

# Marriage at the Extremes: Comparing Union Happiness in Marriage and Cohabitation

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## Abstract

Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, this study compares how happy married and cohabiting individuals rate their union. Unlike previous studies that used linear regressions and focused on mean happiness, we used loglinear models to analyze two separate dimensions of happiness: the tendency to report the union as happy versus unhappy, and the tendency to report an extreme versus moderate rating of union happiness. We find that the tendency to report a happy versus an unhappy rating does not differ between married and cohabiting women, but is higher among married than cohabiting men, and the tendency to report an extreme versus moderate rating, both happy and unhappy, is higher among married than cohabiting individuals. The results are consistent with selection processes, and with expectations about how commitment to the union may affect union happiness ratings based on behavioral and socio-psychological processes.

# 1 Introduction

A majority of American adults are spending a significant portion of their life in cohabitation and an increasing proportion of children are being born or moving into a cohabiting household (Bumpass and Raley 1995). How does the quality of these unions compare to marriage? Cohabitation is relatively short-term, with about half not lasting beyond one year, and only 2% beyond 10 years (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Bumpass and Lu 2000). While they are more unstable and more likely to break up, a majority of cohabiting unions convert to marriage, and cohabitation has become the modal path to marriage (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

There is a growing literature comparing how married and cohabiting individuals rate their union with respect to happiness. Studies using the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) found that the mean level of happiness is higher in marriage than in cohabitation (Brown and Booth 1996; Brown 2003; Nock 1995). Studies using the two waves of the NSFH (1987-1988 and 1992-1994) found that marriage among cohabitators is associated with an improvement in union happiness, compared with those who remain cohabiting (Brown 2004), and long-term cohabitation is especially detrimental to union happiness (Skinner, Bahr, Crane and Call 2002). The lower mean level of union happiness in cohabitation relative to marriage is also confirmed in a 17-nation study using data from the World Values Study (Stack and Eshleman 1998).

A limitation of the previous studies is that they all focused on the mean, although union happiness is usually measured on an ordinal scale (7 points in the NSFH and 3 points in the World Values Study). It is generally inappropriate to treat it as continuous. A few extreme reports can have a big impact on the mean. Moreover, the mean, as one summary measure, captures only one dimension of the full distribution. Distributions for the married and cohabiting population can be very different while having the same mean, and different happiness means may provide no information about the spread of the distributions, for example. Married individuals may be not

only more likely to be happy and to be happier, but also more likely to be unhappier. These union differences in happiness, however, would not be revealed in a comparison of the means. To overcome the above limitations, and to complement and extend previous studies, we examine dimensions of union happiness not captured by the mean. Specifically, we compare two separate dimensions of happiness: the tendency to report the union as happy versus unhappy, and the tendency to report an extreme versus moderate rating of union happiness.

We use loglinear models developed by Sobel to analyze union happiness reported by married and cohabiting individuals in the National Survey of Families and Households. Previous studies treated levels of happiness reported on an ordinal scale as continuous. We maintain the ordinal scale and make full use of the information provided, without assuming reported happiness scores to be equidistance, as implicitly assumed in previous studies.

## 2 Data

The analysis uses data from the National Survey of Families and Households. The first wave of the survey (NSFH1), conducted during 1987–1988, is a national probability sample of 13007 respondents (i.e., primary respondents) representing the US non-institutionalized population aged 19 years and over. The primary respondent received a person-to-person interview and filled out a self-enumerated questionnaire. If appropriate, a separate self-enumerated questionnaire was filled out by his or her married or cohabiting partner (i.e., the secondary respondent). Between 1992–1994, a follow-up survey (NSFH2) of the original sample (including the partners) was conducted.

The analytic sample is based on NSFH1 but uses NSFH2 if the union happiness variable is missing in NSFH1 due to nonresponse, or the respondent not being in a union, or the respondent being present only in NSFH2 in the case of a new partner, but has a valid response in NSFH2. This is done to maximize the sample size. For

the same purpose, both the primary and the secondary respondent are used. The analysis is done separately for men and women to avoid the dependency within each union, since observations from the same union are correlated.

The analytic sample is restricted to blacks or whites who are between the age of 19 and 55, and married or cohabiting at the time of interview with union length less than 10 years. The age and union length restriction are imposed to make more homogeneous comparisons because cohabitation is a more recent social phenomenon, and tends to be short-term. Other racial and ethnic groups are excluded because of the small number of cases. The restricted male and female sample of respondents in a union have 3824 and 4126 cases, respectively. After deleting cases missing for union happiness, the final overall male and female sample have 3665 and 3970 cases, respectively.

### 3 Preliminary Results

We find that married and cohabiting women do not differ in the tendency to be happy, but that married men are more likely to be happy than cohabiting men. This is consistent with the existing literature suggesting that marriage is more beneficial to the well-being of men than women (Nock 1998).

We also find that for both men and women, the married population, compared with cohabitators, has a greater proportion for both extreme happiness and extreme unhappiness. Moreover, cohabitators are more likely to choose the middle category of the happiness scale (i.e., neither happy nor unhappy). The differences are statistically significant at  $\alpha = .05$ .

Figure 1 presents two graphs (for men and women, respectively) for the ratio of happiness probabilities for married over cohabitating individuals. For both men and women, the observed and fitted curves have a U-shape, rising high at both ends of the scale and dipping low in the middle. This indicates that compared with cohabitators, married individuals are more likely to choose a more extreme, and less likely to choose

a more moderate category of happiness and unhappiness.

However, the graph for women is symmetric, indicating that married and cohabiting individuals are equally to be happy versus unhappy. This differs from the asymmetry in the graph for men, indicating that married men are more likely to be extremely happy than cohabiting men.

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Figure 1: Probability Ratio for Union Happiness, Marriage over Cohabitation, Observed (O) and Fitted (F), Male and Female, NSFH

