

Living happier ever after?

JUDITH SOONS

In the world of social demography and beyond it will not come as a surprise that people who are married are better off in terms of happiness and health than single people. As the lifestyles of cohabiting couples are both similar and dissimilar to those of married couples, one may wonder whether their lives are more similar to those of married couples or to those of single people in terms of happiness and wellbeing.

The growing number of couples living together outside of marriage has made it increasingly difficult to compare married and unmarried people as the lifestyle of cohabiting couples is very similar to that of married couples. In both cases partners run a joint household, children are born to couples inside and outside of marriage and the legal differences between marriage and cohabitation have become smaller.

That said, differences do exist between unmarried and married couples. For one, cohabiting couples are more likely to be dual earners, to have conflicts and to split up.

Marriage and happiness

Various studies have compared married couples with cohabiting couples. These studies have shown that people in consensual unions tend to be happier than single people, but less happy than married couples. The same conclusion was also drawn in a study on the social integration of young adults in the Netherlands (PSIN). Whereas the average score on happiness among married couples was 7.9, cohabiting couples scored an average of 7.6. Both groups were found to be a great deal happier than singles (6.6) and somewhat happier than couples who did not share the same household (7.2). These scores show that happiness among people who are married is determined not only by the fact that they have a partner and share a household, but that marriage as such contributes uniquely to their wellbeing.

We do not yet know exactly how marriage contributes to happiness. A possible explanation for the difference between cohabiting and married couples could be that the former have more conflicts. We also see that cohabiting partners tend to differ more strongly in their opinions about the future and the durability of their relationships than married couples: whereas one of the partners might see cohabitation as a lifelong union, the other might see it as a trial relationship that can be fairly easily ended. This greater uncertainty regarding the future of the relationship could explain the fact that cohabiting couples have a weaker sense of happiness than married couples.

Is sense of happiness lasting?

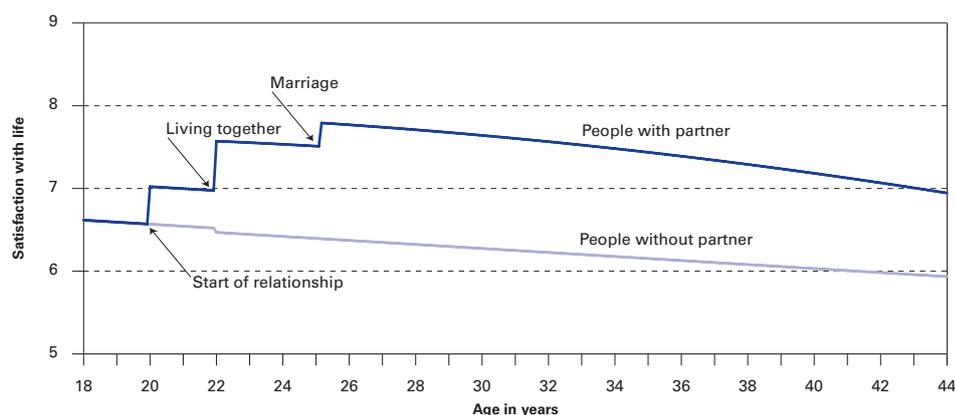
We have found that relationships make people feel happier. A logical question is then how long these feelings of happiness last, a question that has barely been examined to

date. There are reasons to assume that the sense of happiness subsides after a while, which would mean that in the long run relationships do not make people happier. Having said that, there are also reasons to assume that relationships do give people a lasting sense of happiness. Relationships offer certain advantages –also in the long run– that single people have to do without, such as more social support, participation in interesting activities, self-confidence, a sense of identity, and financial benefits. The value of these advantages is not likely to decrease over time. This idea was confirmed by the findings of the PSIN, namely that the wellbeing of couples drops somewhat over the years, but this decline was so slow, however, that even after having lived together for twenty years their sense of wellbeing had not yet dropped to the pre-relationship level. At the same time, we see that young adults who do not live with a partner become also slightly unhappier. A possible explanation for this could be that the probability of finding a partner declines strongly as one grows older, and that there appears to be an implicit age limit for marriage and also for cohabitation. This could give singles the feeling that they are falling by the wayside and this uncertainty in turn could lower their sense of wellbeing.

To conclude, we can say that, whereas living together with a partner contributes to happiness, marriage offers additional advantages that cohabitation does not offer. Both cohabiting couples and married couples, however, experience a lasting increase in happiness... people who live with a partner live happier ever after.

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Satisfaction with life in young adulthood (fictitious)



DEMOS is published ten times a year with the aim of promoting knowledge and awareness of population issues. Inquiries about manuscripts for DEMOS can be addressed to the Editorial Committee.

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NIDI is an institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), conducting scientific demographic research, both at the national and international level.

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Demos is a publication of the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI),
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Elementary design Harmine Louwé
Printed by Nadorp Druk b.v., Poeldijk