

“Differences in subjective well-being within households: An analysis of married and cohabiting couples in South Africa”

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Abstract

We investigate differences in subjective well-being (life satisfaction) within the household using matched data on co-resident couples drawn from the 2008 National Income Dynamics Study for South Africa. The majority of men and women in co-resident partnerships report different levels of subjective well-being. We use regression analysis first to explore the correlates of subjective well-being among women, and among men, who are married or cohabiting. We then estimate the predictors of within-couple differences in life satisfaction. Our results suggest that a number of correlates, related particularly to the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the household, differ by gender and also predict differences in subjective well-being within couples. For example, access to piped water on site increases the subjective well-being of women in comparison both to other married or cohabiting women and to the woman’s partner, but it does not account for differences in subjective well-being among married or cohabiting men. In contrast, the presence of young children in the household lowers the subjective well-being of women, while it has no effect on that of men. Furthermore, within couples, women’s relative satisfaction falls with the presence of young children in the household.

Key words: subjective well-being; life satisfaction; intra-household allocation

JEL Classifications: D13, D60, D63, I31

1. Introduction

Individual economic well-being is notoriously difficult to measure because some degree of income sharing is likely to occur within households. Income and expenditure measures of individual well-being are therefore typically derived from household aggregates which assume equal sharing within the household, even though this assumption has been called into question in a growing body of work (see Doss 2013 for a review of studies). In contrast, subjective measures of well-being, such as overall life satisfaction or happiness, are generally collected at the individual level, providing a window into the distribution of well-being inside the household. Significant variation in the reporting of individual subjective well-being within the household would challenge the idea of a unified household welfare/utility function.

In South Africa, prior to the release of the first wave of the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) of 2008, most empirical studies on subjective well-being relied on data collected in the 1993 Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) (Bookwalter and Dalenberg 2004; 2009; Kingdon and Knight 2006; 2007; Neff 2007; Powdthavee 2007a; b). This survey collected information on the *household's* level of satisfaction, as reported by the head of the household (or principal respondent), through a question formulated as follows: 'Taking everything into account, how satisfied is this household with the way it lives these days?' This question not only assumes that one person would be able to report objectively on the household's level of satisfaction, but more fundamentally, that there is a unified subjective well-being function at the household level.

Earlier studies on subjective well-being which used the PSLSD data responded either by assuming that the respondent would have reported on his/her own subjective well-being (Neff 2007), or that the respondent would be able to report reliably on the household's level of satisfaction (Kingdon and Knight 2006; 2007).¹ None of these studies however questioned the

¹ Kingdon and Knight (2007), for example, include a set of household variables as well as the individual characteristics of the respondent in their model predicting subjective well-being, and conclude that because the respondent's characteristics did not have an impact on the 'household's subjective wellbeing', he/she must have been reporting on household subjective well-being, rather than on own subjective well-being. See also Bookwalter et

notion of a unified household subjective well-being function and the possibility that individuals within the household could have very different levels of subjective well-being, which may be affected by different factors, and in varying ways.

In this paper, we use data from NIDS 2008 on individual subjective well-being reported by each adult in the household to investigate intra-household differences in subjective well-being in South Africa. We explore these differences through the prism of men and women who are living together as married or cohabiting couples. First, we describe the variation in subjective well-being between couples. We then use regression analysis to investigate if there are different factors that are correlated with the life satisfaction of women in relationships, compared to the life satisfaction of men in relationships. Lastly, we analyse within-couple differences in subjective well-being and explore which factors predict whether women are relatively more satisfied with their lives than their partners.

2. Review: Marriage and subjective well-being

The finding that people who are married are happier or have higher levels of subjective well-being than people who are not married has been widely documented in a large number of empirical studies across a range of countries (cf. Stack & Eshleman 1998; Diener et al 2000; Waite 2000; Stutzer and Frey 2006; Soons, Liefbroer & Kalmijn 2009). There are several possible reasons for why married people report higher levels of life satisfaction than people who are not married, widowed, divorced or separated. For example, marriage may provide emotional and financial security to couples and a source of support in the event of negative shocks, protection against loneliness and a ‘sense of belonging’ (Powdthavee 2009: 676). The positive association between being married and subjective well-being is reduced but remains significant after estimations control for the selection of happier people into marriage (Stutzer & Frey 2006).

There has been very little research, however, which compares subjective well-being among people who are married, and specifically between spouses. A few studies have found evidence of

al (2006) who conduct a similar analysis using data on ‘household’ subjective well-being from the 1998 October Household Survey.

a positive correlation between the subjective well-being of spouses (Schimmack & Lucas 2007; Powdthavee 2009), which may be explained by assortative matching, the shared social environment of spouses, and a ‘spillover effect of life satisfaction from one partner to another’ (Powdthavee 2009: 688). However, even when the subjective well-being of spouses is positively correlated, there may still be differences in life satisfaction between partners.

There is by now a substantial literature which challenges the conception of the married couple (and the household more broadly) as a co-operative unit with an aggregate utility function (cf. Folbre 1986; Thomas 1994; Katz 1995; Duflo 2003; Allendorf 2007). This research highlights how outcomes in the household (such as expenditure patterns, child health or production decisions) may be affected by who earns income or owns assets, and more generally, by the bargaining power² of spouses to influence decision-making and resource allocation. However, it is typically difficult to measure differences in economic well-being within marriage, because some degree of income-sharing occurs (and particularly in marriages with children and where there is a gender division of labour). In contrast, information on subjective well-being is easily collected at the individual level, and offers a means to explore the distribution of welfare within marriage.

Of the handful of studies which investigate ‘happiness gaps’ between spouses³, two explore the implications for the stability of marriage and find that differences in the subjective well-being of married partners predict the future dissolution of the marriage (Powdthavee 2009 on the UK; Guven et al 2012 on the UK, Germany and Australia). In this study, we ask the prior question: what factors or characteristics predict a happiness gap between couples? In particular, we explore whether factors associated with different responsibilities in terms of paid work, child-bearing and

² Bargaining power depends on each spouse's fallback position or outside option, which represents the welfare for the spouse if he or she left the marriage.

³ Some research probes differences in subjective measures between spouses, although not specifically differences in reported life satisfaction or happiness (Phipps et al 1996; Bonke and Browning 2009; De Henau and Himmelweit 2013). Phipps et al (1996) focus on satisfaction with leisure time within married couples in Canada; Bonke and Browning (2009) investigate satisfaction with financial wellbeing among childless married couples in Denmark; and De Henau and Himmelweit (2013) explore the members of male-female couple's satisfaction with household income using the British Household Survey Panel.

housework have different implications for the subjective well-being of married/cohabiting men and women in South Africa.

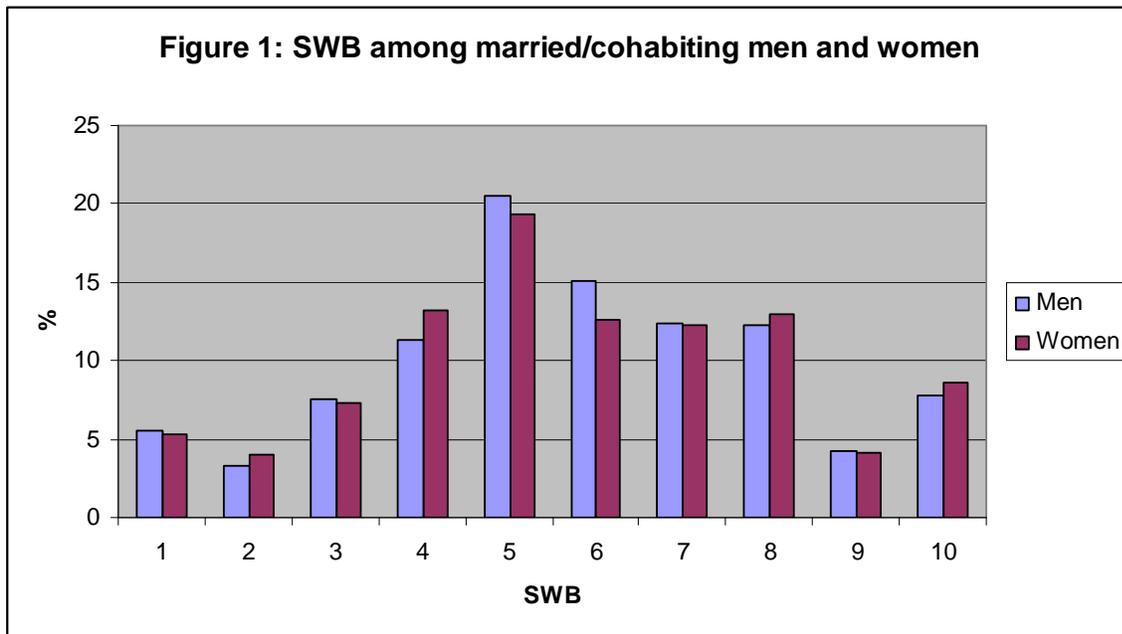
3. Data and descriptive findings

The data for the study come from the baseline wave of NIDS, a nationally representative household survey conducted in 2008 by the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town. In 2008, approximately 7 300 households or 28 000 individuals were interviewed. To explore intra-household differences in subjective well-being, we restrict the sample to married or cohabiting couples who are co-resident, which results in a sample of 1 390 couples (about 75 percent of whom are married).

The NIDS survey is particularly well-suited to a study of subjective well-being of this kind as, in addition to asking all resident adults in the household to report on their own subjective well-being, it collected information on a wide range of socio-economic and demographic variables commonly found to predict subjective well-being, among them, health, employment status, income, relative standing, marital status (as well as the length of marriage) and children in the household. Furthermore, because we are able to match spouses within the household, we can explore the relationship between partner characteristics and subjective well-being within couples.

In the NIDS questionnaire all individuals (aged 15 and older) were asked the following question: ‘Using a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means “very dissatisfied” and 10 means “very satisfied”, how do you feel about your life as a whole right now?’ As two separate groups, men and women who are co-resident in married or cohabiting relationships do not report very different levels of subjective well-being. This is evident from Figure 1, which shows the distribution of married or cohabiting men and women across the spectrum of life satisfaction. Similarly, the mean values of life satisfaction by gender are very similar for this group: 5.75 for women compared to 5.74 for men. These values are somewhat higher than the mean values of 5.38 and 5.54 for the full

sample of women and men respectively⁴, which is consistent with the general finding in the literature that people in married or cohabiting relationships are happier than those who are single or divorced. That couples are more similar in their subjective well-being than the general population of men and women has also been documented elsewhere, and is consistent with assortative mating in couples on happiness levels, a shared environment, and happiness ‘spillover effects’ in couples (Powdthavee 2009).



Source: NIDS 2008.

Note: The samples consist only of women or men who are married/cohabiting and co-resident

However, even though couples may be more similar than the general population in their subjective well-being, there are still substantial differences in the levels of satisfaction reported by men and women within couples. The data in Table 1 show that only 33 percent of couples report the same level of life satisfaction. In 16 percent of couples, women report subjective well-

⁴ A number of studies in the international literature find that on average there is little difference in subjective well-being by gender (cf. Shmotkin 1990; Kroll 2011; Della Guista et al 2011), although Della Guista et al (2011) find differences in the *factors affecting* the life satisfaction of men and women in the UK.

being that is at least two levels lower than men's (on the Likert scale of 1-10) and in 17 percent of couples, women report subjective well-being that is at least two levels higher than men's.⁵

Table 1. Differences in reporting on subjective well-being (SWB) and relative economic position (REP) among men and women

Difference in SWB level (SWB scale 1-10)	Percentage of couples	Difference in relative economic position (REP scale 1-6)	Percentage of couples
-9	0.58	-	-
-8	0.22	-	-
-7	0.07	-	-
-6	0.58	-	-
-5	0.94	-5	0.07
-4	2.16	-4	0.00
-3	3.38	-3	0.43
-2	7.91	-2	3.6
-1	18.85	-1	18.42
0	32.73	0	53.38
1	15.76	1	19.86
2	7.84	2	3.09
3	3.67	3	1.01
4	2.3	4	0.07
5	1.37	5	0.07
6	0.86	-	-
7	0.22	-	-
8	0.36	-	-
9	0.22	-	-

Source: NIDS 2008.

Note: The samples consist only of women or men who are married/cohabiting and co-resident. Negative numbers indicate that women reported lower levels than men.

Interestingly, differences in general life satisfaction within couples are larger than differences in their perceptions of economic ranking (see Table 1). In NIDS, all adults were asked to imagine a six-step ladder, where the poorest people in South Africa are on the bottom step and the richest are on the top step, and then they were asked 'On which step are you today?' In 54 percent of couples, partners reported the same economic rung; in only about four percent of couples did women report being at least two rungs lower than their partner and in only four percent did women report being at least two rungs higher than their partner.

⁵ If couples who have the largest gap in subjective well-being are more likely to end their partnership, then these descriptive statistics will also underestimate the size of happiness gaps within marriage or cohabiting relationships.

That there is a greater divergence within partnerships in overall life satisfaction than in perceived economic status, suggests that there are other factors beyond economic well-being that will affect women and men in married/cohabiting couples differently. We explore some of these in the next section where we look at what factors are correlated with the well-being of men and women in co-resident relationships.

4. Regression analysis

In the empirical analysis we first estimate separate subjective well-being regressions for married or cohabiting men and women, testing the significance of a wide array of individual and household level variables, many of which have been commonly included in subjective well-being equations. In addition, we match spouse/partner's information to each other and explore the relationship between subjective well-being and partner characteristics. In these regressions we are essentially looking at what factors are correlated with greater life satisfaction among married/cohabiting women, and what factors are correlated with greater life satisfaction among married/cohabiting men. We then estimate the predictors of within-couple difference in life satisfaction, where the difference is calculated as the female's life satisfaction level minus the male's life satisfaction level (resulting in a score of -9 to +9). Here we are asking what makes married/cohabiting women relatively more satisfied than their partners. We used Ordinary Least Squares to estimate the models for ease of exposition, although our results are robust to using ordered probit regressions.

The mean individual characteristics of married/cohabiting women and men are displayed in Table 2, and the mean characteristics of the households they live in are shown in Table 3. The average difference in age between men and women is just over four years, but there is barely any difference in the years of schooling attained (suggesting positive assortative matching on education). As we would expect, men are much more likely to be employed compared to women (66 percent compared to 41 percent), while women are far more likely to be not economically active (NEA) or unemployed. Similar percentages of married/cohabiting women and men self-assess their health status as very good or excellent, but women are more likely to report religion as important in their lives (95 percent versus 86 percent of men).

Table 2. Mean individual characteristics of married/cohabiting women and men

	Women		Men	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Dependent variable: SWB	5.75	2.39	5.74	2.33
Explanatory variables: Individual				
Age	44.01	13.65	48.30	14.24
Age ²	21.23	12.97	25.35	14.82
Years of schooling	7.75	4.40	7.64	4.66
African	0.63	0.48	0.63	0.48
Indian	0.02	0.15	0.02	0.15
Coloured	0.22	0.41	0.21	0.41
White*	0.13	0.34	0.13	0.34
Married	0.75	0.43	0.75	0.43
Years with partner	17.71	13.63	17.66	13.66
(Years with partner) ²	499.33	653.02	498.28	655.86
Employed	0.41	0.49	0.66	0.47
Not economically active	0.36	0.48	0.25	0.43
Unemployed (searching + non-searching)*	0.23	0.42	0.09	0.30
Very good health	0.48	0.50	0.49	0.50
Religious	0.95	0.22	0.86	0.35
Perceived richest third SA	0.04	0.19	0.04	0.18
Perceived middle third SA	0.51	0.50	0.49	0.50
Perceived lowest third SA*	0.45	0.50	0.47	0.50
N	1390		1390	

Notes: The samples consist only of women or men who are married/cohabiting and co-resident. * Omitted categories in the regressions.

Table 3. Mean household characteristics of married/cohabiting women and men

	Mean	Standard deviation
Explanatory variables: Household		
Log of per capita household income	6.80	1.25
Presence of very young child (<4)	0.33	0.47
Presence of young child (4-9)	0.38	0.48
Presence of older children (10-14)	0.42	0.49
Presence of non-biological children of mother	0.19	0.39
Presence of non-biological children of father	0.28	0.45
Urban formal	0.52	0.50
Urban informal	0.05	0.22
Rural formal	0.15	0.36
Tribal*	0.27	0.44
Piped water on site	0.71	0.45
N	1390	

Note: * Omitted category in the regressions.

As identified in the previous section, men and women have strikingly similar perceptions of where they rank from poorest to richest in South Africa, with the vast majority assessing their economic status either in the middle or lowest thirds of the distribution. The majority of the co-resident couples also live with children, and men are more likely than women to be living in a household with at least one child who is not biologically his own child (28 percent of men compared to 19 percent of women). Almost 60 percent of the households in our sample are situated in an urban area and just over 70 percent have access to piped water.

i) Differences in subjective well-being among women and men in partnerships

The results of the subjective well-being regressions for married/cohabiting women and men are displayed in Table 4. We show three specifications each for women and for men. The first specification includes individual, household and spouse characteristics, but excludes household income and perceived relative standing (as in De Henau and Himmelweit 2013), as these variables are highly correlated with employment status and we are particularly interested in the impact of the latter for men and women. The second specification includes the income and perceived relative standing variables, so that the independent relationship between employment status and subjective well-being can be examined, controlling for the implications that being employed, for example, will have on economic status. The third and final specification excludes the characteristics of the spouse, but includes the spouse's level of subjective well-being (Powdthavee 2009). Given our interest, we focus mostly on the gendered differences in the correlates of life satisfaction of married/cohabiting men and women in the discussion below.

A common finding in the international literature is that subjective well-being is U-shaped in age (cf. Blanchflower 2009; Stone, Schwartz, Broderik & Deaton 2010). In our sample, we find that only married/cohabiting women exhibit this typical pattern, and that the age-subjective well-being relationship for men is the inverse (although the coefficients are only marginally significant). To explain the U-shaped pattern, Stone et al (2010:9988) refer to various theories in the psychology literature which suggest that wisdom and emotional intelligence increase with age and that 'older people have an increased ability to self-regulate their emotions and view their

situations positively'.⁶ A further possible explanation, which could account for why we find gender differences in the relationship between age and subjective well-being, concerns the stresses of child-birth and child-rearing over the first part of women's adult years, which are not being adequately controlled for by the variables in our regression on the presence of children in the household.

There is a very large literature on the relationship between children and subjective well-being (cf. McLanahan & Adams 1987; Di Tella et al 2003; Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003; Kohler, Behrman & Skytthe 2005; Woo & Raley 2005; Umberson, Pudrovsak & Reczek 2010). A common finding is that having children at best, does not increase subjective well-being, and at worst, decreases subjective well-being in comparison to non-parents, and more so for women (cf. Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003; Dykstra and Keizer 2009). In addition, several studies find that subjective well-being is negatively correlated with minor children in particular, where the daily demands of parenting are greater (cf. Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003; Evenson & Simon 2005). Similarly, we find evidence of gender differences in the relationship between children and subjective well-being, and particularly in the case of younger children. Young children (aged 4 to 9) in the household are negatively and significantly correlated with women's life satisfaction only, while the presence of older children (10 to 14) increases the subjective well-being of both women and men (although the coefficient in the male regressions is significant in only one of the three specifications). These findings are consistent with the "costs" of children (in terms of time constraints, demands, stress) being particularly high for young children, and that these costs are borne predominantly by women. We do not find that non-biological children have an independent relationship to the subjective well-being for either men or women (as has been found elsewhere, Evenson & Simon 2005).

⁶ Also from the psychology literature, Shmotkin (1990: 206) refers to 'the decline of aspirations in the elderly when facing the diminishing alternatives of old age' and to the 'prolonged habituation and accommodation processes that the elderly undergo'.

Table 4. Estimating differences in SWB among married and cohabiting women and men, OLS coefficients

Dependent variable = SWB of woman or man	WOMEN			MEN		
	I	II	III	I	II	III
Individual						
Age	-0.078*	-0.077*	-0.016	0.072*	0.065*	0.032
Age ²	0.078*	0.074*	0.011	-0.061*	-0.059	-0.023
Years of schooling	0.054***	0.019	-0.003	0.046**	0.011	0.022
African	-1.066***	-0.664***	-0.457**	-0.738***	-0.241	0.086
Indian	0.778*	0.752*	0.650*	0.197	0.213	-0.161
Coloured	0.126	0.568**	0.250	0.243	0.732***	0.523**
Married	0.279*	0.129	0.193	0.051	-0.088	-0.175
Years with partner	-0.041**	-0.036*	-0.022	-0.034*	-0.026	-0.005
(Years with partner) ²	0.001**	0.001**	0.001*	0.001*	0.001	0.000
Employed	0.648***	0.469***	0.362***	0.706***	0.206	0.257
Not economically active	0.596***	0.601***	0.407***	0.293	0.055	0.270
Very good health	0.365***	0.367***	0.239**	0.382***	0.310**	0.307***
Religious	0.175	0.204	0.010	0.273	0.311*	0.166
Perceived richest third	-	1.882***	1.323***	-	1.860***	1.516***
Perceived middle third	-	0.930***	0.702***	-	0.809***	0.631***
Household						
Log (per capita hh income)	-	0.261***	0.053	-	0.298***	0.166**
Presence of v. young child (<4)	-0.078	-0.000	-0.121	0.156	0.205	0.181
Presence of young child (4-9)	-0.349***	-0.254**	-0.280**	-0.076	0.019	0.129
Presence of older child (10-14)	0.284**	0.330***	0.183*	0.197	0.254**	0.090
Presence of non-biological child	-0.177	-0.169	-0.158	-0.002	0.023	0.075
Urban formal	0.261	0.149	0.005	0.437**	0.368*	0.289*
Urban informal	-0.209	-0.274	-0.184	-0.139	-0.167	-0.052
Rural formal	-0.166	-0.094	-0.147	0.084	0.181	0.249
Piped water on site	0.483***	0.330*	0.298**	0.144	0.008	-0.178
Spouse characteristics						
Age	0.090**	0.091**	-	-0.025	-0.032	-
Age ²	-0.001**	-0.001**	-	0.000	0.000	-
Years of schooling	0.010	-0.017	-	0.051**	0.022	-
Employed	0.209	-0.175	-	0.413***	0.240	-
Not economically active	-0.248	-0.362	-	0.339**	0.311*	-
Very good health	0.067	0.050	-	0.166	0.230*	-
SWB of the spouse	-	-	0.463***	-	-	0.475***
Constant	3.923***	2.359**	2.484***	2.170**	0.781	-0.341
R ²	0.238	0.284	0.44	0.193	0.237	0.412
N	1390	1390	1390	1390	1390	1390

Source: NIDS (2008).

Notes: The samples consist only of women or men who are married/cohabiting and co-resident. The omitted categories are White, unemployed, perceived household income rank in the bottom third of the national income distribution, household is located in a traditional rural area, and the spouse is unemployed.

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.10.

Although being married compared to cohabiting is positively correlated with life satisfaction, this is only marginally significant in one of the female regressions.⁷ We also find some evidence that the duration of the relationship reduces life satisfaction (at a decreasing rate), and this relationship is somewhat stronger for women. This is consistent with work which identifies an ‘adaptation effect’ to marriage, i.e. that while marriage may increase subjective well-being, it then starts declining some years after marriage (although it is not clear if it falls all the way to its premarital level) (cf. Lucas & Clark 2006; Zimmermann & Easterlin 2006; Soons et al 2009).

As expected, being employed compared to unemployed increases the life satisfaction of both men and women, but the relationship is no longer significant for men once we control for income and relative economic standing in Regression II. This suggests that for men, the main benefits of employment are derived through greater income or economic status, while for women there are additional benefits. For example, employment might also increase women’s self-worth or their bargaining position in the household. Being not economically active rather than unemployed is also correlated with higher life satisfaction among women, while for men there is no significant difference between the two states. This is likely to be driven by the gendered differences in non-market activity: the majority of men who are not economically active report being either too old or sick to do work, whereas women are much more likely to be homemakers. In contrast, better self-assessed health status, a higher perceived relative standing, and absolute income (measured as the log of per capita household income) are all positively correlated with the life satisfaction of both men and women in co-resident relationships.

To capture the burden of housework in the family in the absence of time use data in NIDS, we include whether there is piped water in the dwelling or on site. (Approximately thirty per cent of couples live in households where this is not available.) We do not include whether the household has electricity or other services in addition, as these are highly correlated, and furthermore, fetching water for cooking and cleaning is likely to be one of the most onerous household tasks

⁷ Evidence from other countries, on whether people who are married are happier than people in cohabiting relationships, is mixed, with some studies finding that this is the case, and others that there is no difference between happiness levels (Soons et al 2009).

for women. We find a clear gender difference in all the estimations: women's life satisfaction rises significantly with access to piped water, but there is no relationship for men.

There are also gender differences in the relationship between subjective well-being and spouse/partner characteristics. Among women, only the age of the partner is a significant correlate of subjective well-being (as the male partner's age increases, women's life satisfaction increases at a decreasing rate). Among men, life satisfaction increases with their partner's education and if the partner is employed (rather than unemployed), but only when the estimations do not control for income and relative standing, suggesting that these partner attributes are beneficial to men particularly in terms of their economic worth. Men also report significantly higher subjective well-being if their partner is not economically active (rather than unemployed), even after controlling for income and relative standing. In contrast, subjective well-being among women is lower if their partner is not economically active, although the relationship is not significant. Again, this would be consistent with gender differences in why men and women are out of the labour force: men benefit from having 'housewives', while women will be worse off if men are either sick or too old to work. And lastly, men seem to be better off if their partner is in very good health (although this is only significant in Regression II), while the health of the woman's partner is a very small and insignificant correlate of her subjective well-being. A possible explanation is that men find caring for their partner a burden (so a healthy wife makes them happier), while women are more accepting of having to provide care for a partner.

In the final specification, we include the partner's life satisfaction in the regression but exclude partner characteristics (as these will be strongly correlated with partner life satisfaction). In line with the findings in Powdthavee (2009), we find evidence of strong positive spousal correlation in well-being⁸, and in our sample, the estimated coefficient is very similar for men and women. To the extent that we are controlling for a shared environment through many of our control variables, this effect is likely to also be picking up assortative matching on happiness and

⁸ It is important to note, however, that this relationship is likely to be overestimated as we have a select sample of married/cohabiting couples; couples for which the difference in life satisfaction between partners is greatest will have been more likely to terminate the relationship.

spillover effects i.e. that people feel happy (sad) when their spouses feel happy (sad) because they care for and identify with them. When we control for the partner's life satisfaction in Regression III, some of the other variables (such as age, the duration of the relationship and log income) lose significance as these are correlated with the life satisfaction of both the index person and their partner.

ii) Within-couple differences in subjective well-being

We now take further advantage of our data on matched couples to explore the happiness gap between couples. In particular, we investigate whether there are any significant predictors of within-couple differences in life satisfaction. Our dependent variable is calculated as the life satisfaction value of the female in the couple minus the life satisfaction of her partner and ranges from -9 to +9. The explanatory variables include some individual and household characteristics as above, as well as the difference between the female and male values of certain key attributes such as age, education, employment status, religion, health and perceived relative standing. Table 5 presents the results of two specifications: as in Table 4, the income and relative standing variables are excluded in the first regression and included in the second. A positive coefficient on a variable means that, within couples the woman's life satisfaction is increased relative to that of her partner, while a negative coefficient means that her life satisfaction is decreased relative to her partner.

We do not find many significant individual or household-level correlates of within-couple differences in subjective well-being, but as in the separate regressions for men and women, characteristics associated with a traditional gender division of labour in the household also help explain the happiness gap within couples.⁹ In particular, women report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than their partner if there are young children in the household, and significantly higher levels if there is piped water in the dwelling place or on site. A number of the difference variables also predict relative subjective well-being in ways that would be expected: women report being significantly more satisfied than their partner if their health is

⁹ We tried including a full set of individual characteristics (for men and women) in these happiness gap equations but none was significant so we chose to present the more parsimonious results.

relatively better than their partner's, and if they are more likely to be employed or not economically active than their partner (compared to being unemployed). Regression II shows that women are also happier than their partner if they assess their relative economic status more highly than their partner does. Adding the income and relative standing variables to the second specification makes very little difference to the results (the coefficient on the employment difference variable falls somewhat as we might expect given the correlation between these variables).

Table 5. Within-couple differences in subjective well-being, OLS coefficients

Dependent variable = SWB woman - SWB man	I	II
Individual characteristics of the woman		
Age	-0.028	-0.024
Age ²	0.017	0.015
African	-0.105	-0.269
Indian	0.710*	0.688*
Coloured	0.045	-0.099
Married	0.171	0.195
Years with partner	-0.009	-0.013
(Years with partner) ²	0.000	0.000
Household		
Log (per capita household income)	-	-0.087
Presence of very young child (<4)	-0.194	-0.185
Presence of young child (4-9)	-0.255**	-0.254**
Presence of older children (10-14)	0.073	0.052
Presence of non-biological children of man	-0.056	-0.098
Presence of non-biological children of woman	-0.057	-0.073
Urban formal	-0.220	-0.221
Urban informal	-0.092	-0.128
Rural formal	-0.241	-0.278
Piped water on site	0.282	0.307*
Differences between partners (woman - man)		
Age	-0.004	-0.005
Years of schooling	0.021	0.014
Employed	0.329**	0.266**
Not economically	0.354**	0.323**
Very good health	0.254**	0.216**
Religious	-0.096	-0.047
Perceived relative economic status	-	0.448***
Constant	0.881	1.487*
R ²	0.0304	0.0319
N	1390	1390

Source: NIDS (2008).

Note: The samples consist only of matched cohabiting or married couples who are co-resident.

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.10.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we explored differences in the correlates of subjective well-being among men and women who are married or in cohabiting relationships. There has been very little research that has investigated happiness gaps among couples, and the few studies that have been conducted have emphasised a positive correlation in life satisfaction between partners. Our objective was to probe further and investigate whether there are characteristics that predict when happiness levels among partners diverge, and in so doing, shed light on the variation in subjective well-being within the household.

Using data on individual life satisfaction from NIDS 2008, we found that only a third of married/cohabiting men and women report the same level of subjective well-being as their partner. We explored these differences further by asking what makes married/cohabiting men and women happy, and what makes them relatively happier than their partner? We found that while being in very good health and having higher income per capita or perceived relative economic standing increases both men's and women's subjective well-being, a number of factors, related particularly to the roles and responsibilities of men and women in couples, are differentially related to subjective well-being. For example, among women, reported life satisfaction is negatively correlated with the presence of young children in the household but positively correlated with having piped water on site (which is likely to be proxying for a greater level of household services more generally). Among men, household services and the presence of young children seem to have no appreciable relationship with their life satisfaction, consistent with the burden of housework and childcare falling mainly on women. In the regressions which estimate differences in subjective well-being among couples, women are also happier than their partners if there is piped water on site and if there are no young children in the household. The fact that women's subjective well-being is U-shaped in age (while for men the inverse applies) might also indicate that for women, the earlier part of their adult lives, in which the burden of child-rearing and the associated housework is greatest, is particularly challenging.

The regression analysis further suggests that there are gender differences in the relationship between employment status and life satisfaction. Married/cohabiting women are more satisfied

with their lives if they are employed compared to unemployed independent of the effects on economic status, possibly reflecting that women derive greater self-worth or decision-making power in the household, for example, from being employed. Among married/cohabiting men, the relationship between being employed and life satisfaction seems to derive predominantly from increased income and perceptions of higher relative economic status. Furthermore, women are happier if they are not economically active compared to unemployed, whereas men are not, as the reason for their inactivity is generally that they are either too sick or too old to work (while for women they are more likely to be homemakers).

In terms of spouse characteristics, for men, a partner who is in very good health or is not economically active increases their subjective well-being, while for women neither of these partner characteristics is a significant correlate. These findings are also consistent with a gender division of labour in the household, whereby men benefit from the caring labour that women provide, especially when they are out of the labour force, while for women, husbands who are not economically active are less likely to be engaged in home production or care (particularly if they report being too old or too sick to work).

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