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# Consequences of relationship status and quality for subjective well-being

**Claire M. Kamp Dush**

*Cornell University*

**Paul R. Amato**

*The Pennsylvania State University*

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the links among relationship status, relationship happiness, and a latent measure of subjective well-being. Using the study of Marital Instability over the Life Course, we found that married individuals reported the highest level of subjective well-being, followed (in order) by individuals in cohabiting relationships, steady dating relationships, casual dating relationships, and individuals who dated infrequently or not at all. Individuals in happy relationships reported a higher level of subjective well-being than did individuals in unhappy relationships, irrespective of relationship status. Even with relationship happiness controlled, however, relationship status was associated with subjective well-being. A longitudinal analysis suggested that shifting into more committed relationships was followed by improvements in subjective well-being. Little support was found for the assumption that people with a high level of well-being select themselves into more committed relationships.

**KEY WORDS:** cohabitation • dating • marriage • relationship happiness • relationship status • subjective well-being

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Most individuals make their first foray into romantic relationships in adolescence and continue to explore different types of relationships

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throughout the early adulthood years. Romantic relationships – which range from casual dating to marriage – have the potential to affect people's mental health, physical health, sexuality, and financial status. Although a great deal of research has focused on marriage, few studies have examined how indicators of well-being vary across other relationship statuses, such as casual dating, dating one person steadily, and cohabitation. This article examines the links between different relationship statuses and subjective well-being in early adulthood. Our article makes three contributions to this literature. First, we assess the notion that relationship statuses form a continuum of commitment, with more committed relationship statuses promoting higher levels of well-being. Second, we consider whether being in a committed relationship makes a contribution to well-being that is independent of relationship happiness. And third, we use longitudinal data to see if relationship status has implications for well-being that are independent of selection factors. Although this analytic strategy has been used with respect to entry into marriage, it has not been applied to other relationships statuses, such as cohabitation and steady dating relationships.

### **Well-being as a construct**

Well-being is a relatively stable attribute that reflects the extent to which people experience positive affect and have favorable views of themselves and their lives. Two traditions of research on well-being are present in the literature. The first, which focuses on subjective well-being, is based on the premise that although individuals live in objective environments, they respond primarily to their subjectively defined worlds (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). The two components of subjective well-being that have been examined most frequently are life satisfaction and general happiness (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Research has shown that people with high levels of subjective well-being also report low levels of chronic, negative affect (Bradburn, 1969).

The second tradition, which focuses on psychological well-being, grew out of formulations of adult development and personal growth (Keyes et al., 2002). Ryff's (1989) widely used multidimensional model of psychological well-being includes self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, autonomy, purpose in life, and personal growth. Despite these separate traditions, measures of subjective and psychological well-being tend to correlate positively with each other and show similar patterns of correlations with external variables (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003). Moreover, although self-esteem appears frequently in the research on psychological well-being, factor analytic studies indicate that self-esteem loads on factors of subjective as well as psychological well-being (Keyes et al., 2002). These studies suggest that, along with life satisfaction and general happiness, low negative affect and positive self-esteem are components of subjective well-being. We incorporate information on all four components in the present study.

### **The influence of relationship status on well-being**

Prior research indicates that married individuals have higher levels of well-being than do individuals who are never married, separated, divorced, or widowed (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983; Lee, Seccombe, & Sheehan, 1991; Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990; Waite, 1995). A few studies have found that cohabitators occupy a position between marriage and being single, with cohabitators reporting lower levels of well-being than married individuals but higher levels of well-being than unpartnered individuals (Brown, 2000; Horwitz & White, 1998; Kurdek, 1991).

Why do married individuals have higher levels of well-being than single individuals? Three perspectives may explain this association. One perspective asserts that the association between relationship status and well-being is due to selection, with well-adjusted individuals being more likely than poorly adjusted individuals to get married and stay married. Evidence from longitudinal research, however, consistently suggests that marriage has a positive influence on well-being and mental health even after controlling for selection factors (Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996; Kim & McHenry, 2002; Waite, 1995; Williams, 2003). Married couples also have a higher standard of living than do cohabiting partners or single individuals (Nock, 1998; Waite, 1995). Nevertheless, the boost in positive affect associated with marriage does not appear to be due primarily to economic factors (Brown, 2000; Ross et al., 1990).

The second and most commonly accepted explanation for the link between marriage and well-being refers to social support and social integration. The theoretical and empirical literature indicates that individuals who are embedded in networks of supportive and helpful others tend to have better physical and emotional health, and higher levels of life satisfaction – findings supported by hundreds of studies (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Social support from significant others not only has direct benefits for well-being, but also buffers individuals from the ill effect of stressful life events, such as unemployment, accidents, illnesses, or periods of low income (House et al., 1988). Although various types of social involvement promote social integration, most research has focused on marriage as a key source of social support (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). According to this literature, the social support provided by spouses and the satisfaction gained from being in long-term, committed relationships accounts for much of the emotional benefits of marriage.

A third perspective refers to sociological views of the self. The structural symbolic interactionism perspective (Stryker & Burke, 2002; Stryker & Statham, 1985) views the self as comprised of the various roles that people play, such as spouse, partner, sibling, friend, parent, and employee. These roles are organized hierarchically, with higher order roles contributing more to people's core identities than lower order roles. Commitment refers to the extent to which an individual values a particular identity, which, in turn, is related to the perceived benefits of the social relationships linked to that identity, as well as the perceived costs of losing those relationships if that identity were to be abandoned. Roles that involve a high level of

commitment make especially strong contributions to people's sense of self. Whereas the social support and integration perspective assumes that marriage (and other close relationships) benefit people by providing emotional support, especially in times of stress or crisis, structural symbolic interactionism assumes that individuals in committed role relationships (such as marriage) experience a stronger sense of identity and self-worth than do individuals in less committed role relationships (such as casual dating). Similarly, Leary (1999) argued that self-esteem is based on the extent to which people believe that others view them as valuable relational partners.

### **The continuum of commitment**

Although the link between marital status and well-being has been widely replicated, most studies have failed to make distinctions between the relationship statuses of unmarried individuals. For example, prior research usually combines people who are cohabiting, dating one person steadily, and dating multiple people, despite the fact that these relationship statuses differ substantially. The work of Ross (1995) is an exception. Ross proposed that romantic relationships form a continuum, with married individuals having stronger 'attachments' than cohabiting individuals, and cohabiting individuals having stronger attachments than individuals who are dating steadily (but not living together). Ross found that married individuals had the lowest level of depression, followed by cohabiting individuals, individuals with partners outside the household, and individuals without partners. Ross's research suggests a positive association between the emotional bonds implied in a relationship and the extent to which the relationship protects people from depression.

Although Ross's study provides the starting point for our research, we argue that romantic relationships are better conceptualized as a continuum of commitment rather than attachment for two reasons. First, the term 'attachment' is confusing because it suggests a basis in attachment theory, which Ross did not imply. Second, some married individuals are happy with their relationships, whereas other married individuals are unhappy. In other words, married individuals do not necessarily have stronger emotional bonds with their partners than do individuals in other types of relationships. Irrespective of happiness, casual dating, steady dating, cohabitation, and marriage imply increasingly higher levels of relationship commitment.

We use the term commitment in two senses. First, commitment implies a long-term time horizon. Consistent with this view, marriages tend to last longer than do cohabitating relationships, and cohabiting relationships, in turn, tend to last longer than do dating relationships. In the current data set, for example, the median duration of marriage was 6 years, the median duration of cohabiting relationships was 1 year and 6 months, and the median duration of steady dating relationships was 11 months. Second, commitment is relevant to the structural symbolic interactionist perspective, which argues that commitment to a role (or relationship) reflects the extent to which the role (or relationship) is a fundamental component of a person's

identity. We assume that marriage is a more salient basis for personal identity than is cohabitation, and cohabitation, in turn, is a more salient basis for personal identity than is being in a steady dating relationship.

### **The influence of relationship quality on well-being**

Although relationship status may be related to well-being in general, this association is likely to be contingent on the quality of the relationship. A number of studies have shown that happily married individuals have better mental health and higher levels of well-being than do unhappily married individuals (Williams, 2003; see Glenn, 1990, for a review) – a finding that reflects the heterogeneity of marital relationships. Indeed, Gove et al. (1983) found that it is better to live alone than to be in a marriage characterized by a lack of consideration and caring. In their study, individuals who were moderately happy with their marriages were no less distressed than unmarried individuals, but individuals who were not happy with their marriages were more distressed than unmarried individuals. Ross (1995) also found that unpartnered individuals reported significantly less depression than did individuals in unhappy relationships. These studies suggest that marriage and other romantic relationships enhance well-being, but only to the extent that these relationships are mutually supportive and rewarding. Indeed, being in a discordant relationship may be worse than being in no relationship at all.

### **Hypotheses**

Our first goal was to examine whether the level of commitment implied in a relationship is related to subjective well-being.

*H1:* Relationship statuses form a continuum of commitment, with people in more committed relationships experiencing higher levels of subjective well-being than people in less committed relationships. Specifically, we hypothesize that the mean level of subjective well-being is highest among married individuals, followed (in order) by cohabiting individuals, individuals dating one person steadily, individuals dating multiple people, and individuals not dating at all.

Based on prior research linking relationship happiness to well-being, we also test the following hypothesis:

*H2:* Relationship happiness is positively associated with subjective well-being.

Being in a committed relationship may confer benefits that go beyond those of being in a happy relationship. Consistent with the social integration perspective, the long-term time horizon of committed relationships may provide people with a sense of security and stability, even if they are only moderately happy with their partners. Indeed, people in committed relationships may be willing to endure periods of unhappiness with their partners because they assume that their interpersonal problems eventually can be repaired. In support of this reasoning, Brown (2000) found that the

low level of depression among married individuals (compared with cohabitators) was a function of perceived relationship stability (which was substantially higher among married individuals) rather than relationship satisfaction. Moreover, marriage is a socially valued institution that confers status – as well as legal rights – on spouses. Therefore, the status of being married, independently of the quality of the marriage, may provide benefits to individuals. If committed relationships benefit people through mechanisms other than satisfaction, then relationship status should be associated with subjective well-being even with relationship happiness controlled statistically. These considerations lead to the third hypothesis.

*H3:* With relationship happiness controlled statistically, subjective well-being continues to be highest among married individuals, lowest among individuals in steady relationships, and intermediate among cohabiting individuals.

As we noted earlier, the association between relationship status and well-being may be due to selection, with well-adjusted individuals being more likely than poorly adjusted individuals to move into committed relationships. By analyzing two waves of data, we are able to determine if people with high levels of subjective well-being are more likely than people with low levels of subjective well-being to shift into more committed relationships (the central assumption of the selection perspective). We also are able to determine if shifting into a more committed relationship increases subjective well-being, net of earlier levels of subjective well-being (the central assumption underlying the continuum of commitment). For these reasons, we formulate *H4* (which is based on the selection perspective) and *H5* (which is based on the assumption that relationship status affects well-being).

*H4:* People with high levels of subjective well-being at time 1 are more likely than people with low levels of subjective well-being to shift upward in the continuum of commitment between time 1 and time 2. Shifting into more committed relationships is not followed by an increase in subjective well-being.

*H5:* People with high levels of subjective well-being at time 1 are no more likely than people with low levels of subjective well-being to shift upward in the continuum of commitment between time 1 and time 2. Shifting into more committed relationship statuses, however, is followed by an increase in subjective well-being.

### **Relationship status and gender**

Early research suggested that marriage benefits men more than women in terms of health and well-being (Bernard, 1982; Gove et al., 1983), although later studies have not supported this notion (Ross, 1995; Waite, 1995). Nock (1998) argued that marital quality is related more strongly to the well-being of wives than of husbands, whereas the status of being married is more strongly related to the well-being of husbands than of wives. This finding has not been widely replicated, however. Moreover, few studies have



considered gender differences in relationship statuses other than marriage. Overall, the extent to which gender moderates the links between relationship status, relationship happiness, and well-being is unclear. For these reasons, we explore the possibility that the links between relationship status, relationship happiness, and subjective well-being differ for men and women.

## Method

### Sample

The analysis is based on the study of Marital Instability over the Life Course (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1998). Telephone interviewers used a random-digit-dialing procedure to obtain a national sample of 2033 married individuals 55 years of age and under in 1980. The response rate was 65%, and the refusal rate was 18%, with the remaining 17% representing individuals who could not be reached after 20 telephone calls. The 1980 sample, when compared with census data, was representative of the U.S. population with respect to age, race, household size, number of children in the household, home ownership, and region of the country. (For additional reports based on this data set, see Amato & Booth, 1997; Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1985.)

In 1992, interviewers contacted 471 adult offspring (19 years of age or older) of the original respondents. An additional 220 offspring who reached the age of 19 after 1992 were interviewed in 1997. These figures represent a response rate of 80% across all eligible adult offspring. Only one child per family was interviewed. The cross-sectional sample for our study consisted of pooled data from the 471 young adults interviewed in 1992, and the 220 young adults interviewed in 1997, for a total sample size of 691. The median age of respondents was 23. The longitudinal sub-sample included data from interviews conducted in 1997 with 426 (90%) of the 471 young adults first interviewed in 1992.

### Variables

**Relationship status.** Of the 691 respondents, 217 (31%) were married at the time of the first interview and another 52 respondents (8%) were cohabiting (not married). Respondents who were not residing with a partner responded to a series of questions about their dating experiences during the previous year. On the basis of these questions, we categorized respondents into three additional groups: 204 respondents (30%) were dating one person steadily, 144 respondents (21%) had dated someone during the previous month but were not dating one person steadily, and 74 respondents (11%) had not dated anyone during the previous month. Among respondents dating multiple people (but not dating one person steadily), the number of people dated in the last year ranged from 2 to 20 with a median of 3. For a description of all variables by relationship status, see Table 1.

**Relationship happiness.** We used a seven-item scale to measure relationship happiness among respondents who were married, cohabiting, or dating someone steadily. Respondents rated their level of happiness with (i) the extent to which their partners understand them, (ii) the amount of love they receive

**TABLE 1**  
Means and standard deviations by relationship status

Variable	Married		Cohabiting		Steady dating		Dating multiple people		Not dating	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Relationship happiness	2.62	(0.35)	2.61	(0.38)	2.64	(0.37)	3.29	(0.42)	3.34	(0.40)
Self-esteem	3.39	(0.39)	3.29	(0.37)	3.36	(0.40)	1.76	(0.39)	1.79	(0.38)
Distress	1.63	(0.35)	1.69	(0.35)	1.68	(0.35)	3.55	(0.54)	3.50	(0.71)
Life satisfaction	3.79	(0.59)	3.70	(0.54)	3.65	(0.57)	2.18	(0.50)	2.16	(0.57)
Life happiness	2.47	(0.52)	2.46	(0.50)	2.39	(0.53)	22.39	(3.78)	23.98	(4.73)
Age	27.93	(4.61)	24.48	(4.50)	22.51	(3.80)	14.16	(1.81)	14.50	(2.00)
Education	14.44	(2.23)	14.27	(2.16)	14.18	(2.00)	43.06		44.59	
Female (%)	51.15		53.85		52.94		6.29		8.47	
Nonwhite (%)	8.29		7.69		9.80		144		74	
N	217		52		204					

Note. For categorical variables, percentages are substituted for means.

from their partners, (iii) the extent to which they and their partners agree about things, (iv) the activities they share with their partners, (v) their partners' faithfulness, and (vi) the overall quality of the relationship (1 = *not very happy*, 2 = *pretty happy*, 3 = *very happy*). A final item asked respondents to compare their relationship with most other relationships (1 = *not as good as most*, 2 = *about the same as most*, 3 = *better than most*). The total score was based on the mean of the seven items ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Prior work indicates that this scale correlates significantly with other variables that, on the basis of theory, should be related to relationship happiness. For example, among married individuals, relationship happiness is positively correlated with the frequency of spousal interaction and negatively correlated with marital conflict and the likelihood of divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997; Booth et al., 1985).

**Subjective well-being.** Subjective well-being was assessed with four measures: life satisfaction, general happiness, distress symptoms, and self-esteem. Life satisfaction was based on the amount of satisfaction that people derived from specific aspects of their lives, including home, neighborhood, relatives, friends, job, financial situation, and leisure pursuits (1 = *not very satisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*). We used the mean of the ratings as an overall measure of life satisfaction ( $\alpha = .65$ ). Measures of life satisfaction (similar to our measure) are positively correlated with measures of mental health, physical health, education, income, and (the absence of) everyday stressful events (Amato & Booth, 1997; Campbell, 1981; Louis & Zhao, 2002).

General happiness is a positive emotional state that persists over extended periods, irrespective of temporary fluctuations in affect level. The single-item rating of general life happiness was: 'Overall, how happy would you say you are these days? Would you say you are (1) *not very happy*, (2) *pretty happy*, or (3) *very happy*.' Prior research shows that self-reported happiness is positively correlated with measures of health, education, income, and religiosity (Amato & Booth, 1997; Argyle, 1999; Campbell, 1981).

Distress was measured with the Langner (1962) scale. Items included, 'How often in the last year have you found yourself wondering if anything is worthwhile anymore?' and 'How often in the last year did you feel isolated and alone, somewhat apart from others, even among friends?' (1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*). The mean of the items served as the measure of distress ( $\alpha = .73$ ). Studies have demonstrated that this scale reliably distinguishes between psychiatric patients and individuals not in treatment, and is associated in the expected direction with stressful events such as divorce, unemployment, and crime victimization (Amato & Booth, 1997; Cochrane, 1980; Langner, 1962).

Finally, we measured self-esteem, which refers to the value that one attaches to the self. We relied on the Rosenberg (1965) scale for this purpose. Sample items included, 'On the whole, I am satisfied with myself' and 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities' (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The mean of the items served as the scale score ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Prior research indicates that this scale correlates positively with measures of mental health, social support, education, and occupational success (Amato & Booth, 1997; Owens, Stryker, & Goodman, 2001; Rosenberg, 1965).

**Control variables.** Control variables included age, race, gender, and education. Age and education were coded in years. Race was coded 1 = *nonwhite* and 0 = *White*. Gender was coded 1 = *female* and 0 = *male*.

**TABLE 2**  
Correlations between all variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Married	1.00													
2. Cohabiting	-.19*	1.00												
3. Steady dating	-.44*	-.18*	1.00											
4. Dating multiple people	-.37*	-.16*	-.35*	1.00										
5. Not dating	-.21*	-.09*	-.20*	-.17*	1.00									
6. Relationship happiness	-.01	-.02	.02	—	—	1.00								
7. Self-esteem	.09*	-.04	.03	-.06	-.08*	.24*	1.00							
8. Distress symptoms	-.12*	-.01	-.02	.11*	.07	-.32*	-.38*	1.00						
9. Life satisfaction	.15*	.02	-.01	-.11*	-.08*	.31*	.31*	-.40*	1.00					
10. Life happiness	.15*	.06	.04	-.17*	-.12*	.42*	.34*	-.46*	.44*	1.00				
11. Age	.45*	-.02	-.24*	-.21*	-.02	-.06	.06	.03	.07	-.00	1.00			
12. Female	.02	.02	.04	-.09*	.01	.07	.03	.06	.06	.11*	.01	1.00		
13. Nonwhite	.00	-.01	.04	-.04	.00	-.03	.00	-.03	-.02	-.05	-.05	.02	1.00	
14. Education	-.07	-.05	.03	.05	.04	.10*	.14*	-.05	.07	.10*	.18*	.11*	-.04	1.00

Note. *N* = 691, except for correlations involving relationship happiness (*N* = 473).  
\* *p* < .05 (two-tailed).

## Results

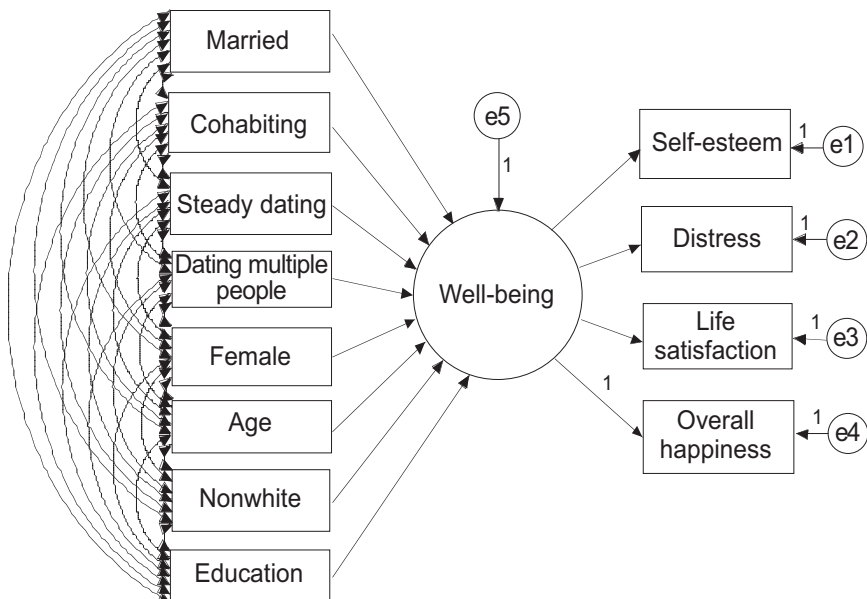
### Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlations between all variables. Correlations between relationship statuses were negative, but this pattern reflects the mutually exclusive nature of the categories. Relationship happiness was positively related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and general life happiness and negatively related to distress. Being married was associated with higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, greater happiness, and less distress. Correspondingly, people who were not in stable romantic relationships (dating multiple people or not dating) tended to report lower self-esteem, less life satisfaction, less happiness, and more distress. Older respondents were more likely to be married and less likely to be dating steadily or dating multiple people. Education was positively related to relationship happiness, self-esteem, and general life happiness. The correlations between the four aspects of subjective well-being were generally significant and in the anticipated direction.

### The influence of relationship status on subjective well-being

The analytic model appears in Figure 1. Subjective well-being was a latent variable based on four observed indicators: general happiness, life satisfaction, distress, and self-esteem. Relationship status was divided into five categories: married, cohabiting, dating one person steadily, dating multiple people, and not dating. These categories were represented in the model as dummy variables,

**FIGURE 1**  
**Model for the structural equation analysis examining associations among relationship statuses and subjective well-being.**

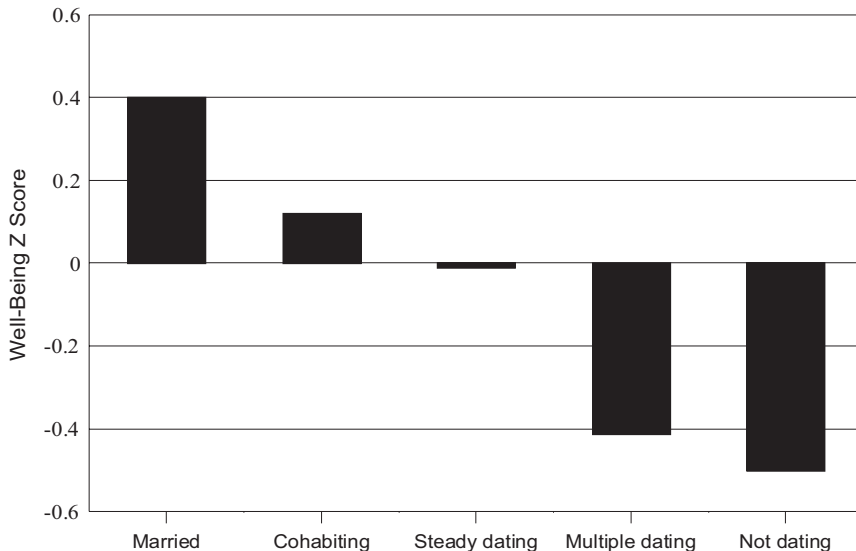


with not dating serving as the omitted category. We used the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) software for all analyses (Arbuckle, 1997).

The model fit the data well:  $\chi^2 (26, N = 691) = 51.80$ , Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .99, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .04. Figure 2 shows the standardized latent means for the relationship status groups. Consistent with the social support and structural symbolic interactionism perspectives, married respondents had the highest level of subjective well-being, followed by those who were cohabiting, dating someone steadily, dating multiple people, and not dating. The overall differences between means were relatively large, with the gap between married individuals and those not dating representing about 90% of a standard deviation. Relationship status accounted for 12% of the variance in subjective well-being.

We tested for differences between latent group means using the Bonferroni adjustment and a .05 level of significance. Although the difference between married individuals and cohabiting individuals was not significant, married individuals scored significantly higher than individuals who were dating one person steadily, dating multiple people, or not dating. Cohabiting individuals did not differ from individuals who were dating one person steadily, but they differed from individuals who were dating multiple people or not dating. Individuals who were dating one person steadily differed from those who were dating multiple people or not dating. These results support *H1* and the notion of a continuum, with married individuals having the highest level of subjective well-being and single individuals (not dating) having the lowest level. Although not all of the differences between groups were significant, the probability of observing this particular order of means by chance alone was only .008 (that is, the observed order divided by  $5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$  possible orders = 1/120).

**FIGURE 2**  
Mean level of subjective well-being by relationship status.



In an alternative analysis, we substituted an ordered variable for the categorical relationship status variable, based on the assumption that higher scores indicated more committed relationships (1 = *not dating*, 2 = *dating multiple people*, 3 = *dating one person steadily*, 4 = *cohabiting*, and 5 = *married*). The ordered variable was significantly related to subjective well-being ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, the ordered variable accounted for 12% of the variance in subjective well-being – the same amount accounted for by the categorical version of this variable. This result indicates that virtually all of the variance in subjective well-being accounted for by relationship status was linear. Once again, these results support *H1* and the notion that relationship statuses can be viewed as a continuum, with corresponding implications for subjective well-being.

### The influence of relationship happiness on subjective well-being

The next step in the analysis incorporated the data on relationship happiness. After omitting individuals who were not in relationships (and hence, did not provide ratings of relationship happiness), we used structural equation methods to determine if relationship status and happiness made independent contributions to subjective well-being. In one analysis, we treated relationship status as a categorical variable, with dichotomous variables for marriage and cohabitation and steady dating serving as the omitted comparison group. In a second analysis, we treated relationship status as an ordered variable (1 = *dating steadily*, 2 = *cohabiting*, 3 = *married*).

Table 3 shows the results of these analyses. Fit indices indicated that the models provided a good fit to the data. Model 1 reveals that relationship status was associated positively with subjective well-being – a finding that supports *H2*. In support of *H3* (and the notion of a continuum of commitment), married individuals reported a higher level of subjective well-being than did individuals

**TABLE 3**  
Structural equation analysis predicting subjective well-being from relationship status and relationship happiness

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2
Relationship status (categorical)		
Married	.18**	–
Cohabiting	.05	–
Dating steadily (omitted)	–	–
Relationship status (ordered)	–	.17**
Relationship happiness	.53***	.53***
Female	.01	.01
Age	–.07	–.07
Nonwhite	.00	.00
Education	.16**	.16**
$R^2$	.35***	.35***
CFI	.99	.99
RMSEA	.04	.04
$\chi^2$ (df)	36.84 (21)	34.33 (18)

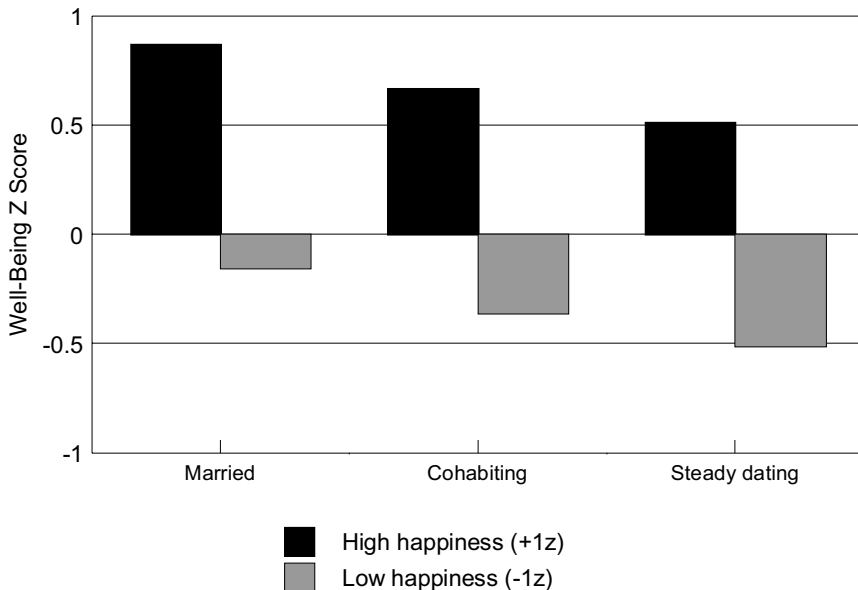
Note.  $N = 473$ . Table values are standardized  $b$  coefficients.

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

in steady dating relationships, even with relationship happiness controlled. Although the mean for cohabitators fell between the means for the other two groups, cohabitators did not differ significantly from either group. Similarly, Model 2 revealed that subjective well-being was associated significantly with relationship status as well as relationship happiness. These results indicate that relationship status and relationship happiness made independent contributions to subjective well-being. Moreover, the  $R^2$  values (for both analyses) were relatively high and indicated that relationship characteristics accounted for slightly more than one-third of the variance in subjective well-being. An additional analysis (not shown) indicated that the interaction between relationship happiness and status was not significant.

To illustrate these results, we used the regression equation from Model 1 in Table 3 to generate predicted well-being scores for individuals in each type of relationship, with relationship happiness scores fixed at either one standard deviation above or one standard deviation below the mean. Figure 3 shows these results. Irrespective of the type of relationship, individuals who were happy with their relationships had higher levels of subjective well-being than did individuals who were not happy with their relationships. Relationship status also mattered, however. Holding relationship happiness constant, subjective well-being declined in a linear fashion from marriage to cohabitation to dating steadily. This pattern suggests that relationship happiness and relationship status make independent contributions to well-being.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Predicted subjective well-being by relationship status and relationship happiness.**





### Gender differences

To check for gender differences, we ran multigroup models with gender as a grouping variable. We ran the model described in Figure 1 once with all paths between relationship categories and subjective well-being free to vary across genders and once with the same paths constrained to be the same across genders. The change in chi-square values between models was not significant, which indicated no gender differences in the associations between relationship status and subjective well-being,  $\Delta\chi^2(28, N = 691) = 20.04, ns$ . Subsequent analyses also revealed that the estimated effect of relationship happiness also did not vary with gender. These results indicate that being in more committed relationships, and being in happier relationships, appears to benefit women as much as men.

### Longitudinal analysis 1992–1997

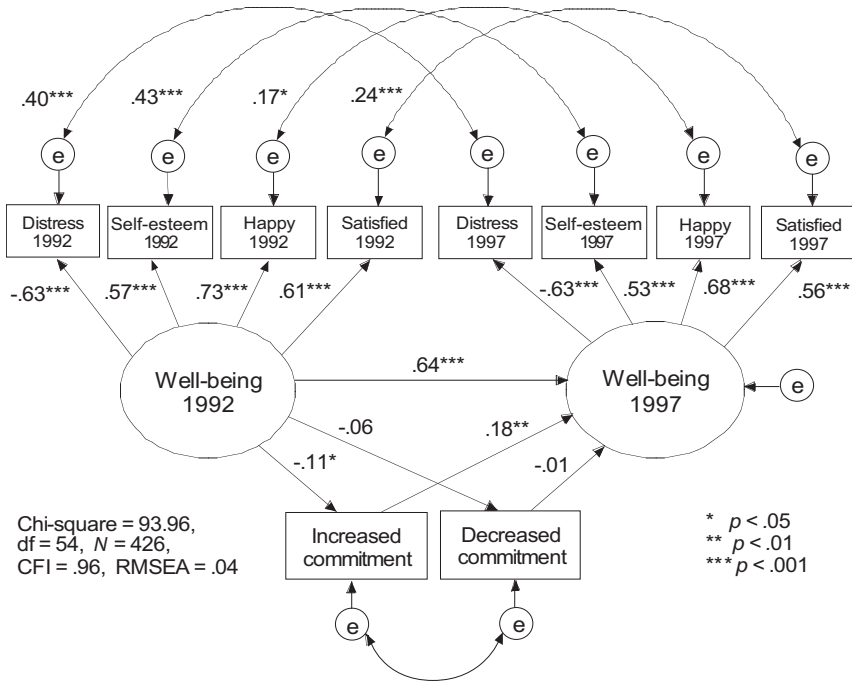
Of the 691 young adults in the sample, 426 were interviewed in 1997 as well as 1992. About half of these respondents (52%) were in the same relationship status at both times. Another 38% of respondents shifted from a lower position on the continuum to a higher position (for example, dating multiple people  $\rightarrow$  dating one person steadily, dating one person steadily  $\rightarrow$  cohabiting, or cohabiting  $\rightarrow$  marriage). And 10% of respondents moved from a higher position on the continuum to a lower position. Note that young adults were more likely to shift into relationships that involved higher levels of commitment than to shift into relationships that involved lower levels of commitment during this 5-year period – a trend that probably reflects the relatively young age of the sample.

Figure 4 shows the structural equation model for this analysis. We captured changes in relationship status with two dichotomous variables, one reflecting shifts toward greater levels of commitment and the other reflecting shifts toward lower levels of commitment, with no change serving as the omitted comparison group. Because subjective well-being in 1992 was in the model, subjective well-being in 1997 was conceptually equivalent to a change score. The model included correlations between the errors in the observed indicators of subjective well-being at both times – a standard procedure in longitudinal structural equation analysis. In addition, the paths between the latent variables and the observed indicators were constrained to be the same in 1992 and 1997. This step ensured that the same latent variable was assessed in each wave. Although not shown, the model also included the respondents' gender, age, race, and education as control variables.

Figure 4 indicates that the model fit the data well (CFI = .96, RMSEA = .04). The selection perspective (*H4*) assumes that people with high levels of subjective well-being tend to move into more committed relationships. Contrary to this hypothesis, however, subjective well-being in 1992 was significantly and negatively (rather than positively) associated with shifting into more committed relationships by 1997. In other words, people with relatively low levels of subjective well-being tended to move upward in the continuum rather than remain in the same type of relationship. Subjective well-being in 1992 was not related to downward movement in the continuum.

People who adopted more committed relationships during this period experienced increases in subjective well-being – a finding that also is consistent with *H5*. Because the relationship variable was a dichotomy, the standardized coefficient in the figure (–.11) is less informative than the effect size. Individuals

**FIGURE 4**  
**Structural equation model showing associations between changes in subjective well-being and increases or decreases in relationship status. All coefficients are standardized.**



who moved upward in the continuum reported an increase in subjective well-being equivalent to .32 of a standard deviation, which is a moderate effect size. Further inspection of the data (not shown) indicated that improvements in subjective well-being occurred, irrespective of the type of relationship that one entered, provided that the new relationship implied greater commitment. In contrast, individuals who shifted into relationships that were lower on the continuum declined slightly (but not significantly) in subjective well-being. Overall, these results provided more support for the notion that relationship status affects well-being than for a selection perspective.

### Discussion

This study tested several hypotheses dealing with the links among relationship status, relationship happiness, and a latent variable based on subjective aspects of well-being. Our first hypothesis was based on Ross's (1995) study. Consistent with this study, we found that married individuals reported the highest level of subjective well-being, followed by cohabiting individuals, individuals dating one person steadily, individuals dating

multiple people, and individuals not dating. Moreover, the same rank order existed for women and men. These findings support the general notion that being in romantic relationships – with spouses, cohabiting partners, or steady dating partners – is beneficial to people's mental health and sense of well-being (Brown, 2000; Gove et al., 1983; Kurdek, 1991; Waite, 1995). Moreover, the association between the amount of commitment implied in a relationship and subjective well-being increased monotonically. With respect to well-being, some commitment appears to be good, and more commitment appears to be better.

Based on a number of prior studies of marriage (Glenn, 1990; Williams, 2003), we also hypothesized that relationship happiness is positively associated with subjective well-being. Our results support this straightforward hypothesis: people in happy relationships tend to experience higher levels of subjective well-being than do people in unhappy relationships. Our study extends prior work, however, by showing that this association holds for all types of romantic relationships – not just marriage. Given the centrality of marriage in people's lives, one might expect relationship happiness to be correlated more strongly with well-being among married people than among cohabitators or steady daters. The association between relationship happiness and subjective well-being was similar across these three groups, however, which suggests that people take the quality of their romantic relationships seriously. Additional data provide further insight into this finding. We asked people in cohabiting relationships and steady dating relationships about their plans to marry. Seventy-seven percent of people in cohabiting relationships and 57% of people in steady dating relationships reported that they planned to marry their partners. Because most individuals who were cohabiting or dating steadily had high ambitions for their relationships, it is not surprising that relationship happiness was associated strongly with subjective well-being, irrespective of the type of relationship.

Consistent with *H3*, after controlling for relationship happiness, married individuals continued to have the highest level of subjective well-being, followed by cohabiting individuals and individuals in steady dating relationships. These results support the social support and integration perspective, as well as the structural symbolic interactionism perspective, in suggesting that something other than happiness with a partner contributes to subjective well-being. Compared with other forms of romantic relationships, marriage involves a higher level of commitment from partners and a stronger future orientation. Moreover, as an institution, marriage receives a great deal of support from religion, the legal system, and the wider community. For these reasons, marriage is likely to place a particularly prominent role in shaping people's identities and sense of self. The institutional nature of marriage, therefore, combined with the long-term nature of marital bonds, may account for the especially favorable state of well-being among spouses (Nock, 1998; Waite, 1995). Even individuals in relatively unhappy marriages may benefit from the stability, commitment, and social status of marriage. And the long-term time horizon of marriage may

provide people with the hope that their relationships will improve in the future.

Although many studies have shown that married individuals have better mental and physical health than unmarried individuals, the use of cross-sectional data makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of selection from the effects of relationship status. We addressed this limitation by using two waves of panel data. According to the selection perspective (and *H4*), people with a high level of subjective well-being make attractive partners, and hence, are more likely to move into (and stay in) committed relationships than are individuals with low levels of subjective well-being. If this is true, then the association between marriage (and other committed relationships) and well-being has less to do with the status of the relationship than with the types of people who attract (or repel) partners.

Our analysis, however, found little evidence of selection. Contrary to the selection perspective, people with relatively low levels of subjective well-being were more (rather than less) likely to shift into more committed relationships between 1992 and 1997. This finding suggests that people who are happy and content with their current lives feel little need to adopt more committed relationships. After all, if people are happy cohabitating, then why marry? In contrast, people who are dissatisfied with their lives may be motivated to seek out more committed relationships, perhaps in an attempt to improve their sense of well-being. Our data suggest that this strategy tends to be successful. Consistent with *H5*, individuals who moved up the continuum of commitment between 1992 and 1997 experienced significant increases in subjective well-being. These results are consistent with prior research suggesting that marriage improves people's well-being, even with selection processes taken into account (Horwitz et al., 1996; Kim & McHenry, 2002).

### **Limitations and strengths of the current study**

Like all studies, our study contains several limitations. First, the sample size for some groups was small, and the cohabiting group, in particular, had only 52 people. Small sample size decreases statistical power and makes it difficult to detect group differences in the population. It is possible, for example, that we would have detected differences in subjective well-being between cohabitators and married individuals with a larger and more powerful sample. Second, our sample was limited to relatively young adults, with a median age of 23 years. Consequently, it is difficult to know if our results can be generalized to older adults. Third, although we had data on duration of marriage, we did not have data on the duration of cohabiting relationships. For this reason, we could not control for the length of the relationship in our analysis. Fourth, although we assumed that marriage implies more commitment than cohabitation, and that cohabitation implies more commitment than steady dating, we did not have a direct measure of relationship commitment. Finally, although our results are consistent with the assumption that relationship status affects subjective well-being, we cannot rule out alternative (noncausal) explanations. It is possible that

some unmeasured variable affects subjective well-being as well as the likelihood of being in different relationships statuses, resulting in a spurious association.

Despite these limitations, our study has several strengths. Our data come from a national sample, we had information on a variety of relationship statuses, and the panel nature of our data allowed us to assess selection effects. Moreover, our findings are consistent with a growing body of research suggesting that marriage (and other romantic relationships) provides emotional benefits to spouses, net of selection factors.

## Conclusions

Prior research has focused primarily on the link between marital status and well-being (Gove et al., 1983; Lee et al., 1991; Ross et al., 1990; Waite, 1995). Relatively little research has focused on the potential benefits of other types of romantic relationships, such as cohabitation or steady dating. The present study suggests the usefulness of examining a range of relationship statuses. Future research should attempt to specify more clearly the particular characteristics of romantic relationships that promote well-being. The social support and integration perspective, for example, assumes that committed relationships benefit people through providing emotional support, companionship, and a sense of belonging. The structural symbolic interactionist perspective assumes that committed relationships benefit people by providing a strong identity and sense of self. Future research should investigate these, and other, conceptual perspectives to delineate more clearly the mechanisms linking relationship statuses to well-being. Future research also should address whether the benefits of being in committed relationships vary with age and the duration of the union.

Although prior work has focused on marriage, matrimony is not the only game in town. Our findings suggest that marriage may be good for people, in general, but it is better to be in some type of relationship (cohabiting or dating one person steadily) than to be unpartnered. In general, people appear to feel better about themselves and their lives when they are in a romantic and committed relationship. Our research supports the notion that these relationships form a continuum of commitment, with corresponding benefits for subjective well-being.

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