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Happiness, Post-Materialist Values, and the Unmarried

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Abstract

With the rise of individualism and post-materialist values comes the fall in the importance of marriage. However, it is still not clear how these two processes affect each other in terms of individuals' wellbeing and happiness. Thus, the aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of how happiness may be moderated by post-materialist values among different groups of marital status: never married, divorced/separated, widowed, married, and cohabiting individuals. Through executing a multilevel analysis on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) between 2002 and 2014, this paper demonstrates a clear relationship between post-materialist values and levels of happiness. Moreover, it is shown that holding post-materialist views provides greater levels of happiness for singles than it does for cohabiters and married individuals, raising questions about the relationship between marriage and happiness in a post-materialist era.

Keywords: marriage; singlehood; individualism; post-materialism.

Introduction

Unmarried individuals today are the fastest growing demographic group in many countries (Budgeon 2008, Fry 2013, Klinenberg 2012). In the U.S., for example, approximately one

quarter of those who have never married are predicted to never get married (Wang and Parker 2014). Official statistics in China indicate that the percentage of one-person households rose from just 4.9% in 1990 to 14.5% in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2013). Adults are marrying late, cohabitation is more common, divorce is more prevalent, and attitudes of the public reflect a decline in the status of marriage (Amato 2010, Wang and Parker 2014).

Various reasons are attributed to the rise of the unmarried, such as higher economic and professional standards that affect the career-marriage balance (Barnett et al. 2003), the atomization of the family and its effect on future generations (Fu and Heaton 1995), and migration which, at times, contradicts tying the knot due to geographic constraints on one side and cultural alienation with the local population on the other side (Callero 2015). One of the most prominent factors in deciphering what is responsible for bringing about the shift to singledom, however, is the rise in individualism and post-materialism (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987, Van de Kaa 2001). The argument is that those who have experienced materialist obstacles – economic or physical insecurity – carry needs for order and stability as well as economic and military strength. Thus, these individuals, mostly the children of the Great Depression and the two world wars, strive to have stable family life so they get married sooner and stay married longer. On the other hand, those who have been exposed to greater security, mostly the children born after the Second World War onwards, show a shift from survival to self-expression values such as seeking fun, freedom, and creativity (Duch and Taylor 1993, Inglehart 1971, Inglehart and Abramson 1999). In turn, these recent generations abandon family values and prefer going solo in order to satiate these post-materialist values (Klinenberg 2012).

Following these arguments, the main question remains as to what extent those who hold post-materialist values actually benefit from going solo. Glenn (2001), for example,

argues that young people are simply not aware enough of the benefits of marriage, and believe that holding post-materialist values actually sabotages their wellbeing. Indeed, various studies ostensibly support this argument. There is strong evidence to suggest that married people are better off financially (Gallagher and Waite 2000), show improved happiness and wellbeing (Gove, Hughes and Style 1983, Johnson and Wu 2002), reduced levels of depression (Wade and Pevalin 2004), reduced levels of substance abuse (Power, Rodgers and Hope 1999), less violence (Gallagher and Waite 2000), improved health (Dupre and Meadows 2007, Hughes and Waite 2009), and increased longevity (Sbarra and Nietert 2009). Therefore, the main argument is that singles do not benefit from staying unmarried. Rather, it is simply a lack of understanding of the advantages afforded by marriage that is the main reason for the decline in marriage.

However, it might well be that individualism and post-materialism are not only a *cause* for the rise of singledom, but also a source of *benefit* for singles. That is to say, singles who hold post-materialist values are better equipped to deal with singledom and derive greater benefit for their happiness from being unmarried. Thus, the current study addresses this question and investigates whether singles with post-materialist values are happier than their counterparts by examining the large databases of the European Social Survey (ESS) across 31 countries. This examination is not only statistically advantageous, but also allows for generalization of the results because the aforementioned hypothesis is evaluated across various cultures, while accounting for contextual differences with a multilevel analysis.

Post-Materialism and the Unmarried

Marriage is undergoing a process of deinstitutionalization where the well-accepted social norms associated with marriage are being challenged by the rise in individualism (McEwen and Wellman 2013, Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). In this respect, the deinstitutionalization

of marriage happened in two stages. First, there was a shift where the role of marriage was no longer perceived as exclusively needed to fulfill societal expectations (institutional marriage), but also to provide companionship (Orden and Bradburn 1968). Secondly, and more recently, the emphasis on the institutional unionization has lessened, and the importance of personal choice and self-development (sometimes through transient relationships) became central (Cherlin 2004). Both stages have been part of the rise in post-materialist values. According to the seminal work of Maslow (1954), which is often cited as the foundations of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) and post-materialism (Van de Kaa 2001), after feeling materialistically secured and safe there are additional levels of needs: the first is love and companionship and thereafter the desire for esteem and self-actualization. In studies of the self-determination theory these two can be referred to as competence and relatedness, which come together with autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000). Indeed, these exact two components are seen now in the development of the institution of marriage (Duch and Taylor 1993).

In addition, post-materialist values come with the advancement and self-actualization of women (Barnett and Hyde 2001). In turn, this advancement affects marriage patterns: strong relationships between a woman's level of education and age at her first marriage have been found (Blossfeld and De Rose 1992, Quisumbing and Hallman 2005), particularly since the normative expectations are that young women in education are 'not ready' for marriage or motherhood. Furthermore, increased career resources are associated with women postponing or avoiding having children (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991). The argument is that a more gender-equal society provides opportunities and encourages women to advance academically and professionally and hence places less pressure on women to get married and have children (Barnett and Hyde 2001).

Finally, the individualistic approach promoted by capitalism also fuels the singledom trend, especially as countries have become increasingly developed and industrialized. At

large, capitalism is causing individuals to shift away from long-term, steady arrangements and move towards temporary, noncommittal, and consumerist arrangements both professionally and romantically (Bauman 2013). Historically, the emergence of capitalism and business have had marked effects on marriage patterns and family structures, as moderated by gender roles and the role of religions. Market-oriented approaches overcome societal norms and thereby deinstitutionalize family norms, while strengthening individualist tendencies (Grassby 2000). Even in developing countries, Aghajanian and Thompson (2013) identify the emergence of a “developmental idealism” in which there is a relationship between economic development and individualism and self-actualization, which in practice are manifested by educational and career goals instead of marriage.

Indeed, the rise in post-materialist values is manifested in different ways, but all of which function in tandem with choosing to remain single. Although this shift is not commonplace in all national contexts (Coleman 2004), the theory behind the SDT has justifiably been defended (Lesthaeghe 2010, Van de Kaa 2003) and is expected to eventually progress throughout the world (Kiernan 2004, Van de Kaa 2003) albeit to different extents and in varying forms. However, as in the discourse about capitalism, in which the market system relates to economic prosperity but not necessarily to greater happiness (Brockmann et al. 2009, Easterlin et al. 2010), one must ask whether those unmarried individuals who hold individualistic and post-materialist values are happier and actually maintain an advanced state of wellbeing.

Happiness, Post-Materialist Values and the Unmarried

In hypothesizing whether individuals with post-materialist values who are unmarried and even consciously decide to go solo actually benefit in terms of life satisfaction and happiness (the term 'happiness' is used in this paper, though the two are highly correlated, see:

Mogilner, Kamvar and Aaker 2010, Oishi et al. 2013), there is a need to consider several factors. First, the assumption is that the happiness baseline of couples versus singles is higher (Frey and Stutzer 2000, Stutzer and Frey 2006). Aspects of economic and professional constraints, geographical limitations, failed relationship experiences, and aversions towards divorce (e.g. negative experiences in childhood) are certainly valid concerns that reduce the likelihood of getting married against their will and potentially reducing their levels of happiness (e.g. White and Booth 1991). Indeed, there is a well-documented gap in happiness between couples and the unmarried (Helliwell and Grover 2014, Zimmermann and Easterlin 2006). However, given this gap, the next question is whether post-materialist values raise happiness levels on their own and even compensate for other “deficits” in happiness.

Of course, if people hold individualistic values and even choose to stay single, they probably consciously or unconsciously believe that there are benefits in being single. In turn, this means that in this instance, individualistic values should relate to higher levels of happiness.

However, several mechanisms act against this simplistic assumption. The first mechanism is social discrimination. Following the early signs of demographic changes at the beginning of the SDT, some researchers highlighted the social difficulties that face an individual who chooses to act differently from the rest of society and not get married (Stein 1975). In fact, societal attitudes towards singles and cohabitation have been shown to be deterministic when it comes to relationship patterns (Budgeon 2008, Popenoe 2009). Although there is evidence in a multitude of national contexts showing that singles are being discriminated against less and less (DePaulo and Morris 2006), individuals are still socialized and educated to get married and strive to build stable family type units. As a result, singlehood has largely been and still frequently viewed negatively in the eyes of both society (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003) and the individual (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010), and in

some cases particularly for women (Maeda and Hecht 2012, Sharp and Ganong 2011).

Indeed, in one study (DePaulo and Morris 2006), one thousand undergraduate students were asked to list characteristics that they associated with married and single individuals.

Compared to single people, married individuals were more likely to be described positively, being referred to as mature, happy, kind, honest, and loving. Conversely, singles were perceived to be immature, insecure, self-centered, unhappy, lonely, and even ugly.

This situation might adversely affect happiness levels in two ways. The first is by simply tackling social exclusion and negative stereotypes. Among those who hold individualistic values and tend to stay single, this situations might be even worse. Perhaps counterintuitively, studies show that those who choose to live as singles are perceived more negatively than those who are unhappy with their singlehood status and would like to become coupled (Morris and Osburn 2016, Slonim, Gur-Yaish and Katz 2015). The second is by reducing one's own self-evaluation. The social comparison theory, originally developed by Festinger (1954), conjects that individuals are driven to achieve accurate and palpable self-evaluations relative to others in the same social context. To that end, the theory was used to explain the motivation for evaluating one's own happiness, specifically as a relative matter. Thus, the same post-materialist views that lead some individuals to stay single may still collide with familial norms. Individuals might feel *relatively* worse off than others due to still predominance norms as if they didn't "tick off" all achievements possible in the eyes of others, although they might choose not do so deliberately. In fact, choosing deliberately to stay single might entail a sense of perpetuation to this decision, thus hurting those with post-materialist values the most.

The second mechanism acting against the direct relation between individualistic values and higher levels of happiness is a psychosocial one. Studies in self-determination suggest that enhanced self-motivation, higher wellbeing, and mental health are a result of

having various needs met. One of these needs is that of relatedness: “if the social contexts in which such individuals are embedded are responsive to basic psychological needs, they provide the appropriate developmental lattice upon which an active, assimilative, and integrated nature can ascend”. With respect to singles, developments of the self-determination theory (Knee et al. 2013, Patrick et al. 2007) show that relatedness, which involves human interaction and emotional satisfaction might not be materialized and developed if an individual prefer post-materialist values over being unionizing with a significant other (naturally, there are many alternatives, see: DePaulo 2015, yet this argument is seemingly true on average).

Finally, as mentioned, the free-will actualization of certain values of freedom and individualism do not necessarily mean greater happiness. In fact, there is some evidence to contradict this assumption. For example, in discussing the falling levels of happiness in 1990-2000 China when capitalism had risen, Brockmann et al. (2009) show that happiness levels actually fell. Similar phenomena were also observed in Eastern European countries when they shifted from communism to a market-based system in the 1990s (Easterlin 2009). The authors explain that it is due to inequality and relative deprivation that cause many to feel relatively worse off. Similar mechanisms might pertain to being unmarried in post-materialist era when the permanent race and instability might adversely affect singles. Therefore, it is an empirical question to be tested here how post-materialist values affect the happiness levels of different groups of marital status.

Intervening Mechanisms

In order to accurately test this question, there is a need to account for some major aspects that are considered to affect marital status groups differently, aside from individual characteristics. The first is the degree of religiosity, which is included in the equations below

because many religious societies place high importance on modesty and traditional values, extra-marital sex is viewed negatively, and late marriage is preferred over single or unmarried parenthood (Lavee and Katz 2003). Conversely, non-religious societies are more accurately characterized by openness to singles and a widespread movement away from religious values that form the basis of familialism, possibly explaining the relatively higher levels of never-married individuals (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988).

Another important variable added here is subjective health assessment. One way in which singles may achieve greater happiness is associations with better health. While many studies seek to claim that those in long-term relationships or marriages are healthier (Gallagher and Waite 2000, Koball et al. 2010), increasing evidence suggests that in fact singles are healthier. This may be a reflection of the changing nature of the growing population of singles, indicative of cultural changes that facilitate improved health of singles, experimental error, or as a result of persistent discrimination and prejudice against singles that leads to skewed results (DePaulo 2014, DePaulo 2007). To bypass these mixed results, health is accounted for in the multilevel analyses below.

In addition, the degree of feelings of discrimination is also included in the equations below, separately, since the aforementioned mechanisms of discrimination against the unmarried suggest they likely to suffer from reduced levels of happiness, which were found to be linked to discrimination (Mays and Cochran 2001). The implications may be particularly strong for widows and divorcees, who in some societies and contexts are more heavily stigmatized than never married individuals (Parker, Riyani and Nolan 2016). While support from one's in-group has been shown to reduce the negative effects of perceived discrimination on mental health (Noh and Kaspar 2003), a lack of a supportive community for singles, particularly older singles, may make some single populations especially

vulnerable to these effects (see Appendix Table 1 for actual differences between the groups in terms of feelings of discrimination).

Finally, a social activities assessment ranging on 1-5 Likert scale is also included, since singles might be happier because of improved contact and relationships with friends, siblings, parents, and communities. Indeed, singles are more likely to be in touch with their parents and siblings, benefit from emotional support provided by friends and family, and receive practical help from others (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). The argument here is that people who choose to get married become less involved and connected with those who are not in a relationship. The phenomenon witnessed, sometimes known as ‘greedy marriage’ (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006) is that married individuals donate the majority of their time to their spouses, while singles maintain a richer and more diverse social life.

Method, Data, and Variables

Data for this study comes from the 2002-2014 European Social Survey (ESS). The sample of the current study includes only individuals who are older than 30. The age 30 was chosen because it is around the mean age at a first marriage in the countries under investigation.

Around this age, both the internal and external expectation to be married starts growing and thus requires individuals to face the consequences of not being married in terms of happiness and wellbeing (Engelberg 2016). Nevertheless, this specific limit is still arbitrary and one can argue that dealing with the “happiness question” varies greatly. For this reason, a sensitive analysis was conducted. The results were similar and are available upon request.

This study uses both demographic and socioeconomic variables in order to accurately determine individuals’ happiness. The following variables are used: gender, age (and age squared, accounting for decreasing marginal happiness effect), unemployment, subjective income assessment, and previous cohabitation. As an education variable, ‘years of schooling’

is being used. As mentioned, subjective health assessment, sociability, degree of religiosity, and feelings of discrimination are also included here. All of these variables are not only prominent in the literature on happiness, but also proved to be significant in a preliminary step-wise examination. Note that estimations were also conducted for men and women separately and produced similar results (available upon request).

In addition to these factors, individuals are characterized by their country of residency on a higher level while accounting for the mean level of happiness in each country (see Appendix Figure 1 and Appendix Table 1). Thus, the characteristics of individuals and their countries are modeled as by other, less observable, country factors. Furthermore, the country levels are decomposed by the country's HDI indicator (HDI 2016) and the mean level of happiness in each country. The first provides a broad picture of a country's life expectancies, adult literacy rates, GDP, and gross enrollment ratios in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. This indicator has been incorporated from the UN databases (HDI 2016). The second country level variable is the mean level of country's happiness, which accounts for other sources of happiness on the country level (e.g. the number of sunny days per year). Thus, one can think of the higher-level model as a collection of variables that is unpacked in these models to at least two more specific components: the HDI indicator and country's happiness level.

Further, the 'year of survey' is being used to account for the concern that there are differences between different periods of time. Furthermore, all calculations are weighted with the weights provided by the ESS and properly applied only in the fixed-effect (lower) level. Finally, the results presented here closely resemble those yielded from fixed-effect-only models.

The main dependent variable under examination is the level of happiness. This indicator stems from the question: "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you

are”? This question correlates significantly with questions on subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction. This specific indicator was chosen based on previous studies such as those of Stack and Eshleman (1998) and Mencarini and Sironi (2012). Indeed, the meaning of happiness varies greatly and one cannot assume what is meant by an answer in a survey to a scalable question of “how happy are you?” Nevertheless, for this reason, the current study takes a large sample ranging across countries and ages while accounting for these different factors. Broadly speaking, happiness is viewed here as the degree to which people judge their life more- or less-favorably (Veenhoven 1988). Although imperfectly, this study assumes that, on aggregate, the question of the European Social Survey is useful enough.

The main independent variable under investigation is marital status. This variable includes the category of non-marriage cohabitation. The category of being divorced and the category of being separated have been combined together since no significant differences have been found between the two and based on the fact the number of separated individuals is relatively small.

Marital status is tested in interaction with four measures of post-materialist values ranging on a 1-6 scale: the importance of having fun, the importance of being free, the importance of being creative, and the importance of trying new things. Indeed, Inglehart's theory encompasses a large set of values, but it has already been argued that this set of values combines several aspects that are not necessarily related (Flanagan 1979, Flanagan 1982, Inglehart and Flanagan 1987). Specifically, Flanagan argues that the economic aspect of postmaterialism has not changed as much as the political aspect, and that post-materialism is mostly a political phenomenon rather than an economic one. However, the current paper bypasses this debate since the focus of this paper is about singles and their stance in society. Thus, this paper uses the aspects of post-materialism that touch upon the core values that singles might need in order to adapt to their situation; in other words, aspects of

postmaterialism that are strongly related to self-actualization and self-expression. Thus, the values that are incorporated in this paper are part of the Schwartz system of values, which was adopted in the ESS (Schwartz 2003). In this system, the values that are relevant to this current study are taken from the sub-categories of self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism, which are closely related – yet subtly different – to Inglehart's theory. In this sense, values such as “maintaining order in the nation” and “giving people more say in government” are not relevant, nor are measures such as “important to be rich”. Indeed, these variables did not yield any association with the subjective wellbeing of singles in preliminary estimates, and as such are omitted from this study.

Finally, given the very large sample, the analysis could produce statistical significance even for small point estimates. Thus, I also estimated the effect size. This is not an easy task since the equations are complex and multilevel. Therefore, I first estimated the parallel fixed-effect models, where the results closely resemble those yielded from the mixed-effect models, and based on this estimation, I calculated the Cohen's D measures. The Cohen's D measures show that the results of this study are small to medium in terms of standard deviations and thus practically significant. These measures will be discussed below.

Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic and population characteristics of the sample used for this study. As consistent with other studies of demographics and happiness, married and cohabiting individuals express higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than unmarried individuals, with divorced/separated and widowed individuals polling the lowest. These results also correlate with subjective income levels, which is partly due to living in two-person households. Also in line with previous research, never married individuals express higher levels of perceived discrimination than their married or widowed counterparts.

Subjective health ranks similar for most of the groups surveyed except for widowers, who probably have reduced subjective health due to their higher age on average.

[Table 1 about here]

Regarding measures of post-materialism and individualism, married and widowed individuals score lower on average than all of the other demographics, which seems to go hand in hand with lower levels of education and higher levels of religiosity. Cohabiting individuals have the highest combined score of individualism and education, taking first place in every category except for the importance of freedom, where never married individuals score marginally higher. In order to understand how these factors interact specifically with marital status, it is necessary to perform statistical analysis.

Table 2 shows the summary of multilevel analyses of post-materialist and individualist values – seeking fun, freedom, creativity, and trying new things – as predicted by individual characteristics and marital status. These statistics depict several patterns with respect to post-materialist values. In general, women express lower individualist values, as do those who have never cohabited. Individualist and post-materialist values are for the most-part positively associated with education levels, increased social activity, subjective income, being unemployed, and subjective health. Individualist and post-materialist values are negatively correlated with feelings of discrimination.

[Table 2 about here]

When it comes to marital status, patterns emerge in individualist values when comparing single and married individuals. Cohabiting and divorced/separated individuals hold more individualist and post-materialist values on average than married individuals on all measured variables, while results for other groups are mixed. While never married individuals are more fun-seeking and appreciate freedom at a higher level, they value creativity at a marginally less significant amount, and appreciate trying new things at a

similar rate to married individuals. In this group, results may have been affected by never married individuals who eventually want to be married. The widowed group also displays mixed results. While generally expressing less individualist and post-materialist values than the married group, the widowed group appreciates freedom more, at a highly significant level.

Table 3 presents the coefficients of a multilevel analysis of happiness and includes interactions of marital status and post-materialist values. While the four models presented in this table show that married individuals exhibit higher levels of baseline happiness than unmarried individuals, they also show how singles derive greater happiness from each marginal degree of holding post-materialist values. Post-materialist values benefit singles more than they benefit married individuals: unmarried individuals holding average levels of post-materialist values are roughly 0.25-0.30 standard deviations happier than married individuals who hold average levels (in that group) of the same post-materialist values.

[Table 3 about here]

In order to explore how these factors interact with relationship status, it is possible to consider each of the measured components of post-materialism included in this study. Models 1 through 4 investigate fun-seeking, value of freedom, creativity, and trying new things respectively. Models with more than one of the factors are not presented here since combining all of the factors causes a confounding effect. In addition, Model 0 shows the baseline differences between the groups. This addition demonstrates that a significant portion of what offset the difference is explained by post-materialist values, and thus reveals the importance of this investigation in shedding light on the unobserved heterogeneity.

Model 1 is based on a question that asks the participants whether it is important to seek fun and participate in activities from which pleasure is derived. It shows that a fun-seeking characteristic is associated with higher levels of happiness, and that for the singles

surveyed, the effect of fun-seeking on happiness is greater. In other words, for every point scored higher on the fun-seeking scale, singles raise their happiness more than married individuals. These statistics are significant for divorced/separated, never married, and widowed individuals alike. To make it tangible, consider an average divorced person who scores, according to Table 1, 3.87 on this value in comparison to a similar, yet an average married person who scores 3.79. Using the relevant coefficient from Table 3, the average divorced person will have a gain of $0.032 * 3.87 = 0.12$ points, which shrinks the gap between the happiness of the divorced person and the happiness of the married one from 0.835 to 0.715 (~15% reduction). Similarly, the gain of a similar never married person is $0.063 * 3.97 = 0.25$ points, which reduces the gap from 0.918 to 0.668 (~27% reduction).

To that end, it is possible to see how a combination of an increase in fun-seeking and social activities, for instance, can be used to reduce the initial disadvantage in baseline happiness among the unmarried. In particular, for widowed individuals – who report the lowest levels of social activity, and in fact value fun the least out of all the groups measured – the additional happiness provided by being fun-seeking is most effective and significant.

It should be noted that in Model 1, as well as in the remaining models in Table 3, no significant difference can be seen between the amount of happiness associated with post-materialist values for married and cohabiting individuals. It therefore seems that although cohabiting and married couples display different characteristics and values sets (as shown in Table 1), no extra advantage in happiness is afforded to cohabiting individuals who hold any of the post-materialist values included in this study. In that respect, the results of this study show that cohabiting individuals are psychologically similar to married individuals when it comes to the amount of happiness associated with post-materialism. Although this may appear to be leading to the convergence of marriage and cohabitation, care should be taken in overgeneralizing the patterns in these multilevel analyses. The statistics in Table 1 indicate

that cohabiting individuals are happier, more satisfied, and more post-materialist in every respect when compared to married individuals. In other words, the results suggest that while the mechanism of post-materialist values may work similarly for married and cohabiting individuals, their starting points are quite disparate.

Model 2 measures freedom as a moderating value in the happiness of single and coupled individuals. Valuing freedom in general is highly significantly correlated with increased happiness. For divorced/separated and widowed individuals, the effects of valuing freedom on happiness are greater than those who are married, suggesting that the idea of freedom is especially beneficial for those who have already been, but are no longer, in a cohabiting relationship or marriage.

Model 3 measures creativity and Model 4 measures the importance placed on trying new things. Both show similar results. In both cases, the post-materialist values – creativity and trying new things for Models 3 and 4 respectively – are highly significant and positively correlated with increased levels of happiness. Moreover, all uncoupled individuals gain significantly more happiness from valuing creativity or trying new things in comparison to married individuals.

In fact, with only one exception, every post-materialist value measured in this study is associated with higher gains of happiness for every group of singles. These results suggest that by holding a significantly post-materialist set of values it is possible for singles to make gains in happiness that may carry major advantages compared to married individuals. This is especially true when taking into account the increased mean years of education, subjective income, and subjective health as reported by singles, all of them are additional mechanisms for raising happiness. While it is not possible to *totally* account for each of these mechanisms in relation to happiness, it would seem that in many cases it is indeed possible for singles to – consciously or unconsciously – engage in activities that align with post-materialist values

enough in order to provide them a happiness advantage. These ideas are explored fully in the discussion below.

Discussion

In an age when the Great Depression, the world wars, and the Cold War are becoming increasingly distant memories, and economic development as well as purchasing parity is on the rise (excluding the recent financial crisis for which the consequences are still unknown), individuals increasingly consider living independently (Levine 1977). Given the rising proportion of unmarried individuals around the world, it would be prudent to gain a better understanding of what affects their happiness levels. This way, myths and misunderstandings regarding the happiness of the growing number of people living alone can be debunked, and directions for social and policy change that would benefit this ever-growing population can be identified. To that end, this paper investigates how post-materialist values can moderate the happiness of various groups of singles, and in doing so, sheds light on the ways in which singles can, in an era increasingly dominated by individualism, improve their overall levels of happiness.

The results show that at least for the aspects of post-materialism measured, holding post-materialist values is correlated with higher levels of happiness for singles. Not only that never married, divorced, and even widowed individuals in the aspect of freedom (Table 2) hold higher levels of post-materialist values than married individuals, but they also derive greater benefit from every additional score of post-materialist values than married individuals and even cohabiters do. Indeed, the results of the Cohen's D test support the practical effect of these findings and show that the estimated happiness gain associated with average levels of post-materialist values among unmarried groups is roughly 0.25-0.3 standard deviations in for every post-materialist value compared to the married group, which is the reference group

of the interaction term in the equation. While this effect is considered practically small to medium, it is comparable to the effect of feeling/not feeling discrimination, for example, and makes post-materialist values an important factor in future research on the topic of unmarried individuals' subjective wellbeing.

To make it more tangible, a never married person who values fun-seeking the most (i.e. gives it the highest score, 6) is around 10% happier than one who thinks these values are unimportant (i.e. gives it the lowest score, 1), the gap between the two stands at 0.635 points on the happiness scale where the average for never married individuals is 6.67 (Table 1). Similarly, valuing trying new things is associated with around 9% happiness advantage for the never-married, the gap between the two stands at 0.6. The analysis presented here also indicates that, on average, a widow gains 8% more happiness from the value of trying new things as compared to her married counterpart when the two are equal on all major characteristics (education, income, etc.), and both value trying new things at the highest level, the widow gain almost half a point.

In explaining these results, several directions should be considered. These directions in explanation should address at least four main arguments against higher levels of happiness among singles holding post-materialist values. First, being single has economic, psychological, behavioral, and physical costs, as Table 1 and previous research shows (e.g. Burt et al. 2010, Garrison and Scott 2012, Koball et al. 2010). In fact, those who value individualistic values such as personal freedom might actually suffer more from these phenomena because they have fewer expectations to be married someday (or remarry) and overcome them on the day they will. Thus, these disadvantages can be seen as perpetual, and yet post-materialist values actually correlate with greater happiness.

Secondly, the fact that individuals value having fun and freedom does not mean their overall happiness levels are higher. In fact, believing in freedom sometimes can lead to

reduced happiness, not more. This logic is widely apparent in the discourse on capitalism. As mentioned, evidence show that happiness levels actually fell in 1990-2000 China when capitalism has risen (Brockmann et al. 2009) and similar phenomenon has been seen in Eastern Europe (Easterlin 2009). The reason is that freedom raises competition, stress, and inequality. Similarly, there is an argument to be made that singles might be buried under the constant race and instability in their solo life.

Thirdly, even if singles overcome the economic, psychological, and behavioral difficulties associated with being unmarried, and even if they cope with the burden of freedom which is associated with uncertainty, there is still a need to consider outer social difficulties. As shown in Table 1, unmarried individuals suffer from higher levels of discrimination (Stein 1975). Even nowadays, singles are being discriminated against (DePaulo and Morris 2006), and singlehood is still frequently viewed negatively in the eyes of both society (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003) and the individual (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). This is sometimes even worse for the divorced and widowed (Lopata 1971). Thus, those who believe in staying single or at least tend to cherish freedom are those who might be more prone to these negative social attitudes and therefore be less happy.

Fourthly, from a Maslowian point of view (Maslow 1954, Maslow 1968) and the self-determination theory (Knee et al. 2013, Patrick et al. 2007, Ryan and Deci 2000), singles who hold post-materialist values might be in a condition where they satisfy their upper-level needs of freedom and self-actualization, but without meeting the lower needs of relatedness and emotional satisfaction. In other words, those who actually believe in post-materialist values might suffer from imbalance between their different needs, similar to workaholics for example, which, in turn, might lower their subjective wellbeing (Barnett et al. 2003, Schaufeli, Taris and Van Rhenen 2008).

Therefore, the results here are quite surprising and should be explained in detail. It

appears that post-materialist values can contribute to elevated levels of happiness for singles. Of course, the data of this paper is cross-sectional in nature and further research should investigate the mechanisms at play when people actually change their marital status and/or their values and what results this change entails. Nevertheless, the conclusion arising from the findings is that people who stay or become unmarried gain from holding post-materialist values. Furthermore, they can possibly raise their level of happiness further by cultivating a set of values corresponding to the post-materialist concept.

The exact mechanism at play might vary. First, as shown above, post-materialism is compounded with other factors that, in turn, increase happiness. For instance, an individual who appreciates creativity or finds it important to try new things is more inclined to enroll in social activities (Table 2), wherein according to the analysis performed in this paper and others, social interactions would further raise happiness for singles (Table 3). The same individual may also be more inclined to engage in sports, thereby improving their health and by extension raising happiness levels. Indeed, there is emerging evidence of clear relationship between post-materialism and participation in certain physical leisure activities (Sicilia Camacho et al. 2011), particularly in relation to solo-sports and running (Llopis-Goig 2014). The analysis presented in this paper complements these findings by showing that post-materialist singles, in comparison to coupled individuals, benefit more from these activities in terms of their happiness levels.

In addition, elderly singles, especially the widowed, are more likely to gain a wider variety of friendships (Hartup and Stevens 1997). Studies show that elderly singles, unlike elderly couples, may have friends who are both single and married, as well as friends from different generations (Bettini and Norton 1991). Earlier research also finds barriers to cross-sex relationships for the elderly married people, who may understand communicating with the opposite sex as taboo, or as a potential threat to their spouse (Adams 1985). In contrast,

recent research suggests that the elderly singles are much less limited by these normative barriers, and as such are more likely to have friends of the opposite sex (Weger 2015).

Moreover, it is necessary to take into account the context of the increasing prevalence of individualism. It could be that by holding post-materialist viewpoints, singles are less inclined to compare themselves to the rest of society. The results from this paper possibly shed light on a way in which post-materialism can help bypass social mechanisms. Singles who hold post-materialist values might care less about norms and traditions. In a sense, this position is inherent in post-materialist view in which freedom and trying new things are more important than adhering to norms and traditions. In addition, those who remain single (even against their will) use these values of independence and enjoying life to adapt to their situation, while those who still value security and following traditional institutions and norms are more frustrated, arguably because they did not fulfil these values. Thus, post-materialist values not only lead to a new way of living for singles, but also free singles from feeling judged in doing so, and hence encourage them to adapt accordingly. This is particularly important where singles are viewed negatively by society and individuals (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010, Reynolds 2013).

Furthermore, according to the self-determination theory (Patrick et al. 2007, Ryan and Deci 2000) and the Maslow's need theory (Maslow 1954, Maslow 1968) a single person would need to satisfy their needs for relatedness and companionship in order for their self-motivation and wellbeing to arise. However, by definition, post-materialist singles place higher importance on these higher level needs, and in many instances will readily devote more time and resources to focus on them (DePaulo 2015). It therefore would follow that for post-materialist singles, their social needs are being met more easily, despite overwhelming societal pressure to be in a relationship or get married. Thus, singles may be – consciously or unconsciously – defining or satisfying their familial needs without cohabiting or marrying.

This might be done through alternative families and communal arrangements (DePaulo 2015, Weston 2013). Thus, the exact same post-materialist values that encourage these individuals to stay single also open and allow them alternatives in new living arrangements.

Finally, post-materialist singles may be able to supplement the social level of their needs by engaging in urban activities. Differences may be particularly noticeable between never married and married individuals, where there is a frequent urban-suburban split (Jobse and Musterd 1992). Never married individuals are more drawn to cities and urban environments, where by living in communities with other singles they not only can reduce the negative effects of comparison on happiness, but also can benefit from rich and diverse range of opportunities for social capital (Gautier, Svarer and Teulings 2010). While it has been justifiably argued that the amount of social capital available is generally falling (Putnam 1995), the type of social capital available in cities and communities of singles may have a counteracting effect that is particularly strong for post-materialist singles. This effect may be especially strong where social networking and online communities are common sources for social capital .

Indeed, the results of this paper therefore raise questions about the potential benefits of marriage in an increasingly post-materialist age. While this does not directly negate research suggesting that post-materialists avoid or delay marriage because they are unaware of its benefits, the analysis performed here suggests that post-materialist singles also stand to be happier as a result of their views, perhaps equally unaware of the edge that post-materialism affords them. To that end, it is possible to qualify claims that post-materialist views only undermine happiness by preventing marriage (see: Glenn 2001) by further exploring how post-materialist values can actually benefit singles. Given the global shift toward self-development and post-materialism (Cherlin 2004) this second direction is worth a further investigation, insofar as an increase in the prevalence of post-materialism, particularly

among young singles, presents a potentially increased opportunity for raising the happiness levels of all demographics.

In other words, while the rise of post-materialist values – one of the central antecedents to the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 1995, Van de Kaa 2003) – led to reduced rates of marriage and by extension, reduced happiness among singles, the very same antecedent may be one of the keys to *raising* the happiness of singles. As happiness levels fall with increasing development (Brockmann et al. 2009) and post-materialism is on the rise also outside of the West (Aghajanian and Thompson 2013), a deeper understanding of how post-materialist values can increase the happiness of singles is expected to have consequences in a wide variety of contexts.

Looking forward, it is instructive to consider whether the classification of the unmarried population is appropriate as is. Indeed, the results indicate differences between divorced, widowed, and never married individuals. It is important to note that widowed individuals are part of a population that is significantly different in terms of age and gender due to higher life expectancy among women (Bengtson and Putney 2000, Golini and Silverstrini 2013) and thus deserves further research. In addition, the classification made here and in other studies makes one main distinction – between those who are married or have married before (divorced and widowed) and those who have not married before (never married). Yet with the changes in the status of marriage and shifts towards singledom in society, it may be appropriate to add an additional classification that differentiates between those who value the institution of marriage and want to be married, and those who do not (whether they were married before or not). In examining the nature of singles across different contexts, DePaulo (2014) introduces this very distinction, arguing that there is an ignored demographic of individuals who are simply *single at heart* – in other words, prefer being single. With this classification, one may see a totally different partition of singles. That is to

say, in a society that places relationships in central focus, those who are single at heart seem likely to be on a different trajectory of happiness than those who ascribe to the traditional relationship hegemony (see: Mogilner, Kamvar and Aaker 2010). Investigation of the single at heart might therefore bring us to a better understanding of how we can cater to the happiness and wellbeing of a quick-growing population.

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Table 1. *Characteristics of Marital Status Groups, Age 30 and above*

Variable	Divorced/Separated	Married	Never Married	Widowed	Cohabit
N	29,215	161,567	25,731	32,196	12,150
% total	11.20%	61.94%	9.86%	12.34%	4.66%
% men	38.73%	49.39%	53.81%	20.47%	53.54%
Mean age	52.56	53.19	46.48	71.45	41.13
Mean happiness (0-10)	6.55	7.36	6.67	6.19	7.55
Mean satisfaction (0-10)	6.16	6.96	6.40	6.04	7.18
Mean social activities (1-5)	2.65	2.70	2.66	2.48	2.73
Mean subjective health (1-5)	3.60	3.72	3.79	3.07	4.00
Mean years of education	12.61	12.24	13.12	9.72	13.94
% feels discrimination	9%	5.8%	9.61%	5.19%	8.04%
Mean degree of religiosity (0-10)	4.33	4.99	4.41	5.92	3.42
Mean subjective income (1-4)	2.66	2.98	2.84	2.57	3.14
% unemployed	6.16%	3.19%	8.17%	0.9%	5.74%
Important to have fun (1-6)	3.87	3.79	3.97	3.29	4.08
Important to have freedom (1-6)	4.97	4.70	4.99	4.64	4.84
Important to be creative (1-6)	4.44	4.39	4.41	3.85	4.53
Important to try new things (1-6)	4.01	3.90	4.00	3.45	4.09

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2014 European Social Surveys.

Table 2. *Coefficients of Multilevel Analyses of Post-materialist Values by Marital Status, Age 30 and above*

Variable	Seeking Fun	Freedom	Creativity	Trying New Things
Individual Characteristics				
Female	-0.163***	-0.104***	-0.081***	0.018
Age	-0.019***	0.012***	0.011***	-0.002
Age squared	0	-0.000**	-0.000***	-0.000**
Subjective health	0.093***	0.058***	0.077***	0.100***
Years of schooling	-0.005	0.018***	0.029***	0.011***
Unemployed	0.053***	0.058***	0.080***	0.166***
Subjective income	0.049**	0.061***	0.075***	0.033*
Never cohabit	-0.051**	-0.076***	-0.056***	-0.082***
Degree of religiosity	-0.019***	-0.018***	0.004	0.001
Not feeling discrimination	0.028	-0.110***	-0.127***	-0.075**
Social Activities	0.214***	0.062***	0.103***	0.182***
Marital status ^a				
Divorced/separated	0.130***	0.338***	0.084***	0.122***
Never married	0.083***	0.275***	-0.056*	0.009
Widowed	-0.052**	0.148***	-0.153***	-0.050***
Cohabit	0.090**	0.175***	0.083**	0.097**
Country Characteristics				
Mean of happiness	-0.043	0.02	-0.122***	-0.024
HDI	-0.16	0.708	2.248***	2.113**
Intercept	4.290***	3.207***	2.222***	1.445*
Variance Components				
Country variance	-0.853***	-1.494***	-1.400***	-1.256***
Individual variance	0.277***	0.096**	0.221***	0.292***
N	208,310	208,412	207,961	208,221

* P < .1 ** P < .05 *** P < .01

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2014 European Social Surveys.

Note: additional covariate included in model but not shown here is Year of Survey.

^a Omitted category: married.

Table 3. *Coefficients of Multilevel Analyses of Happiness and Marital Status in Interaction with Post-materialist Values, Age 30 and above*

Variable	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Individual Characteristics					
Female	0.098***	0.113***	0.102***	0.107***	0.097***
Age	-0.043***	-0.042***	-0.045***	-0.045***	-0.044***
Age squared	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
Subjective health	0.493***	0.480***	0.486***	0.481***	0.482***
Years of schooling	0.003	0.003	0	-0.002	0.001
Unemployed	-0.395***	-0.396***	-0.395***	-0.396***	-0.404***
Subjective income	0.500***	0.492***	0.494***	0.492***	0.493***
Never cohabited	0.060***	0.068***	0.068***	0.069***	0.072***
Degree of religiously	0.060***	0.062***	0.062***	0.060***	0.060***
Not feeling discrimination	0.406***	0.401***	0.407***	0.408***	0.410***
Social activities (1-5)	0.228***	0.213***	0.229***	0.223***	0.218***
Marital status^a					
Divorced/separated	-0.704***	-0.835***	-1.145***	-0.888***	-0.835***
Never married	-0.670***	-0.918***	-0.924***	-0.866***	-0.922***
Widowed	-0.754***	-1.036***	-1.107***	-1.034***	-1.045***
Cohabit	-0.043	-0.217	0.229	-0.208	-0.059
Important to have fun		0.064***			
Important to have freedom			0.047***		
Important to be creative				0.074***	
Important to try new things					0.057***
Marital status*opinion					
Divorced/separated		0.032*	0.086***	0.040**	0.032***
Never married		0.063***	0.049	0.045***	0.063***
Widowed		0.087***	0.074***	0.072***	0.082***
Cohabit		0.042	-0.059	0.034	0.002
Country Characteristics					
HDI	-2.717***	-2.725***	-2.653***	-2.761***	-2.722***
Mean of happiness	0.784***	0.784***	0.775***	0.782***	0.778***
Intercept	1.056	0.961	1.066	1.067	1.152
Variance Components					
Country variance	-1.800***	-1.728***	-1.789***	-1.744***	-1.792***
Individual variance	0.573***	0.567***	0.569***	0.567***	0.568***
N	214,857	207,058	207,169	206,729	206,977

* P < .1 ** P < .05 *** P < .01

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2014 European Social Surveys.

Note: additional covariate included in model but not shown here is Year of Survey.

^a Omitted category: married.

Appendix Table 1. *Mean of Post-materialist Values and Percentages of Marital Status by Country, Age 30 and above*

Country	M. Seeking Fun	M. Freedom	M. Creativity	M. Trying New Things	% Divorced /Separated	% Married	% Never Married	% Widowed	% Cohabit
Austria	3.88	4.96	4.50	3.85	13.14	58.12	12.17	10.43	6.15
Belgium	4.26	4.83	4.33	4.03	12.84	65.47	7.89	8.24	5.56
Bulgaria	3.42	4.47	3.78	3.75	8.42	61.68	7.60	19.22	3.08
Croatia	3.14	4.55	4.05	3.27	4.29	68.48	10.13	16.41	0.69
Cyprus	4.34	4.91	4.76	3.85	7.11	75.11	7.14	9.86	0.79
Czech R.	3.71	4.57	4.34	3.72	16.06	58.35	7.44	15.15	3.00
Estonia	4.24	4.86	4.65	3.73	10.95	65.69	7.84	7.82	7.70
Finland	3.01	4.71	3.88	3.75	14.65	51.66	9.91	14.84	8.94
France	3.63	4.79	4.32	4.00	13.22	59.29	10.93	8.69	7.87
Germany	3.69	4.46	4.44	3.98	13.17	56.70	11.97	11.34	6.83
Greece	3.69	5.01	4.50	3.90	11.06	65.84	9.39	8.69	5.02
Hungary	4.23	4.93	4.58	4.11	5.82	68.56	11.06	13.48	1.07
Iceland	4.61	4.91	4.42	4.09	13.85	58.71	8.02	16.11	3.31
Ireland	3.26	4.78	4.24	3.79	13.41	59.67	9.25	6.76	10.91
Israel	3.79	4.84	4.47	3.96	7.17	60.59	17.66	10.48	4.09
Italy	4.26	4.99	4.60	4.06	9.58	73.59	6.07	9.29	1.47
Lithuania	3.74	4.90	4.61	4.35	6.38	67.33	14.72	9.37	2.20
Luxembourg	3.10	4.32	3.71	3.32	14.68	53.10	6.65	22.25	3.33
Netherlands	3.65	4.67	4.47	4.18	9.15	70.13	8.59	8.55	3.59
Norway	4.40	4.94	4.51	4.04	11.91	59.20	11.90	11.55	5.44
Poland	3.49	4.44	4.42	3.55	12.52	60.86	9.52	6.42	10.69
Portugal	3.09	4.83	4.06	3.95	5.74	70.84	8.20	13.87	1.36
Russia	3.47	4.40	4.11	3.64	8.54	62.73	9.82	16.61	2.30
Slovakia	3.32	4.63	4.08	3.54	17.83	51.16	6.63	22.97	1.42
Slovenia	3.29	4.56	4.25	3.90	9.60	65.46	8.60	15.12	1.21
Spain	4.14	4.97	4.46	4.36	6.32	67.28	9.14	11.97	5.29
Sweden	3.73	4.82	4.44	3.86	6.17	67.78	12.20	9.67	4.18
Switzerland	4.12	4.62	4.42	3.70	13.58	55.10	10.88	6.83	13.61
Turkey	3.89	5.20	4.65	4.08	14.02	60.98	11.73	8.74	4.53
Ukraine	3.85	4.71	4.47	4.22	3.06	82.87	3.87	9.92	0.28
UK	2.91	4.35	3.59	3.47	12.71	57.51	4.45	24.74	0.59

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2014 European Social Surveys.