spend than cohabiting or married young adults. Sixth, the partner's level of education decreases in more committed relationships; i.e., daters' partners have the highest, and partners of married young adults have the lowest, level of education. Finally, most partners have a job, ranging from 63% among dating partners to more than 80% among cohabiting and married partners.

Regarding personal resources, singles have lower average levels of self-esteem when compared with dating people who, in turn, have less self-esteem than cohabiting or married participants. Surprisingly, married people have the highest average level of neuroticism, rather than the lowest as we had expected. However, these differences are not significant.

With respect to social resources, singles receive less instrumental and emotional support than do partnered respondents. Furthermore, married people visit church more often than cohabiting people, who visit more often than dating and single people.

Finally, there are relationship status differences in life course transitions such as parenthood and past union dissolution. The percentage of respondents who have experienced the dissolution of a cohabiting or married union varies from as low as 3% among the currently married to 9% among the currently cohabiting. Having children is nearly exclusively a marital phenomenon.

Relationship status and well-being

Multi-level regression models were estimated to test our hypotheses (see Table 2). The first hypothesis suggests a hierarchy in well-being (i.e., life satisfaction) with married respondents at the top and single respondents at the bottom. As highlighted in Table 2, results from the first multilevel regression model are consistent with this hypothesis. Life satisfaction scores of single, dating, and cohabitating respondents were significantly lower when compared with married respondents, controlling for age, cohort, sex, the presence of children, and past union dissolution (see model 1 within Table 2). In addition, being male, having children, and having experienced the dissolution of a previous union are all related to lower life satisfaction.

In this paper we focus only on data from the first (1987) and third (1995) wave of the PSIN, as these waves have by far the richest information on personal and social resources. These results are robust across all PSIN

TABLE 2
Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors for the effects of relationship status and resources on life satisfaction (standard error in brackets, *N* = 2818)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Control variables						
Age (in years)[a]	–.01	(.01)	–.04**	(.02)	–.04*	(.02)
Male	–.24**	(.08)	–.49***	(.08)	–.44***	(.08)
Female (reference)						
Cohort						
1969	.28†	(.15)	.05	(.13)	.09	(.13)
1965	–.04	(.11)	–.16	(.10)	–.14	(.10)
1961 (ref.)						
Parenthood	–.26*	(.11)	.10	(.11)	.06	(.11)
Ever separated	–.46**	(.15)	–.32*	(.13)	–.31*	(.13)
Relationship status						
Single	–1.36***	(.12)	–.93***	(.13)	–.20	(.20)
Dating	–.93***	(.12)	–.69***	(.11)	–.19	(.17)
Cohabiting	–.34**	(.12)	–.24*	(.11)	–.13	(.11)
Married (reference)						
Material resources						
Level of education			.00	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Activity status						
No activity			–.37***	(.09)	.07	(.14)
Education			.23**	(.09)	.17†	(.09)
Job (reference)						
Money to spend			.29***	(.04)	.27***	(.04)
Partner job			.18*	(.09)	.40***	(.12)
Level of education partner			–.02	(.02)	–.03†	(.02)
Personal resources						
Neuroticism			–.06***	(.02)	–.03	(.02)
Self esteem			.39***	(.02)	.39***	(.02)
Social resources						
Instrumental support			.08**	(.03)	.08**	(.02)
Emotional support			.02	(.03)	.02	(.03)
Church visit			.08**	(.02)	.08**	(.02)
Interactions						
No activity × single					–.49*	(.21)
No activity × dating					–.59*	(.23)
No activity × cohabiting					–.77**	(.28)
Neuroticism × single					–.10***	(.03)
Partner job × dating					–.54***	(.17)
Constant	8.14***	(.12)	3.74***	(.32)	3.39***	(.33)
R^2 within	.05		.17		.18	
R^2 between	.09		.34		.35	
ρ	.43		.34		.34	

[a]Age is centered around the mean age of wave 1 and 3
†$p \leq 0.10$; *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

waves in which life satisfaction was measured (1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2005). Relationship status differences are the same for the full dataset when compared with those from only waves 1 and 3 (available from the first author on request). Furthermore, to examine the extent to which relationship status differences in life satisfaction result from a selection process, we conducted within-person multilevel regression analyses on the full dataset (results not shown). Differences in life satisfaction among relationship statuses remained highly significant, with one exception. The life satisfaction difference between cohabitation and marriage became non-significant, suggesting that cross-sectional differences in satisfaction between cohabiting and married young people may partly result from individuals with higher well-being being somewhat more likely to opt for marriage.

Mediating effects

We hypothesized that relationship status differences in well-being could be partially explained by the mediating effects of material, personal, and social resources. This second hypothesis is tested in model 2 (see Table 2). We added all material, personal, and social resources in one model because preliminary analyses showed that these categories of resources had largely independent effects. Results indicate that employed people report greater life satisfaction than people without a daily activity, but less satisfaction than those who are enrolled in full-time education. Having money to spend or having an employed partner enhances life satisfaction, but neither the participant's nor partner's level of education affects life satisfaction. Both personal resources influence life satisfaction: neuroticism has a negative effect and self-esteem a positive effect. Further, instrumental support from friends, family, and the partner, but not emotional support, positively influences life satisfaction. Attending religious observances is related to increased satisfaction, while age has a negative effect. Finally, adding the resource variables increases between-group R^2 from .09 in model 1 to .34 in model 2. This implies that about one-third of the variance across individuals in life satisfaction can be explained by resources, relationship status, and the control variables, with resources explaining the largest proportion. The within-groups R^2 is lower than the between-groups R^2. This implies that our models explain the variance between persons better than the variance within persons.

Comparing the regression coefficients of the relationship statuses of this model, which include resources, with the coefficients of model 1, shows that the difference in satisfaction decreased between married and single respondents with 32%, between married and dating respondents with 25%, and between cohabiting and married respondents with 28%. Apparently, resources partially mediate the effects of relationship on well-being.

Moderating effects

The third hypothesis suggested that resources moderate the effect of relationships on well-being. We added blocks of interactions, of material, personal, and social resources, and of relationship statuses to the previous

model (see model 3, Table 2). Having neither full-time employment nor educational responsibilities is related to a lower well-being in single, dating, and cohabiting, but not married, respondents. Further, we conclude that the negative effect of neuroticism is stronger for single respondents than for other groups. Finally, having an employed partner is beneficial for cohabiting and married respondents, but not for dating respondents.

Gender differences

Model 3 was performed again with the addition of interactions between gender and the independent variables (results not shown). We found no gender differences in the independent variables. Next, we calculated the mediating effects for men and women following the same procedure as for the total sample. Differences in well-being between dating, cohabiting, and married respondents are better explained by the availability of resources for men compared with women, although resources explain a substantial part of the variance for both sexes. With respect to singlehood, there was no difference. In addition, three-way-interaction analyses were conducted (results also not shown) to examine gender differences in the moderating effects of resources. Only one gender difference emerged: instrumental support is positively related to life satisfaction among cohabiting women, but not among cohabiting men.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to increase understanding of differences in subjective well-being across relationship statuses. Little longitudinal research has been conducted to date on the role of relationships in the well-being of young adults. Most previous research used marital status and focused on adults of all ages. In addition, we examined whether resources explain relationship differences in well-being.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, we observed a clear relationship status hierarchy in well-being among young adults. Single people had the lowest level of well-being, followed by dating, cohabiting, and married young adults, who had the highest level. This is consistent with previous studies in which married people were found to have higher subjective well-being levels when compared with unmarried or never-married people. At the same time, our results show that there are differences in well-being within the unmarried category. These findings are also in line with earlier studies of young adults (e.g., Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). They suggest that marital status is not a very good indicator for understanding partner-related differences in well-being among young adults, and that it is worthwhile to also pay attention to other types of relationships, such as steady dating and unmarried cohabitation. We certainly agree with this conclusion.

In addition to describing differences across relationship status, we examined the mediating role of material, personal, and social resources in explaining these differences. We expected that relationship status would be

related to the availability of resources, and that the availability of resources would predict well-being. Singles were expected to have fewer resources than people who are dating, who would have fewer resources than cohabiting and married people. Therefore, differences in resources, rather than relational status per se, would be the root cause of differences in well-being. Resources were found to explain about 25–32% of the variance in well-being between singles, dating, cohabiting, and married young adults. We conclude from these results that the effect of relational status is to a substantial extent due to differences in resources, especially material resources. Advantages created by pooling resources and the economies of scale are two principles that explain the difference in well-being between people who are living together and those who are not living together (Wilson & Oswald, 2005). Nonetheless, material resources also explain about one-fifth of the differences between cohabiting and married young adults, although both groups are living together. This may occur because cohabiters are less likely to actually pool their resources, and because spouses profit more from economies of scale as a result of a higher level of specialization (Oppenheimer, 2000).

In addition to mediating effects, we examined whether the availability of resources moderated the effect of relationship status on well-being. For a few resources, results were in line with expectations. Lacking daily full-time work or school activity was related to reduced well-being for single, dating, and cohabiting, but not for married young adults. For married participants, specialization, where one partner stays at home, probably constitutes a conscious choice. Therefore, being inactive outside the home does not bother married partners as much as it does unmarried people (Waldron, Weiss, & Hughes, 1998). It is worthwhile to note that having no daily activity outside the home is measured rather conservatively, because it is possible that people who are not employed or in full-time education are volunteering or are working or studying part-time. It is likely that those in the study who are involved in part-time work or education increase the average level of well-being for those with no activity. In addition, whether or not the partner is employed full-time does not influence the level of well-being among dating young adults, but has a positive effect on the well-being of cohabiting and married young adults. Presumably, the partner's economic resources are less important when partners are not living together. Finally, a moderating effect was also found for neuroticism as a personal resource. Not having a partner seems to increase the negative effect that neuroticism exerts on well-being. The moderating hypothesis was not supported for other resources. Apparently, the effect size of most resources is independent of relationship status.

In conclusion, the differential resource availability provides a compelling explanation for relational status differences in subjective well-being. This study showed that mediating effects are stronger than moderating effects. At the same time, a large part of the differences among relationship statuses remains unexplained. First, this could imply that unmeasured resources, such as income, intimacy, or sexual activities, are more important in explaining

relational status differences in well-being than the resources measured in this study. Another possibility is that the specific partner-provided resources (or a combination of self and partner resources) are more important than generic resources for explaining relationship status effects on well-being.

Throughout the paper, we paid attention to gender differences. In general, men had lower well-being scores than did women. With respect to singles, dating, and perhaps cohabiting people, this is in line with previous studies that found that never-married women were better off than never-married men, because men would rely more on their partner for social support (Marks, 1996). This gender difference, however, has not been found in other recent studies among adults of all ages (Simon, 2002; Strohschein et al., 2005). Differences regarding the availability of social resources may explain why women have higher well-being than men. For instance, Pugliesi and Shook (1998) showed that men have smaller social networks and receive less social support when compared with women. Men are also more depending on their partner for these resources (Dykstra & De Jong-Gierveld, 2004). Moreover, women seem to benefit more from the social support they receive. This is consistent with our finding that increasing instrumental support resulted in a larger increase in well-being for cohabiting women than for cohabiting men. No other gender differences were observed.

Finally, we would like to point out a few issues that merit further attention. First, although we used panel data, the relatively long interval between waves and the small number of waves did not allow thorough study of possible reciprocal processes between relationship status and well-being. For instance, we could not examine what happens if people start and end a relationship between the waves. It would be interesting, however, to examine the processes of starting, developing, and terminating relationships in more detail. This could be done by using more measurements of well-being per person and/or utilizing shorter time-periods between measurements. Unfortunately, not all waves of the panel study could be used to measure resource effects. Nevertheless, our finding that the effects of relationship status were similar if data of all five waves were used, suggests that the relationship status differences in well-being remain important as young adults enter middle adulthood. In addition, given that our data cover the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is possible that since that time societal and cultural changes have influenced the relation between relationship status and well-being. However, comparing studies conducted in the 1980s (Coombs, 1991) with more recent studies (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wilson & Oswald, 2005) suggests consistency in conclusions. Therefore, we expect that our results also apply to recent cohorts of young adults.

Further, our data cannot rule out the claim that people with higher well-being are more likely to enter a (committed) relationship. These selection effects, however, are typically weaker than causation effects (see, e.g., Mastekaasa, 2006). While we were not able to fully examine this issue, we found some indication that selection may partly explain differences in well-being between cohabiting and married young adults.

Third, relationship satisfaction is strongly related to life satisfaction. Research has shown, for instance, that people who are very unsatisfied with

their marriages are just as unsatisfied with their lives as are single divorced people (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Williams, 2003). Differences in the well-being of dating, cohabiting, and married groups could partially result from within-group differences in relational satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction thus might mediate the effects of relationship status on well-being. In addition, access to resources may also vary dependent upon relationship quality and satisfaction. Therefore, future studies should examine the role of relationship quality or satisfaction in understanding partner-related differences in well-being. Kamp Dush and Amato (2005), however, report results similar to those reported here, but after controlling for relationship happiness. This suggests that relationships have positive effects on well-being, independent of relationship satisfaction.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to study relationship status differences in well-being in different cultural settings. The Dutch culture is rather individualistic and tolerant towards cohabitation (Hofstede, 1991; Liefbroer & Fokkema, 2008). It is possible that differences between single, dating, cohabiting, and married individuals are different in individualistic cultures than in other, e.g., collectivistic, cultures. These differences may be due, in part, to varying norms regarding singlehood (Sprecher et al., 1994) and cohabitation. For instance, religious involvement explains a relatively large part of the differences between cohabiting and married young adults in the present study. Religious participation, however, is relatively low in the Netherlands, compared to countries such as the US. At the time of the data collection, only 23–31% of the Dutch population visited a church at least once a month and about one-third had no religious affiliation (Statistics Netherlands, 2005), compared with only 8% without affiliations in the US in 1990 (Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). Therefore, religion may be an even more important mediator in some cultures. Finally, union formation co-occurs with other life course transitions in young adulthood. It would be interesting to examine the consequences of the timing and sequencing of these transitions for the contributions of relationships on well-being. The resource perspective used in this study could be a worthwhile perspective for such a study, because the availability of resources will vary by young adults' positions in all of these parallel careers.

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