

Reduced relationship desire is associated with better life satisfaction for singles in Germany: An analysis of pairfam data

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

1–11

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DOI: [10.1177/02654075211005024](https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211005024)

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Abstract

This research estimates the extent to which life satisfaction of singles is influenced by their desire to be single. Regression analyses on data from the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam) studies are used to investigate this question, paying particular attention to longitudinal differences between never-married and divorced/separated men and women. Panel data analyses between different waves of the pairfam data indicate that decreases in desires for a relationship are significantly associated with greater life satisfaction. These patterns hold for all but one of the demographic groups investigated (divorced/separated men). The results are used to suggest how many singles may be able to maintain high levels of life satisfaction in the face of social stigmata.

Keywords

Divorce, life satisfaction, marriage, singlehood

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Introduction

For decades, surveys and studies have found that, on the whole, single and unmarried demographics report lower levels of happiness and wellbeing than their coupled and married counterparts. Possible explanations include an inherent lower levels of support when there is no partner and/or that singles are liable to evaluate themselves negatively by comparing themselves to others who are in a romantic relationship, resulting in a drop in overall happiness and life satisfaction (Kislev, 2018, 2019a; Suls & Wheeler, 2013). Yet, recent research has shown that these statistics are unnuanced and likely hide the experiences of singles who are satisfied with their lives (DePaulo, 2017; Kislev, 2019a). Indeed, a growing demographic of individuals are single by choice, and are characterized by their lack of desire to enter a romantic relationship (DePaulo, 2015; Kislev, 2020b; Slonim et al., 2015). For the growing single by choice demographic, it is possible to conject that by not seeking a romantic relationship, individuals avoid the wellbeing “penalty” associated with the social comparison and not being supported by a romantic partner. Instead, they derive support from friends and relatives (Kislev, 2020b). However, this question has not been investigated empirically.

Accordingly, this paper investigates the correlation between relationship desire and life satisfaction among adult singles, using longitudinal data from the pairfam studies. These analyses complement previous research that investigates how lower relationship desire might be associated with different relationship formation patterns such as cohabitation (Esteve & Lesthaeghe, 2016) and voluntary singlehood (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015; Moore & Radtke, 2015). These changes in relationship formation norms are happening despite the fact that singles face consistent discrimination (DePaulo, 2007, 2011) and negative stereotypes (Morris & Osburn, 2016; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Thus, by identifying subgroups of singles—such as those with low relationship desire—with increased wellbeing, it will be possible to better understand recent demographic shifts whereby married couples are less and less prevalent.

Singles’ life satisfaction

Very few empirical studies have directly investigated the relationship between relationship desire and wellbeing. A brief review of studies on the relationship desire of singles, as well as general wellbeing of singles, can be used to inform the analyses performed here.

A wide range of studies from multiple national contexts show that, on average, singles experience lower levels of general wellbeing (Joung et al., 1994; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). Some of these studies give important contextual insights into why this might be the case. For example, one study of singles in the Netherlands with 836 adult participants aged 18–40 found that singles generally felt quite negative about singlehood, with a large majority having more positive feelings about being partnered in comparison to being single (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). The study analyses suggest that singles with liberal values have less positive attitudes toward relationship commitment. The analyses stop short of suggesting whether these values can be in turn used to improve the wellbeing of singles, leading to the question raised by this paper.

Indeed, more recent studies have found that an increasing number of singles are satisfied with their relationship status and have generally high wellbeing, producing evidence that is difficult to reconcile with older studies finding singlehood to be associated with decreased happiness. Interview data with 142 singles over the age of 30 and quantitative analysis of over 300,000 respondents in the European Social Survey (ESS) overwhelmingly show that many singles, particularly long-term singles, lead fulfilling and happy lives by defying social pressure, maintaining post-materialistic values, building and retaining social capital, and investing in their careers (Kislev, 2019a). In many cases, long-term singles begin to report higher levels of happiness than married individuals because they maintain richer friendship circles and social networks that in the long term prevent loneliness (Einolf & Philbrick, 2014; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006; Kislev, 2020b).

There is therefore an apparent disjuncture between the evidence suggesting that singles on the whole report lower levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction, and studies suggesting that a growing group of singles report high levels of happiness, despite apparent social pressures placed on and discrimination against singles (DePaulo, 2007). While this disjuncture can be explained, at least in part, by problems of selection and sampling errors (Hanson et al., 2014), it is important to consider whether levels of relationship desire could explain the differences.

Relationship desire in singlehood

The premise of this paper is that relationship desire could help explain the apparent discord between the studies finding that some singles are happier with others that suggest singlehood is associated with reduced happiness. In this research, it is useful to consider the differences between voluntary singles, or singles by choice, and involuntary singles, or people who are single by circumstance (Adamczyk, 2017; Slonim et al., 2015; Slonim & Schütz, 2015b). Instead of considering these two groups as discrete and dichotomous opposites, this study measures individual relationship desire on a continuous scale.

At one extreme of the scale are singles with no intimate relationship desire, who can be viewed as singles by choice, or voluntary singles. Studies are beginning to suggest how low relationship desire can be associated with other social measures. For example, longitudinal analyses of the pairfam survey show that reductions in relationship desire over time are associated with higher rates of sociability with friends (Kislev, 2020b). Other studies suggest that reduced interest in marriage (Park et al., 2020) and lower relationship desire (Kislev, 2020c) likely predict increases in sexual satisfaction. These quantitative findings are corroborated by qualitative studies: for example, a narrative analysis of 26 long-term singles from Ireland found that those who chose singlehood felt increased levels of independence, self-fulfillment, and autonomy both throughout their lives and into old age (Timonen & Doyle, 2014). The converse is also true: the same study found that individuals who did not have control over their marital status due to circumstance were more likely to express negative emotions such as loneliness. Indeed, studies show that individuals who were single by circumstance experience reduced wellbeing (for example, due to not meeting the “right” partner: Adamczyk, 2017; or due to widowhood: Bennett & Soulsby, 2012).

The findings in each of these studies could be explained by a direct connection between relationship desire and life satisfaction, whereby singles with reduced relationship desire experience higher levels of satisfaction since they are less impacted by seeking something that they do not have (i.e., a romantic partner). Such a hypothesis would concur with studies suggesting that the choice to remain single is personally satisfying for many individuals (Pepping et al., 2018). The current study contributes to the literature by investigating this relationship directly, hypothesizing a significant negative relationship between relationship desire and life satisfaction due to the apparent differences between singles by choice and singles by circumstance (Adamczyk, 2017; DePaulo, 2015; Slonim et al., 2015). In addition, it is important to compare individuals whose relationship circumstances differ, independent of their relationship desire. For this reason, the study compares the never-married with divorced/separated individuals.

Methods

This study analyzes data from the first 10 waves of the German Research Foundation (DFG)-funded pairfam study (Brüderl et al., 2018; Huinink et al., 2011). The pairfam project began collecting a wide range of data on an annual basis in 2008/2009 with an overall sample of 12,400 participants from adolescence to middle adulthood. The current study omits participants under the age of 18.

Two subgroups of singles were examined here, divided into men and women: never-married men, never-married women, divorced/separated men, and divorced/separated women. All four groups were single, meaning that they even did not have a partner who lives at a different address at the time of survey. Only respondents who had not been in a relationship 3 months preceding the survey and who did not experience a termination of partnership due to death were included.

The analyses presented below used several demographic and socioeconomic variables that, based on previous studies' findings (Aysan & Aysan, 2017; Kötö-Ausmees & Realo, 2015; Plouffe & Tremblay, 2017), were likely to be of importance. They include gender, age, years of education, and satisfaction with income (ranging from 1—*bad*, to 5—*very good*), as well as number of children.¹ Cases were omitted only based on missing values in these variables and no other criteria were applied (no artificial imputation).

The main dependent variable under examination was the level of life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured using the following question: All in all, how satisfied are you with your life at the moment? This item was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*very dissatisfied*) to 10 (*very satisfied*). The main independent variable, relationship desire, was measured by degree of agreement with the following statement: "I would like to have a partner." Agreement ranges from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*absolutely*).

This study presents fixed-effects regressions of life satisfaction on change in relationship desire over time, together with the aforementioned demographic variables. The change in relationship desire was calculated in a pairwise fashion for each of the 10 waves between 2008/2009 and 2018/19, and represented by the difference operator. In this way, the analyses indicate whether changes in relationship desire over time are associated with differences in reported life satisfaction. Here, generalized least squares

Table 1. Characteristics of the single groups, never-married and divorced/separated, age 18 and above (cross-sectional data).

Variable	Never-married and Single		Divorced and Single	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
N	9,170	6,111	580	1,225
Mean age	26.51	26.36	38.31	38.04
Subjective health (1–5)	3.79	3.64	3.37	3.38
Years of education	11.27	11.49	12.13	12.38
% employed	0.59	0.53	0.80	0.74
Satisfied with income (1–5)	3.51	3.34	2.75	2.69
Mean number of children	0.01	0.18	0.56	1.42
Life satisfaction (0–10)	7.11	7.12	6.07	6.48
Singlehood is easier (1–5)	3.76	3.73	3.64	3.79
Lacking relationship desire (1–5)	2.53	2.72	2.43	2.87

Source: Pairfam datasets, waves 1–10.

(GLS) analyses are performed instead of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression due to the issues of heteroskedasticity that are liable to occur in regressions on panel-data (Kaufman, 2013).

This study omits individuals who switched between being single and being partnered in consecutive waves as well as those with no repeated measure. As common longitudinal analyses, this is responsible for a significant reduction in the number of cases included in Table 2, relatively to Table 1. Note that individuals who had no partners in consecutive waves, then partnered, and then became singles again were counted twice as accustomed in longitudinal singles. All analyses were estimated separately for never-married and divorced men and women. All estimations were conducted with the Stata software, version 15.1.

Findings

For context, Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the different single demographics used in this paper, where the participants are separated into four categories: never-married men and women and divorced/separated men and women.

Yet, the main purpose of this study is to investigate whether there is a relationship between relationship desire and life satisfaction across the four groups presented. For this reason, Table 2 presents fixed-effects GLS regressions of self-reported life satisfaction on changes in relationship desire over time, together with demographic and individual characteristics. Note that since this study focuses on individuals who stayed singles for at least two waves consecutively, the number of omitted cases for the four categories was naturally high and this is the reason for the large gap in the number of cases between Table 1 and 2.

All groups, except for divorced/separated men, indicate positive and significant relationships between subjective health and income satisfaction with overall life satisfaction. To that end, the results reflect other studies indicating particular challenges in

Table 2. Fixed-effects GLS regressions of life satisfaction, age 18 and above.

Variable	Never-married and Single		Divorced/Separated and Single	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Age	0.010 (0.014)	-0.010 (0.017)	0.137* (0.058)	0.041 (0.030)
Subjective health	0.334*** (0.030)	0.352*** (0.037)	0.181 (0.145)	0.530*** (0.080)
Years of education	-0.032 (0.017)	0.000 (0.022)	0.000 (.)	-0.080 (0.116)
Employed	-0.052 (0.070)	0.088 (0.090)	-0.305 (0.358)	0.341 (0.220)
Satisfied with income	0.117*** (0.030)	0.103** (0.035)	0.022 (0.156)	0.239** (0.074)
Number of children if any	0.361 (0.487)	-0.061 (0.189)	0.289 (0.387)	0.079 (0.230)
Δ Relationship desire	-0.049* (0.020)	-0.100*** (0.025)	0.012 (0.092)	-0.118* (0.046)
Constant	5.564*** (0.407)	5.752*** (0.504)	-0.014 (2.409)	3.308 (1.816)
N (observations)	3915	2592	247	719
N (individuals)	1,267	867	94	221
R ² within	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.13
R ² between	0.25	0.29	0.03	0.21
R ² overall	0.21	0.22	0.02	0.24

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Source: Pairfam datasets, waves 1–10.

the wellbeing and happiness of divorced men, who frequently experience relatively large penalties in self-confidence, feelings of competence, and coping abilities when compared with divorced women (see, for example: Symoens et al., 2014). This could also explain the different result regarding the coefficients for age in Table 2, whereby divorced/separated men are the only group to experience significant improvements in self-reported life satisfaction with age. It could be that over time, divorced/separated men improve their wellbeing as they adjust more slowly to divorced/separated life.

The main result of this paper is the coefficients of change in relationship desire. Here, the negative and significant coefficients indicate that reductions in relationship desire over time—that is, between the pairfam data panels—are associated with increased life satisfaction. This result appears to complement studies indicating that voluntary singles or singles by choice (i.e. singles with reduced levels of relationship desire) experience better social outcomes that are associated with happiness and wellbeing (Park et al., 2020; Timonen & Doyle, 2014). Yet, and unlike previous studies that suggest a link between low relationship desire and factors associated with life satisfaction (such as relationship desire or sociability, see: Kislev, 2020b, 2020c), this study suggests a direct significant association between reduced relationship desire and higher life satisfaction.

Two additional findings must be noted when considering these results. First, cross-sectional regressions (available from the author upon request) also suggest a significant, negative association between relationship desire and self-reported life satisfaction. The findings of this study thus support the hypothesis proposed in the literature review both point-wise and longitudinally. Second, and as with the demographic and individual characteristics, this relationship is not apparent for the divorced/separated men subgroup. Further investigation should assist in uncovering the nuances in the possible relationship between relationship and life satisfaction for divorced/separated men, as discussed below.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate the possible relationship between relationship desire and self-reported life satisfaction for never-married and divorced/separated singles. For all of the groups studied (except for divorced/separated men), the results support the hypothesis that reductions in relationship desire over time are significantly associated with higher life satisfaction. In order to situate this finding in the current literature, it is important to interpret the possible meanings of the “relationship desire” variable. Broadly speaking, low relationship desire is a characteristic of voluntary singles (Adamczyk, 2017), singles by choice (Slonim et al., 2015; Slonim & Schütz, 2015a), or “new singles” (DePaulo, 2015). Thus, the findings complement studies that suggest that the single demographics have ways of experiencing increased levels of wellbeing, despite discrimination and stigmatization of singles (Kislev, 2019a, 2019b, 2020c).

The findings of this study are important for two reasons. First, they add an additional possible explanation behind apparently conflicting findings on the happiness of singles. While singles as a demographic on the whole might report lower levels of happiness, studies that do not take singles with low relationships desire into account overlook an important sub-demographic who report high levels of life satisfaction, despite the apparent challenges of being single (see, for example: DePaulo, 2007). Second, the findings help to contextualize the accelerating demographic shift away from marriage (i.e. the Second Demographic Transition: Lesthaeghe, 2010). Whereas singles face high levels of discrimination and thus reduced wellbeing, the shift away from marriage needs explanation. The results of this study bring the possibility that people choosing singlehood have reduced relationship desire, and thus reduce or altogether avoid the “penalty” previously associated with singlehood. The study joins the findings of others who suggest that the move away from marriage can be explained in part by the ways in which some singles seek and maintain happiness via friends, uncommitted sex, and work satisfaction (DePaulo, 2016; Kislev, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b).

In order to support these arguments, future studies will need to identify specific explanations for the causality of the relationship between low relationship desire and life satisfaction. One explanation could be due to more independence and control over one’s choices that, in turn, are shown to increase life satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2008). There are many possible mediating factors in this causal relationship. Indeed, singles can exercise their independence by choosing to invest more in their friendships, careers, hobbies, communities, and extended family relationships, each of which can be reasonably expected to increase overall wellbeing (DePaulo, 2016). It could also be that

reduced relationship desire has a mediating effect, whereby singles with low relationship desire can be more sexually satisfied (Kislev, 2020c) or have increased social capital (Kislev, 2019b), for instance, and thus result in increased life satisfaction. Some qualitative studies (e.g. Timonen & Doyle, 2014) have already contributed to this causation argument: they can be used as a justification for further research in this regard.

Yet, it is important to address the anomalous result in this paper (divorced/separated men), among whom there was no apparent correlation between relationship desire and self-reported life satisfaction. While additional analyses (available upon request) indicate no differences between the divorced/separated and non-married singles on the whole, divorced men prove to be an anomaly here.

Yet, the anomalous nature of divorced men in this study could be explained by existing studies on the wellbeing of divorced men. For example, the findings here are arguable consistent with those of Leopold (2018) who concluded that in comparison with divorced women, divorced men are less satisfied with their lives, especially in the short-term. The fact that divorced men are less satisfied, in general, might limit the possibility of those choosing singlehood, in particular, to achieve higher levels of life satisfaction or, as some of the aforementioned studies suggested, to falsely report on willing to stay single (showing low levels of relationships desire) whereas the actual reason is difficulties with attachment among this group (Apostolou et al., 2019; Pepping & MacDonald, 2019; Pepping et al., 2018; Schachner et al., 2008).

Alternatively, because women experience higher levels of discrimination, prejudice, and societal expectations in many fields and hold negative self-views in higher numbers (Fischlmayr, 2002; Meece et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2007; Zeldin et al., 2008), it is possible that those who high relationship desire are also subject to more negative self-view in this context. The result is a widening of the life satisfaction gap between divorced women with high and low relationship desire. This is while women who consciously choose to remain single develop an increased social capital compared to single men (Wenger et al., 2007).

Finally, differences between divorced men and women may be attributed to cultural differences between men of different nationalities. Indeed, a demographic study on the life satisfaction of the elderly in Europe shows in almost all nations (including Germany which is in the focus of the current research) that living alone was associated with reduced life satisfaction for men (Gaymu et al., 2012). The exceptions were Denmark and the Netherlands, where it could be argued that single men feel less threatened or emasculated by their relationship status.

These claims regarding the wellbeing of divorced and separated men, however, would need to be backed up by further research. Future research that seeks to identify the intricacies of the connection between relationship desire and the life satisfaction of singles will likely provide insights on the wellbeing and happiness of the growing singles demographic. The current research, therefore, opens up new pathways for such studies.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained at: <https://www.pairfam.de/en/data/>.

Note

1. The survey simply asks how many children the participant has without differentiating between biological children and children who live in the same household as the respondent, or children who live away from home some or all of the time. Childless respondents report "0" for this variable.

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