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Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study

The literature on marital status and happiness has neglected comparative analysis, cohabitation, and gender-specific analysis. It is not clear if the married-happiness relationship is consistent across nations, if it is stronger than a cohabitation-happiness link, and if it applies to both genders. We address these issues using data from 17 national surveys. A multiple regression analysis determined that the relationship between marital status and happiness holds in 16 of the 17 nations and the strength of the association does not vary significantly in 14 of the 17 nations. Being married was 3.4 times more closely tied to the variance in happiness than was cohabitation, and marriage increases happiness equally among men and women. Marriage may affect happiness through two intervening processes: the promotion of financial satisfaction and the improvement of health. These intervening processes did not replicate for cohabitants.

Considerable support has been found for the thesis that marriage is associated with higher levels of personal well-being. This includes work on personal well-being (Bradburn, 1969; Coombs, 1991; Glenn, 1975; Gove, Hughes, & Briggs-Style, 1990; Horwitz, White, & Howell-White,

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1996; Kessler & Essex, 1982; Mastekassa, 1992, 1993; Williams, 1988), health (Hahn, 1993; Joung et al., 1997; Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990; Verbrugge, 1979), mortality (Goldman & Hu, 1993; Gove, 1973; Hu & Goldman, 1990; Rogers, 1995; Trovato & Lauris, 1989), and suicide (Stack, 1990; Stack & Wasserman, 1995).

The advantage of the married over those who are not married appears to hold true for a specific indicator of well-being—global happiness. Studies, primarily based on data from the United States, have provided evidence that married persons report higher levels of personal happiness than persons of any unmarried status (Burt, 1987; Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove, Hughes, & Briggs-Style, 1983; Williams, 1988; see reviews in Weerasinghe & Tepperman, 1994, and Ross, 1995). In some multivariate models, marital status has been the most important predictor of happiness (Burt, 1987; Davis, 1984; Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove et al., 1983; Williams, 1988).

Several issues have been neglected in the previous research. First, most of the evidence is based on data from the U.S. Research based disproportionately on one nation is in need of replication (e.g., Kohn, 1987). Further work is needed to see if the findings will replicate in nations with different institutional and cultural frameworks. For example, the U.S. has the highest divorce rate in the world (United Nations, 1988). In nations with low rates of divorce, there may be less support for divorce, thus trapping unhappy people in marriage and lowering the mean level of happiness among the married. Second, comparative work is needed in order to weight the importance of marital status against national character in the

shaping of happiness (Inglehart, 1990). It may be, for example, that national character is more important than marital status in explaining cross-national differences in levels of happiness. Research based on a single nation, which is typically the case in happiness research, cannot, by definition, test this proposition (Glenn & Weaver 1988; Gove et al., 1983; Joung et al., 1997). Third, previous research has neglected the status of cohabitant. According to the social integration theory of happiness (e.g., Umberson, 1987), it may be that marriage does not increase happiness any more than cohabitation. Fourth, much of the past research is marked by model misspecification (Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove et al., 1983). For example, few studies include religion and health in their models, although these factors, when included, often show powerful effects on happiness. Given that married people tend to be more religious and healthier than people who are not married, it is not clear if some of the past research is reporting a spurious relationship between marriage and happiness. Fifth, much of the past research does not generate gender-specific models. Given a widespread belief that marriage benefits men more than women (e.g., Coombs, 1991), we anticipate that marriage is more closely tied to male happiness than female happiness. The study presented here contributes to the literature by addressing these five issues with data from 17 national surveys.

EXPLANATORY SCHEME

Happiness is a self-perceived subjective indicator of a positive personal feeling. Bradburn (1969) defined it as a balance between positive and negative affect. Generally, it is operationally defined as the degree to which respondents define themselves as happy or not (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1979).

Two broad explanations of the relationship between marriage and happiness have been formulated: social causation and social selection (e.g., Joung et al., 1997; Mastekaasa, 1992). Social causation theory contends that marriage itself increases happiness by providing emotional and financial support. These, in turn, buffer against the travails of life and preserve or increase happiness. In contrast, social selection theory contends that persons who are already relatively high in qualities like psychological health and financial status are the ones who are most likely to marry in the first place. Marriage does not necessarily increase happiness. Persons who are happy already simply

are more likely to be selected for marriage (Ross et al., 1990, p. 1062). These two processes are not mutually exclusive and certainly can operate simultaneously.

This article tests aspects of the social causation-protection theory. It cannot test the selection hypothesis due to the lack of appropriate longitudinal data.

The impact of marital status on personal well-being has been attributed largely to three intermediating processes. Being married has been thought to affect well-being by elevating financial resources, fostering better physical health, and providing greater emotional support (e.g., Joung et al., 1997; Ross, 1995; Ross et al., 1990).

Financial Support

Marriage can provide economic protection or a "safety net." Persons who share a household generally can gain from economies of scale (Joung et al., 1997; Rogers, 1995). To the extent that marriage involves the combination of two significant incomes, married persons may enjoy a higher standard of living than they did before marriage. Married persons generally can afford better housing, food, and services than never-married, divorced, or widowed persons. The resulting improved standard of living and lower risk of impoverishment contribute to better mental health, including happiness (Ross et al., 1990).

Physical Health

Marriage also may affect well-being by promoting better physical health. The underlying relevant mechanisms include increasing the likelihood of early detection of symptoms, encouraging medical treatment, discouraging risky behaviors such as drinking and smoking, helping with the recovery process, and encouraging a spouse to follow a healthy diet. (See reviews in Joung et al., 1997; Rogers, 1995; Ross et al., 1990; Umberson, 1992.) In turn, better physical health is expected to promote better emotional health, including happiness. Unfortunately, the literature on happiness has largely neglected this connection (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove et al., 1983). The study presented here will fill this gap in the literature.

Emotional Support

Emotional support refers to a sense of being esteemed, cared about, and valued as a person. Mar-

ried persons are more likely than persons who are not married to report a higher degree of emotional support. Emotional support tends to lower depression and other forms of mental ill health (Ross et al., 1990, p. 1062). We anticipate that any relationship between being married and happiness will be due, in part, to greater emotional support provided to married persons. Generally, research has found that married couples are higher in their degree of mutual support than other couples (Joung et al., 1997; Stroube & Stroube, 1987). However, as in much of the past research on happiness, there is no direct measure available in our study for the degree of emotional support (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove et al., 1983).

Social Integration: Marriage Versus Cohabitation

A fundamental aspect of the social causation thesis deals with the conditions of living alone or living together. Conceivably, living alone increases the odds of isolation from the privileges and obligations of married life. These ties, fundamental to social integration, can help people establish a basic sense of belonging and security. Persons lacking such ties may be more vulnerable to loneliness and unhappiness (Ross et al., 1990).

One unexplored area in the relationship between marital status and happiness is the relationship between cohabitation and happiness. To the extent that cohabitation improves health, increases emotional support, and enhances financial status, we expect it to improve happiness. Further, marriage may not improve happiness any more than cohabitation improves happiness. Both increase social integration, and both are alternatives to living alone. Our study provides the first systematic analysis of this issue.

Contextual Effects: Gender

It is not clear to what extent the effect of marital status on happiness is conditioned by gender. From the three explanations of the social causation perspective, the genders would need to be different in relation to emotional, financial, or health conditions in order for a contextual effect.

In a review of the literature, Coombs (1991) asserts that marriage is more beneficial to men than to women because women are more apt to provide emotional support. However, this generalization is based on a problematic interpretation of key research results. For example, Gove et al., (1983), in a much cited article, came to the conclusion that

marriage benefits the happiness of men more than women on the basis of two beta coefficients from separate multiple classification analyses: 0.079 for men and 0.048 for women. Although this difference between coefficients may be significant, no significance test was employed to ascertain if it actually was significant. The amount of support between spouses is typically not systematically measured in this research.

Some research questions the thesis that the relationship between marital status and health is gendered. Although married men enjoy better mental health than married women, it is also true that single men enjoy better mental health than single women. Further, divorced and widowed men often are found to have better mental health than divorced and widowed women (Fox, 1980; Ross et al., 1990). In the case of suicide, marriage apparently protects men and women to an equal degree (Stack, 1990). Finally, Horwitz et al. (1996) found that marriage affects the well-being of both men and women about equally. The mode of enhanced well-being differs, however, between the genders. For men, it lowers the level of depression, and for women, it lowers the level of alcoholism. Similar conclusions were drawn by Joung et al. (1997) for the case of gender and morbidity.

Income Differentials

The fact that women gain more financially from marriage than men often is neglected in the literature. This notion is omitted from one review of the literature (Coombs, 1991). Males and females differ, generally speaking, in the incomes they bring to and maintain in marriage. Ross et al. (1990, p. 1064) cite American data that suggest that marriage increases income by 50% for females, but by only 25% for males. From this differential rise in income, we might anticipate that women are happier than men as a result of marriage. Gove et al. (1983) reported that, once controls were introduced for marital status and other factors, income positively influenced female happiness but was not related to male happiness. However, sheer income does not necessarily measure the degree to which one is satisfied with one's financial circumstances. Research using financial satisfaction is needed as a check on research that uses objective measures of financial circumstances.

Health Differentials

Research on mortality generally finds that marriage contributes to lowering the risk of death among men more than among women (e.g., Helsing, 1981; Lillard & Waite, 1995; Litwack & Messeri, 1989; Trovato & Lauris, 1989). This has been attributed to the fact that women tend to have a healthier lifestyle than men. Once married, women are apt to improve the lifestyle of their husbands. Often this is done when wives encourage and reinforce primary prevention techniques, such as quitting smoking, avoiding heavy drinking, and promoting a more balanced diet (Ross et al., 1990; Umberson, 1987). These prevention techniques lower mortality due to lung cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and colon cancer. Further investigations of generalized physical health and marriage also tend to find that marriage offers more protection to men than to women (Bird & Freemont, 1989; Ross et al., 1990).

Investigations of happiness, however, have tended not to include physical health as a control (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove et al., 1983). It is not clear if the reported relationship between marriage and happiness is spurious.

We do not seek to resolve the debate over the issue of gender differentials in the literature about marriage and well-being. We will, however, present an analysis of how gender is related to the issue of personal happiness and marital status. It may be that the financial gains of women from marriage more or less equal the emotional and health gains derived from marriage by men. If so, marriage's effects on happiness may not differ by gender. Women's financial gains from marriage are probably much higher in more traditional nations where there are lower rates of participation in the labor force by women than in the U.S.

Contextual Effects: Low National Divorce Rates

Many nations have a divorce rate less than half that of the U.S. It seems plausible, if all else is equal, that some married persons in nations with low rates of divorce may be trapped in unhappy marriages. If divorce is difficult to obtain or if there are strong sanctions against divorce in the national system, then many unhappily married persons will opt to stay in their unhappy marriages. If so, the mean level of happiness among the married will be relatively low. Comparative research on happiness has not tested this contextual effect (e.g., Diener, Sandwik, & Seidlitz, 1993).

National Character

Personality traits of individuals may be shaped by the cultural systems of nations. Differences in the historical conditions of nations may result in differences in the average personality of their citizens. For example, long periods of unfulfilled expectations may give rise to cynical attitudes. These personality orientations can be transmitted from generation to generation by the socialization process (Inglehart, 1990, pp. 30–31). National character may be more important than marital status in shaping levels of individual happiness. By definition, research limited to one nation cannot address this issue. We include a series of control variables representing each nation in order to weight the importance of the marital status variables against differences in national character.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected by the World Values Study Group (1991), an international association of social scientists that grew out of the European Values Systems Study Foundation of Amsterdam. Its permanent secretariat is at the University of Tilburg. The World Gallup Network performed most of the field work and interviews. Nationally representative samples were drawn from the adult population in each participating country. Data were collected during 1981–1983 and were released in 1991. Complete data were available on 18,000 adults in 17 nations.

Happiness is measured by a single item with fixed response categories. Respondents were asked, "Taken all things together, would you say you are: not at all happy (0), not very happy (1), quite happy (2), or very happy (3)?" The problems of single-item measures are well known. However, this single-item instrument has been used innumerable times in American-based research and, as such, has the advantage of comparability with previous studies (Lee et al., 1991).

Some caution should be used in interpreting the results presented here because it is possible that the questions had different meanings to respondents in different countries. Available evidence suggests that the measurement errors that may be involved in translation are not large enough to preclude meaningful analysis. For example, in Switzerland a study was done on life satisfaction of three groups: the Italian-speaking, German-speaking, and French-speaking Swiss. Their satisfaction scores then were compared with scores derived by the researchers in Italy, Ger-

many, and France. The German-speaking Swiss, the French-speaking Swiss, and the Italian-speaking Swiss all expressed higher levels of satisfaction than their counterparts in Germany, France, and Italy. A similar set of findings was reported for Belgium where there are two national languages, French and Dutch. Here, again, nationality seemed to be a more important predictor of life satisfaction than language (Inglehart, 1990, pp. 28–29).

Marital status is measured with a series of binary variables representing the statuses of marriage (0,1), cohabitation (0,1), divorce (0,1), and widowhood (0,1). Being single is the reference category. We paid special attention to the relative sizes of the coefficients of the married and cohabiting terms in order to test the hypothesis of social integration protection.

Economic well-being is measured on a 10-point scale of financial satisfaction from 1 (*highly dissatisfied*) to 10 (*highly satisfied*). Data on household income might be preferable to a measure of satisfaction with income. Financial satisfaction was selected over an available measure of income for four reasons: Income data were unavailable for a substantial number of respondents in many nations; income data were essentially not highly comparable, given different income distributions in the 17 nations; we assumed that satisfaction with income will be more predictive of happiness than a nonevaluative measure of sheer objective income; and preliminary results using the available income data were essentially the same as results using the satisfaction data.

Following previous research (e.g., Hahn, 1993; Mastekaasa, 1992), physical health is measured as self-assessed health. The health variable ranges from 0 (*very poor*) to 4 (*very good*). Although multiple-item scales of health status and objective measures might be preferable, previous research employs self-reported single-item measures (Hahn, 1993; Mastekaasa, 1992). In any event, our data set has only one item on health status.

Following previous research (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Gove et al., 1983; Umberson, 1989), controls are incorporated for a variety of socioeconomic variables. These are gender (male, 0,1), age (in years), education, the presence of children (0,1), and church attendance (1 = *low;* 4 = *high*).

In addition, we introduced controls for national character. To this end, 16 binary variables (0,1) are included for the country of the respondent.

Following conventions for multiple-category nominal scales in regression, the U.S. serves as the necessary benchmark category (Lewis-Beck, 1980).

Five macrosociological or nation-level characteristics that may influence individual levels of happiness also were explored (Veenhoven, 1991, 1994). Data are from United Nations sources (United Nations, 1986, 1988). These are the divorce rate or divorces per 1,000 population, marriage rate or marriages per 1,000 population, the level of economic development measured as gross domestic product per capita, the distribution of income measured by the ratio of the top decile of households to the bottom 20% of households. Nations were arbitrarily divided into three groups—low, medium, and high—for each of these variables. Following rules for binary variables, one category serves as the reference group (Lewis-Beck, 1980). The reference group is the group thought to have the largest negative influence on happiness: nations with high rates of divorce, low rates of marriage, older ages at first marriage, low gross domestic product per capita, and high levels of income inequality.

ANALYSIS

The results of an ordinary least squares multiple regression are summarized in Table 1. Variance inflation factors were calculated as a test of multicollinearity. None of the variance inflation factors exceeds 5, indicating the absence of the problem of multicollinearity and rendering the results suitable for interpretation.

Controlling for the sociodemographic variables and national binary variables, married persons report significantly more happiness than single persons. The variable most closely tied to the variance in happiness is, however, satisfaction with household finances (beta = 0.218). The second most important predictor of happiness is health status (beta = 0.213). That marital status survived these controls indicates that there are other features of marital status that affect happiness beside its association with health and financial satisfaction.

Controlling for the other variables, cohabitants have a higher level of happiness than single persons (beta = 0.046). However, this beta coefficient for cohabitants is less than one quarter of the coefficient of married persons. Apparently, marriage protects more against unhappiness than does cohabitation.

TABLE 1. EFFECT OF MARITAL STATUS ON GLOBAL
HAPPINESS, FINANCIAL SATISFACTION,
AND REPORTED HEALTH

Independent Variable	Happiness	Financial Satisfaction	Health
Marital status			
Married	0.156*	0.031*	0.026*
Cohabitant	0.046*	−0.034*	−0.016*
Divorced	−0.016*	−0.044*	−0.001
Separated	−0.022*	−0.043*	0.0004
Widowed	−0.019*	−0.039	−0.019*
Reported health	0.213*	0.149*	—
Socioeconomic status			
Financial satisfaction	0.218*	—	0.133*
Unemployed	−0.031*	−0.121*	−0.027*
Education	0.005	0.071*	0.097*
Controls			
Male	−0.024*	−0.017*	0.050
Age	−0.047*	0.156*	−0.307*
Church attendance	0.035*	0.079*	0.019*
Parental status	0.005	−0.052	0.013
National character			
Australia	0.020*	0.037*	−0.011
Belgium	0.008	0.073*	−0.005
Britain	0.045	0.034*	0.019*
Canada	0.012	0.074*	0.024*
Denmark	0.001	0.084*	0.025*
France	0.014*	−0.011	−0.070*
Germany	−0.083*	0.041*	−0.104*
Iceland	0.056*	0.006	−0.017*
Ireland	0.035*	0.021*	0.049*
Italy	−0.106*	0.002	−0.077*
Japan	0.051*	−0.007	−0.133*
Netherlands	0.009	0.096*	−0.022*
Northern Ireland	0.014*	0.012*	0.020*
Norway	−0.026*	0.082*	0.003
Spain	−0.073*	−0.057*	−0.139*
Sweden	−0.001	0.066*	0.006
	0.000	0.000	0.000
F	176.36	87.82*	177.6*
R^2 0.21	0.11	0.20	

*$p < 0.05$.

There is substantial cross-sectional variation in levels of national happiness. For example, five nations, Australia, France, Ireland, Japan, and Northern Ireland, have happiness levels significantly higher than the U.S. Nations with levels of happiness that are significantly lower than levels in the U.S. include Germany, Italy, and Spain. Differences in national character are not, however, as closely related to variations in happiness as differences in marital status. The size of the beta coefficient for the married is, for example, over seven times the size of the beta coefficient of the

Australian binary variable. It is 50% stronger than the most potent beta coefficient for national character, that for Italy (beta = −.106). The full model explains 21% of the variance in happiness.

We tested for the intermediary effects of marital status on happiness by exploring the effect of marital status on financial satisfaction and health status. These results are in columns 2 and 3 of Table 1. The results in column 2 of Table 1 indicate that marital status affects financial satisfaction. Controlling for the other variables, we find that married persons report higher financial satisfaction than single persons (beta = 0.031). Column 3 of Table 1 presents the results of the analysis assessing the impact of marital status on perceived health status. Controlling for the other variables, we find that marital status affects health. For example, married persons report better health than single persons (beta = 0.026). In contrast to marriage, cohabitation was not positively related to either financial satisfaction or health. The hypothesis that being married has both indirect and direct effects on happiness was supported.

Table 2 presents the results for a gender-specific analysis. Column 1 presents the regression results for women, and column 2 presents the regression results for men. Column 3 presents the results of a test to determine whether or not the differences in coefficients for men and women are significantly different (Cohen, 1983). Controlling for the other variables, marriage increases reported happiness for women (beta = 0.158). Controlling for the other predictors of happiness, married men are happier than single men (beta = 0.150). A test for differences in slopes based on the associated unstandardized coefficients and their standard errors found that the difference was not significant (Cohen, 1983). Marriage protects females just as much from unhappiness as it protects males. Cohabitation also protects both males and females from unhappiness. However, its beta coefficients are considerably smaller than those for marriage.

Table 3 presents the results with a binary variable added to represent the respondent's residence in a nation with a low divorce rate. This analysis is restricted to married persons, the target group of interest. Due to the fact that many of the national binary variables were a linear combination of the low rate of divorce and other variables, the national binary variables had to be omitted from this equation. Controlling for the other variables, living in nations with a low rate of divorce was associated with lower levels of reported happiness among the married. This was true for both females and males.

TABLE 2. EFFECT OF MARITAL STATUS ON GLOBAL HAPPINESS BY GENDER

Independent Variable	Females			Males			Difference in Slopes
	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta	z Test
Marital status							
Married	.200*	.020	.158	.179*	.021	.150	0.72
Cohabitant	.144*	.029	.050	.103*	.029	.038	1.00
Divorced	−.033	.037	−.009	−.130*	.048	−.027	1.60
Separated	−.128*	.049	−.024	−.111*	.057	−.019	−0.23
Widowed	−.043	.029	−.021	.017	.041	.005	−1.19
Financial satisfaction	.057*	.002	.221	.053*	.003	.213	1.11
Health	.142*	.006	.222	.126*	.007	.200	1.74
R^2	.23			.19			
F	107.23*			77.74*			
n	10,127			9,237			

Note: For the purposes of brevity and clarity, the coefficients for the control variables are not shown.
*$p < .05$.

In additional analyses, we determined that when the avenues to marriage are more open, happiness is generally at a higher level than when the avenues are less open. Married men in nations with high rates of marriage were happier than men in nations with low rates of marriage. The same relationship also held for married women. Persons in nations with high age at first marriage were less happy than persons in nations with a relatively low age at first marriage. This was true of both men and women.

In analyses not reported here, other structural features of the nation of the respondent were entered into the analysis. Due to multicollinearity problems, however, these had to be entered into separate equations. Persons in nations with high and medium levels of wealth (gross national product per capita) reported more happiness than persons in nations with a lower gross national product per capita. Persons in nations with low levels of income inequality were significantly less happy than persons in nations with high levels of inequality.

The last phase of the analysis explores the relationship of marital status and happiness within nations. Thus far, we have pooled the data from all 17 nations. However, this may mask the findings from one or more deviant nations where the relationship between happiness and marital status may not hold. Hence, we undertake a nation-specific analysis.

The model from Table 1, minus the 16 national binary variables, was replicated with each nation separately. These results are provided in Table 4. Controlling for the socioeconomic predictors, we found that being married was related to happiness in 16 of the 17 nations. The exception was Northern Ireland.

To assess whether or not the strength of the relationship between being married and happiness varies significantly around the world, we performed a z test for differences in unstandardized slopes (Cohen, 1983). The unstandardized regression slope for the U.S. served as the baseline of comparison. Only three of the 16 nations, Denmark, Iceland, and Spain, had unstandardized

TABLE 3. EFFECT OF LOCATION IN NATIONS WITH A LOW DIVORCE RATE ON HAPPINESS AMONG MARRIED PERSONS, BY GENDER

Variable	Females			Males		
	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta
Low divorce rate	−0.112*	0.017	−0.091	−0.130*	0.018	0.109
Medium divorce rate	−0.032*	0.018	−0.26	−0.001	0.018	0.001
F	126.0*			105.8*		
R^2	0.16			0.15		

Note: Controls for the sociodemographic variables are not shown for the purposes of brevity and clarity.
*$p < .05$.

TABLE 4. EFFECT OF BEING MARRIED ON HAPPINESS

Nation	b	SE	Beta	Difference in Slopes Test z Score
Australia	0.216*	0.081	0.182	0.85
Belgium	0.124*	0.060	0.100	−0.21
Britain	0.154*	0.053	0.132	0.23
Canada	0.184*	0.056	0.163	0.65
Denmark	0.287*	0.058	0.272	2.10*
France	0.157*	0.057	0.137	0.26
West Germany	0.120*	0.050	0.118	−0.30
Iceland	0.518*	0.072	0.463	4.60*
Ireland	0.154*	0.065	0.134	0.20
Italy	0.148*	0.072	0.111	0.11
Japan	0.183*	0.079	0.145	0.50
Netherlands	0.218*	0.056	0.188	1.00
Northern Ireland	0.070	0.123	0.058	−0.53
Norway	0.165*	0.055	0.142	0.38
Spain	0.290*	0.054	0.210	2.25*
Sweden	0.215*	0.070	0.193	0.94
United States	0.139*	0.040	0.112	

Note: Results for each of the 17 nations are from the 1981–1983 World Values Surveys. For the purposes of brevity and clarity, the coefficients for the control variables for each of the regressions are not shown.

*p < .05.

slopes for the married that were significantly different from the baseline slope.

In results not fully reported here, an inspection of the beta coefficients from these additional 17 regression models determined that marital status was the most important correlate of happiness in two nations (Denmark and Iceland). Financial satisfaction was the variable most closely tied to the variance in happiness in seven nations. Health was the most important correlate of happiness in eight nations.

In order to gain further insight into the structural determinants of happiness among married persons, we regressed the mean level of happiness in each of the 17 nations on structural characters taken from the cross-national literature on happiness (e.g., Inglehart, 1990; Vennhoven, 1991, 1994). These conditions included the level of economic development, income inequality, age at first marriage, marriage rate, and divorce rate. None of these variables was significantly related, however, to the mean level of reported happiness at either the zero order or the multivariate level of analysis. (Results not shown.) This may be due to the relative lack of variation in some of the variables because the sample is restricted to 17 industrial nations.

CONCLUSION

Research on marital status and happiness has tended to be restricted to the U.S. We extend the analysis to a set of 17 industrialized nations with diverse social and institutional frameworks. Controlling for sociodemographic variables, we found that married persons have a significantly higher level of happiness than persons who are not married. This effect was independent of financial and health-oriented protections offered by marriage and was also independent of other control variables, including ones for sociodemographic conditions and national character.

In 16 out of 17 analyses of the individual nations, marital status was significantly related to happiness. Further, the strength of the association between being married and being happy is remarkably consistent across nations. In only three nations was the coefficient of the married term significantly different from that for the U.S. The results offer perhaps the most sweeping and strongest evidence to date in support of the relationship between marital status and happiness.

The relationship between marital status and happiness was marked by two intermediary processes. Marriage increases financial satisfaction, which, in turn, increases happiness. Marriage also is associated with a relatively high level of perceived health, which, in turn, elevates happiness. These findings lend support to the hypothesis of social causation or marriage protection. The financial and health protection offered by marriage affects the level of happiness. In short, a spouse provides emotional support, helps to control the health-oriented behaviors of his or her partner, and contributes to household income. These findings on intermediary processes are largely consistent with recent work on other aspects of well-being, such as morbidity (e.g., Joung et al., 1997).

However, the findings on cohabitation offer mixed support for the social integration hypothesis. That married persons reported more happiness than single persons is consistent with the notion that married persons report higher levels of interaction than single persons. Cohabitants, who also have a live-in partner to enhance social integration, were happier than other categories of single persons. However, although persons who are married and persons who cohabit have a live-in partner in common, marriage increases happiness substantially more than cohabitation. Marriage was 3.4 times more closely associated with the variance in happiness than was cohabitation.

The larger effects of marriage, relative to cohabitation, on happiness cannot be fully explained

here. However, two of the standard, intermediary processes that increase happiness for the married did not do so for the cohabiting population. Unlike marriage, cohabitation was negatively associated with both financial satisfaction and health. Still, compared with remaining single, cohabiting was associated with modest gains in happiness. Evidently, the gains of cohabitation in areas such as social integration and emotional support must offset losses in areas such as financial satisfaction and health. Possibly there are selection processes at work, and cohabitants are fundamentally different from married persons to begin with. Perhaps cohabitants' levels of happiness fall short of those of married persons before marriage. Clearly, more work is needed on these unanticipated findings.

Marriage was not, however, the most important correlate of happiness. Reported health and financial satisfaction were the two principle predictors of happiness. Being married served as the third most important correlate of happiness. The only investigation of happiness that we could locate that included both indicators of health and financial security was done for a small sample in a rural community in Ontario, Canada (Michalos, 1983). It also found that health and financial security were the two leading predictors of happiness. In our study, however, marriage was more important than any of the remaining controls, including measures of religious involvement, age, gender, and national character.

Separate analyses for men and women determined that there was not a significant difference between the coefficients for marriage's effect on happiness by gender. This finding is consistent with the position of Horwitz et al. (1996) that, overall, marriage enhances the well-being of men and women about equally. Nevertheless, this finding needs to be taken with some caution. Although the relationship of happiness and marital status did not differ by gender, other measures of well-being (life satisfaction, anxiety) may follow a gendered pattern. More comparative research is needed on these matters.

Although much of the impact of marriage is mediated by its associations with health and financial satisfaction, a substantial and direct effect remained when these two processes were controlled. The residual variance unexplained by these intermediary processes may be due to social selection (Mastekaasa, 1992). That is, happier, healthier persons are more likely to enter marriage in the first place. Happy, cheerful, positive, and optimistic people are regarded as more attractive partners than unhappy, negative, brooding, and depressed ones.

The selectivity hypothesis might be extended to form a selectivity and alternatives hypothesis. That is, selectivity in partners operates before, during, and after marriage. When an alternative to a traditional or existing marital arrangement exists that appears to be better or more desirable, that alternative may be selected. Single persons may decide to simply live together (cohabit) rather than to marry. Unhappily married persons may choose to divorce rather than to remain married, resulting in a net effect of higher rates of happiness among those remaining married.

Factors that combine a selectivity process with alternative options can be noted in a variety of nontraditional lifestyles and changes that are taking place in marriages and families today: a delayed or later age of marriage, a phenomenal increase in the rates of nonmarital cohabitation, a steady increase in the number and percentage of women in the paid labor force, a decrease in time for joint marital activities, high rates of divorce and remarriage, a decrease in the number of children per family or household (Popenoe, 1988, 1993; Waite, 1995).

A limitation of our study is that its analysis deals with industrialized nations and, for the most part, Western industrialized nations. No data were available for other nations. Thus the extent to which similar patterns link marital status to levels of happiness is unknown. Further work is needed to explore this relationship for Eastern nations and nations undergoing economic development.

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