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Social Capital, Happiness, and the Unmarried: A Multilevel Analysis of 32 European Countries

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Abstract

Vast changes to the status of marriage in modern society have impacted the demographic makeup of many countries. Particularly in the Western world, a growing portion of the population comprises of singles that may be separated, divorced, widowed, or never married. Faced with this change, it is crucial for researchers and policymakers to understand the mechanisms behind the well-being of the unmarried. This paper explores the relationship between social capital and happiness for different types of marital groups. By performing a multilevel analysis on data from 32 countries, this research demonstrates not only that singles present higher social capital which is positively correlated with higher happiness, but also derive greater happiness from equal levels of social capital. Furthermore, this paper explores potential consequences for further research in social capital, happiness, and marital status.

Keywords: marriage; singles; cohabitation; social capital; happiness.

Introduction

The institution of marriage is undergoing vast changes: a rising average age of first marriage, increased rates of divorce, and a growing number of individuals who are actively choosing to not get married (Amato 2010, Santos and Weiss 2016). In Europe, more than 50 percent of households in major cities such as Munich, Frankfurt, and Paris is occupied by people living alone (Euromonitor 2013). In the United States, 22 percent of American adults were single in 1950, while today this number has jumped to more than 50 percent (Klinenberg 2012), and one in four American young adults is predicted to never get married (Wang and Parker 2014). At the same time, getting married before having children has become less prevalent in developed nations. The proportion of American children living with two married parents decreased from 87 percent at the start of the 1960s to approximately 65 percent in the 2010s (Wang and Parker 2014). These changes, usually referred to as part of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) (Lesthaeghe 2014, Van de Kaa 2003), are attributed to many social transitions that began to take hold in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries: mass urbanization, increased longevity, the communications revolution, women's rights movements, technological advances, and the rise of the welfare system (Santos and Weiss 2016, Quiroz 2013).

The decline in marriage has many consequences, but one of the most burning questions is how it affects unmarried individuals' happiness and well-being. Whereas many claim that marriage is positively correlated with subjective well-being, it is not entirely clear whether people are happier as a result of marriage or this is due to happier people choosing to get married (Stack and Eshleman 1998, Carr and Springer 2010). Moreover, a review of 18 longitudinal studies by Luhmann et al. (2012) shows that people who married did not become any happier than they were when they were single, except for an initial honeymoon effect in some of the studies. Finally, many of these studies focus on the group of those who are currently married, while many married people end up less happy after divorce or a death of a spouse

(DePaulo 2007).

In any event, rather than asking why there is a growing number of unmarried individuals or what the consequences of being unmarried are, the question of the current study is what mechanisms increase their quality of life. In particular, this research explores the contribution of social capital to unmarried individuals' happiness as a moderating factor between marital status and happiness. This way, mechanisms for increasing the well-being of the growing number of people living alone can be explored, and directions for social and policy change that would benefit the growing population of singles can be identified.

Theoretically, such research disentangles the confounding relationship between social capital and happiness. The argument here is that not everyone benefits from social capital the same way. Individuals with different marital statuses might not only develop a higher rate of social capital, interact more frequently with family and friends, and be socially active, but also derive greater benefits from such activities. More specifically, whereas research indicates that married couples turn to their partners in order to gain support and mental stability (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006), unmarried individuals might turn outwards to friends, colleagues, and the wider family in order to feel safe and belonging as well as to increase their well-being. This paper therefore asks how singles may increase their levels of happiness by exercising a wider range of social capital in the form of social meetings and social activities outside of marriage. This is done by comparing the happiness of married, cohabiting, never married, divorced/separated, and widowed individuals across Europe, using data from the European Social Survey (ESS).

In this vein, it is important to bring attention to the terminology used in this paper. While the definition of 'married' is clear-cut, 'unmarried' or 'single' include never-married, divorced, widowed, and cohabiting individuals. In order to avoid conflating the experiences of different types of unmarried individuals, the literature review and data analysis presented here differentiate between different types of single status. In particular, this study separately categorized those who currently cohabit with a significant other, estimated at around 10 percent (Copen et al. 2012). Thus, cohabitation is considered a midpoint category in this study and not part of singlehood *per se*. On one side, cohabitation has moved closer to marriage both socially and legally, with common marriage laws providing similar rights as those granted to formal marriages in many places, such as the United States, Australia, and Europe (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014, Heaton and Forste 2007, Martin 2002). On the other side, cohabiting is close to singlehood because it is also based, at least in part, on the increasing frustration and disillusionment with the institution of marriage (Zimmermann and Easterlin 2006, Bramlett and Mosher 2002, Cherlin 2004). The propensity to get in and out of relationships more easily and aversion to the risk of divorce have contributed to the number of couples choosing to cohabit for significant periods of time without getting married (Lewis 2001, Morgan 2000, Sweet and Bumpass 1990, Esteve et al. 2012). Therefore, this paper analyzes cohabiters separately from other categories of singles.

Furthermore, while singles share many of the same challenges, they are affected differently according to more nuanced social and familial situations. Having children is one prominent issue in this sense. For example, a single person with nearby supportive children or grandchildren operates in a different reality than a single with no descendants. Therefore, all statistical analyses employ a special variable to account for those with children. In addition, those who cohabited in the past are differentiated from those who never lived with another person.

Finally, happiness is defined as the degree to which individuals judge their life more or less favorably (Veenhoven 1988). This is a modest definition against the background of many cultures and philosophers that attribute ethical virtues, social devotion, and even transcendental Nirvana to the term happiness (Tatarkiewicz 1977, Hegel and Brown 2006, Chiang 1996,

McMahon 2004). In this sense, happiness can also be equated to the terms subjective wellbeing (Duncan 2005) and life satisfaction (Oishi et al. 2013, Mogilner et al. 2010), since they are often used interchangeably and are highly correlated. Indeed, many studies found the reductionist definition to be widely agreed-upon and to unify many cultural interpretations (Lu 2001). For example, one study compared dictionary definitions of happiness across 30 countries spanning 150 years, accounting for both time and culture. This study found that the most shared aspects of the definition were feeling lucky and experiencing favorable external conditions (Oishi et al. 2013).

Social capital and happiness

The notion of social capital, understood as “the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit” (Woolcock 1998), has gained greater prominence in recent decades, especially following Putnam’s argument that social capital has declined over time and more and more people are “bowling alone” (Putnam 2001). Putnam views social capital as the connections between people and the norms of reciprocity that arise as a result. Social capital in this sense can be easily measured and leveraged by social meetings (e.g. meeting friends, family, and colleagues) and social activities (e.g. volunteering, participating in clubs, etc.). Following these definitions of social capital, researchers are investigating now its relation to happiness. Some view social capital as a robust and direct predictor of happiness (e.g. Putnam 2001, Leung et al. 2011). Helliwell and Barrington-Lee (2010) and Winkelmann (2009) identify social capital as a predictor of well-being using Canadian and German micro-data respectively. An analysis of worldwide datasets by Helliwell et al. (2010) suggests that social context variables explain a large portion of cross-country variation in subjective well-being. In addition, informal social interaction channels found to be highly positively correlated with subjective well-being (e.g. Lelkes 2006, Powdthavee 2008). Furthermore, studies in Europe (Pichler 2006) and the US (Helliwell 2003) reveal a strong correlation between involvement in clubs and non-political/noneconomic organizations and higher levels of life satisfaction. Finally, religious social capital, as usually measured by church attendance, shows a positive relationship with well-being (e.g. Hayo and Seifert 2003).

Others claim that social capital mainly has an indirect influence, arguing that it moderates happiness via secondary factors. For instance, Helliwell and Putnam (2004) find that increased social capital improves physical health, which in turn raises life satisfaction. Social capital can also lead to increased economic growth (Zak and Knack 2001) or to the ability to deal with external shocks (Rodrik 1999), thereby increasing happiness. Yet others (e.g. Ram 2010) find only a fragile connection between social capital and happiness, if at all.

Given the lack of consistency, social capital research has attracted criticism for lack of clarity, confounding variables with transmission channels, or for only being relevant to countries above a certain income threshold (Bjørnskov 2008). The current study, therefore, aims to add another differentiation that might help to explain these mixed results. The argument is that marital status plays a pivotal role in understanding the use of social capital and its benefit for happiness as will be shown below.

Social capital and unmarried individuals

Studies show that among many singles, the role of friendships in everyday life is central, and in some cases, the emotional, social, material, and financial support traditionally derived from familial relationships gets transferred to networks of friends (Bellotti 2008). More recent studies observe that this pattern is prevalent among all age groups (Moore and Radtke 2015, Fileborn et al. 2015).

Indeed, the focal point of support was once the household, but it is increasingly apparent that there has been a shift towards ‘personal networking units’ as a way of organizing one’s

life. This shift has been referred to as ‘networked individualism’ (2008, Wellman 2007), a term that describes the increasing emphasis on individuals’ personal networks as the cornerstone of support, rather than the household unit. This phenomenon has been facilitated by the growing number of singles, the individualization at the global level, and the increasingly ubiquitous connectivity that allows people to make social arrangements more independently (McEwen and Wellman 2013).

Moreover, networks and communities of singles are prevalent even in religious communities where there is a large emphasis on getting married and establishing a family. For instance, Engelberg (2016) observes that among national-religious Orthodox Jewish singles living in Israel, whereas the strong desire to find a partner and establish a family is strongly manifested, they also strengthen their ties with their surrounding friends and establish communities of unmarried singles, which in turn actually facilitate longer periods of being unmarried. Similar patterns have been observed among Evangelical Christians in Australia who created ‘intentional communities’ for unmarried Christians, who then benefit from social, bureaucratic, and financial support (Winner 2015).

Finally, it is evident that the formation of singles communities is taking effect in the way that urban and business environments are adapting to the needs of these communities. Some architects and city planners design urban spaces to include studios and micro-housing for singles with communal shared spaces (Yee 2013), and businesses and entrepreneurs cater to and create specialized services to the singles market, whose expenditure is on the rise (Klinenberg 2012).

This collection of social routes for singles creates an alternative for singles to find support and belonging in non-traditional and non-familial settings. The question is therefore how effective is the social capital created by singles. In other words, the question is whether singles’ happiness has a stronger correlation with social capital. An answer to this question might also explain the mixed results regarding the relationship between social capital and happiness. The hypothesis, which will be detailed below, is that unmarried individuals use social interactions and activities in order to receive support and develop their safety-net, whereas couples do not benefit as much from social capital and therefore invest less in social ties. Thus, the following section addresses the possible relation between happiness and marital status as moderated by social factors.

Happiness, social capital, and unmarried individuals

Several studies (e.g. Coombs 1991) show that singles are emotionally disadvantaged because they do not have their own families to support them in times of crisis. They demonstrate how families can play an important role in improving the welfare of people’s lives. However, other researchers argue that singles might raise their wellbeing by turning to their parents, siblings, and/or friends who may love and care about them, and feel obligated to be there at times of need (Leung et al. 2011). In fact, DePaulo and Morris (2006) find that the heavy expectation placed by members of traditional family units causes people to turn inwards, expect undivided attention from one another, and thereby reducing other available resources from outer circles. For this reason, the contemporary institution of the family is often referred to as ‘greedy marriage’ (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). In contrast, singles do not experience this inward movement, and therefore are more poised to help their families and friends and derive benefits back. DePaulo and Morris (2006) conclude that singles, in fact, share and benefit from their family units – however they may appear – more than individuals in traditional family units.

Moreover, being networked may give singles an added advantage in seeking happiness as they adapt more quickly and naturally to a reality that demands diversified social networks and places less emphasis on the centrality of the family unit. A study conducted by Amato and colleagues (2007) compared the differences in social behaviors between couples in 1980 and

in the year 2000. Couples in the year 2000 were less likely to participate in a wide variety of activities, such as visiting friends, working on house projects, going out, and even eating meals together. Meanwhile, singles have become increasingly adept at building networks over a similar period of time. It would therefore seem that with time, married individuals are more exposed to the risks of loneliness or rather social isolation, whereas singles may be adapting to their reality, ultimately leading to increased happiness.

Similarly, whereas divorce may have negative mental consequences, nowadays, there are often social frameworks and support mechanisms available to those going through a divorce or separation, especially in more liberal societies. Indeed, divorcees who form strong social networks that reduce the stigma and social consequences of divorce increase their well-being and happiness (McDermott et al. 2013).

Another way in which singles differ from coupled individuals and derive greater benefit from social capital is in their level of self-sufficiency. People who have partners, and more so those with children, are frequently assumed to be better off in the event of challenging circumstances such as illness or immobility because there are people available who feel obligated to step in to help (Walsh 1996, Coombs 1991). There are benefits to having a partner and children nearby, such as reduced psychological distress when the family is available (Ha and Carr 2005). However, others argue that in many cases they end up being worse off (DePaulo 2007) because it is increasingly common for grown children to be emotionally or geographically distant from their parents, meaning that their role in support is diminishing. The married couple, then, is left without supporting circles. On the other hand, singles who have spent their lives cultivating rich and diverse social networks are not nearly as prone to this issue, and research is beginning to suggest that they are more emotionally resilient (Trimberger 2006). They are more likely to avoid a situation of having limited personal communities and restricted inner circles of friends, which are powerful causes of psychological distress, especially in older age.

Furthermore, although collectivism was assumed to be related to social capital (Westen 1985, Lukes 1971), more recent evidence suggests that individualism, which is closely linked to single living (Kislev 2018), can facilitate both the production and the effect of social capital (Allik and Realo 2004). Perhaps counterintuitively, individualism can heighten the role of social capital in raising happiness as a result of self-responsibility (Beilmann and Realo 2012), strength of peer-group (Beilmann et al. 2014), and increased numbers of friends (Triandis 2000)

Thus, this paper addresses the possible relation between happiness and marital status as moderated by social factors. The focal question is whether happiness has a stronger correlation with social capital among singles in comparison with currently married people.

Method, data, and variables

Data for this study comes from the 2002-2016 European Social Survey (ESS). The sample consists of all persons aged 15 and above who reside in each country, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, or language. For the current study, only individuals who are older than 30 were selected. The age 30 was chosen because it is around the mean age at first marriage in the countries under investigation. Around this age both the internal and external expectations to be married start growing and thus require individuals to face the consequences of not being married in terms of happiness (Engelberg 2016, Kislev 2019a, Kislev 2019b).

This study uses both demographic and socioeconomic variables to account for intervening mechanisms in determining individuals' happiness (see Appendix Table A1 for detailed results). The following variables are used: gender, age (and age squared, accounting for a decreasing marginal happiness effect), unemployment, and previous cohabitation. Because happiness is subjective in nature, four additional variables are being used: subjective

health assessment, subjective income assessment, degree of religiosity, and feelings of discrimination. As an education variable, ‘years of schooling’ is being used. All of these variables are prominent in the literature on happiness and proved to be significant in a preliminary step-wise examination that was conducted. The ‘year of survey’ is also being used to account for the concern that there are differences between 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.

To identify social interactions, two subjective measures are incorporated. The first is social activities frequency assessment ranging on 1 (*Much less than most*) to 5 (*Much more than most*) scale, and the second is social meetings frequency assessment ranging on 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Every day*) scale. The first question is phrased in the survey as follows: “Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities”? The second question is phrased as follows: “How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues”? The use of these measures of social interactions and the assumed implications that they will have on happiness lend well to Putnam’s (2001) definition of social capital mentioned above. Yet it should be noted that this definition has been criticized for confounding variables with transmission channels, for example, by conflating sociability with group membership, family, or bonding (Fischer 2005). In addition, others have criticized it for only being relevant to countries above a certain income threshold (Bjørnskov 2008). These criticisms must be accounted for in considering the impact of social capital on the happiness of married and unmarried individuals. Indeed, while other paradigms of social capital (e.g. Coleman 1988, Bourdieu 1986) may be instructive and beneficial in addressing the questions posed by this paper, the available data from the ESS directs the choice of definition made here.

In addition to the personal factors, each individual is characterized by country of residency on a higher level in the multilevel analyses. The importance for aggregating several countries together while accounting for the in-between differences is not only to achieve more robust results, but also to account for the various definitions of happiness mentioned above, bringing together Eastern, Southern, Northern, and Western European countries. In any case, the results presented here closely resemble those yielded from fixed-effect-only models. Furthermore, the country levels are decomposed by socioeconomic country characteristics since the literature distinguishes between the effect of social capital on happiness in low/high income environments and low/high levels of education (Han et al. 2013, Calvo et al. 2012). Thus, the Human Development Index (HDI) indicator is incorporated from the UN databases, which provides a broad picture of a country’s life expectancies, adult literacy rates, GDP levels, and gross enrolment ratios in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. In addition, the mean level of happiness in each country is accounted, averaging the interpretation of happiness to a more generalizable definition. Thus, the characteristics of the individual and his or her country are modeled as affected by other, less observable, country factors. One can think of the higher levels as a ‘package’ that is unpacked in these models to at least two more specific components that might affect happiness levels.

Still, given the very large sample, the analysis could produce statistical significance even for small point estimates. Thus, the effect size is also estimated. 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.

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 ranges on 0 (*Extremely unhappy*) to 10 (*Extremely happy*) scale, and significantly correlates with questions on subjective well-being and life satisfaction. This specific indicator was chosen based on previous studies such as those of Kislev (2018) and Mencarini and Sironi (2012).

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 because no significant differences have been found between the two and because the number of separated individuals is relatively small.

Findings

Before considering the relationship between marital status and happiness, it is instructive to look at the differences between the levels of social activities and social meetings of the five groups of marital status being analyzed. Table 1 shows that when it comes to social activities, there are hardly significant differences between the groups. Widowed individuals score slightly lower than married individuals. However, when it comes to social meetings with friends, colleagues, and family, all groups of unmarried person are more sociable than couples. In this respect, these findings strengthen the literature about the ‘greedy marriage’ (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006).

[Table 1 about here]

Table 2 provides a multilevel analysis of happiness levels as a function of marital status in interaction with social capital. The statistics regarding individual characteristics in all of the models are consistent with previous research on happiness, with younger, healthier, less discriminated, and more religious individuals being happier on average. Education has no significant effect on happiness, but being employed and having a higher income also associate with increased happiness.

[Table 2 about here]

Model 1 explores the relationship of marital status and individual characteristics with happiness, although no causal claim can be made here based on these cross-sectional analyses. Without considering social capital, Model 1 indicates that singles – divorced/separated, never married, and widowed individuals – report significantly lower levels of happiness than married men and women. Model 1 also suggests a lower gap in happiness between cohabiters and married individuals, and as such is in line with recent arguments that cohabitation and marriage are becoming increasingly indistinguishable (Hiekel et al. 2014). In addition, in line with previous literature and surveys (e.g. ONS 2016), the results indicate that men take a bigger penalty in happiness.

Model 2 incorporates the social capital factor as measured by social activities and social meetings. As is apparent from Appendix Figure A1 (on the country level), Model 2 shows that social activities and social meetings have a positive effect on happiness.

Models 3 and 4 present the effect of social activities and social meetings in their interaction with marital status. The interaction term demonstrates how singles’ happiness is increased at a higher rate with every increase in their social capital levels compared with married people. In other words, while the terms of social meetings and social activities in the equation show the benefit from social capital across all groups (as the existing literature shows), the interaction terms present the slope of each demographic group separately (a positive result means a steeper slope for every score of social capital).

Indeed, the findings of Models 3 and 4 show that in general, singles derive significantly more happiness from social activities and social meetings than married couples, albeit to different extents. The only group that is only marginally significant ($p = 0.144$) is the never married group in its interaction with social meetings (the interaction with social activities positively correlates with happiness and is highly significant).

To exemplify these results, take five persons: one is married, the second is cohabiting, the third has never married, the fourth is divorced, and the fifth is widowed. They are equal in age, education, income, and so on. If all five are very socially active – volunteering in their

communities, participating in clubs, etc. – the latter three, those who are single, will present up to around 0.4 points of happiness more than the married and cohabitating persons.

Holding variables at their average, one can say that an average amount of each group's social activities (see Appendix Table A1) is correlated with a 0.24 points happiness increase among those who are divorced/separated compared with couples, a 0.25 happiness increase among the never married, and a 0.26 points happiness increase among the widowed. Social meetings account for 0.32 points of happiness increase among those who are divorced/separated, 0.16 points among the never married (not significant), 0.1 points among widows, and 0.26 among those cohabiting.

To illustrate this in another way, an average never married person who is socially active (e.g. gives it the highest score, 5) is around 43% happier than a person who hardly participates in social activities (e.g. gives it the lowest score, 1), the gap between the two stands at 1.14 points on the happiness scale. Similarly, a divorced/separated person who fully participates in social meetings (again, gives it the highest score, 7) is around 24% happier than a person who does not take part in social meetings, the gap between the two stands at 1.14 as well.

Indeed, the results of the Cohen's D test support the practical effect of these findings and show that the estimated happiness increase associated with average levels of social activities among unmarried groups is roughly 0.3-0.35 standard deviations. For social meetings, this number stands at roughly 0.2-0.4 standard deviations. While these effects are considered small to medium, it is comparable to the effect of feeling/not feeling discrimination, for example, and makes social capital an important factor in distinguishing between singles and couples in terms of subjective wellbeing.

Finally, in estimating the magnitude of the social capital effect, the reader should consider that the overall difference between singles and married individuals is usually less than one point and some argue that this estimate is also partly due to a priori selection mechanism (happier individuals are those who are more likely to marry). For example, a longitudinal study (Stutzer and Frey 2006) found that the difference between married and never married individuals due to the selection effect is around 0.3 points on a similar 0-10 scale of life satisfaction (which is highly correlated with happiness) among men and women. In this longitudinal study, this number leaves around 0.4 points difference, which is also under debate regarding several intervening mechanisms (see: DePaulo 2014). Given these small numbers, the effect of social capital can be considered significantly high in certain cases.

Discussion

The research presented here sets out to address questions regarding the relationship between social capital, marital status, and happiness level. In the backdrop of these questions is the rising number of singles around the world. As the proportion of singles grows, it becomes increasingly important to consider what contributes to singles' wellbeing. Thus, this research focuses on social capital as a moderator for increased happiness among singles.

Indeed, many studies suggest that increased social capital raises happiness in direct or at least indirect ways (Bjørnskov 2008, Ram 2010, Leung et al. 2011). These theories and studies are especially important for the causality question and strengthen the direction of causality in which social capital increases happiness. This is true across many national contexts. An examination of all countries participating in this study shows a correlation between social capital and the level of happiness on the country level. Figure A1 demonstrates that in the vast majority of countries included in this study the measures of happiness and social capital extracted from the ESS are significantly correlated.

However, it is not clear how social interactions moderate happiness for different groups of marital status. The results presented here indicate that, in general, social capital increases happiness among singles more than it does for cohabiters or married individuals. Although

singles present lower baseline levels of happiness due to factors such as selection mechanisms into marriage and policies that favor married couples (Mastekaasa 1992, Stutzer and Frey 2006, Burt et al. 2010, DePaulo 2007), singles become happier not only by being more social, but also by deriving greater happiness from equal levels of social interactions than their coupled peers. These results therefore raise important questions about why some demographics gain more from social meetings and activities than others do.

To unpack and consider how singles may use social capital to increase their wellbeing, it is useful to reconsider some of the definitions and theories of happiness. To that end, theories of happiness, particularly those that understand happiness to be a relative or comparative concept (e.g. the social comparison and set point theories: Brickman and Campbell 1971, Festinger 1954), can complement the results of this study and be used to project how singles may – intentionally or unintentionally – use social capital to increase their reported levels of happiness.

First, because the singles' baseline is lower, the relative increase provided by social capital is higher. Conversely, an economic argument, namely the principle of decreasing marginal returns, would argue that couples who compare themselves to singles and exercise social capital in their search for happiness would gain less due to their higher baseline. This argument assumes, of course, Kant's claim (Kant 1999) that happiness is not derived from any intrinsic moral relevance or values, but rather is relative and subjective in nature.

Second, it could be also argued that singles higher level of happiness derived from equal levels of social capital is due to the variety of people or the types of activity that they are more likely to engage in comparing to coupled individuals. DePaulo (2015, 2014) and Klinenberg (2012) describe numerous ways in which singles interact socially nowadays, from a variety of clubs and associations to raising children together. Thus, the manner of social capital can be altered by the type of social meetings and activities and thus more effectively increase happiness. These adjustments to engagement can be made consciously or subconsciously by singles, in alignment with the specific needs of the individual. In contrast, coupled individuals may be more limited due to the constraints placed on them by their relationships (Stein 1975, Stets 1991), particularly if there is an expectation to invest the vast majority of time in the relationship, in the shared household, or in caring for children (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006).

Indeed, the reduced ability of social capital to increase the happiness of coupled individuals is consistent with the findings of Amato et al. (2007), who note that whereas couples are participating in an increasingly un-diverse array of social activities, singles are becoming increasingly adept at building social frameworks that cater to their needs and remain flexible and open to changes. Wellman (2008, 2007) names it 'networked individualism' where individuals' personal networks are becoming a major and adaptive source of support that can replace the role of the household unit. Studies show that this trend is shared not only by young individuals, but also among middle-aged singles (Moore and Radtke 2015) and seniors (Fileborn et al. 2015). In other words, the findings of this study could support the idea that singles of all ages are adjusting their social capital and building personal networks to feel better in being unmarried, while others simply embrace single life, to begin with, and prefer investing more in their friends (Kislev 2019b). Of course, the causality here should be investigated further in experimental studies.

In this vein, confirming the hypothesis made here that singles stand to gain more from social capital is also consistent with theories regarding the social condition of being in a relationship. In particular, these claims fit in with the 'greedy marriage' proposal (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006) on two accounts. Firstly, the way in which marriage can cause individuals to turn inwards would be consistent with singles engaging in more social meetings, and secondly, by expecting undivided attention from the partner and reducing the variety of social capital, coupled individuals might experience lower quality of social capital that, in turn, is less

effective in raising their levels of happiness and might even cause psychological distress, especially in older age (Trimberger 2006).

Of course, these directions in research should be explored further in independent surveys as well as in interviews and ethnographic studies. Notably, while the current research demonstrates the differential effects of social meetings and activities for married and unmarried individuals, it does not take into account the complexity and potentially diverse forms of social capital. In particular, relying on Putnam's (2001) definition here is potentially limiting. Future studies could include qualitative data that would more fully capture and describe the differences in social capital for married and unmarried individuals. An analysis of the egocentric social networks would be particularly insightful here (Djomba and Zaletel-Kragelj 2016). These data would complement existing research on the social networks and communities of individuals that still did not pay enough attention to the differences between married and unmarried people (Fischer 1982, Wellman and Wortley 1990, Wellman 2008). In addition, such analyses could answer critics of Putnam's (2001) view on social capital (Fischer 2005, Bjørnskov 2008) by allowing for flexibility in the definition, role, and potential of said capital.

Further qualitative studies will also allow for a fuller exploration of the mechanisms behind the differential effects of social capital among the married and the unmarried. For example, studies could allow for a further explanation of potential moderating variables such as the number of years being married/unmarried, the place of residence (e.g. rural areas vs. metropolitans), and other factors that were not covered by the quantitative analysis here due to data limitations. Another important issue for further analysis is the potential difference in 'cost' of social capital for married and unmarried individuals. While research establishes that marriage can cause couples to focus more on themselves than on their wider social networks, little has been said about why this is the case, and how this may influence the effects of social capital. Indeed, it could be that there is a price in relationship satisfaction and overall happiness to pay for focusing on relationships outside of the marriage.

In conclusion, people who are unmarried, more often meet socially with friends, relatives and work colleagues compared with married people. Furthermore, those social meetings and activities, correlate more strongly with happiness for unmarried than married people. These findings are important for the study of singles, especially for the study of long-term singles. It appears that singles involved in social undertakings can, and often do, boost their happiness and wellbeing in significant and sustainable ways. Singles who pursue social interactions more proactively than do couples can bypass them in the happiness index. In other words, single men and women fully engaged in social meetings and activities can pass their average married counterparts by one, and even two, standard deviations.

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Table 1. *Coefficients of Multilevel Analyses of Social Activities and Social Meetings Levels, Age 30 and above*

Variable	Social Activities	Social Meetings
Individual Characteristics		
Female	-0.009	-0.006
Age	0.013***	-0.024***
Age squared	-0.000***	0.000***
Subjective health	0.156***	0.148***
Years of schooling	0.016***	0.008**
Feels discriminated	0.058***	0.024
Degree of religiosity	0.013***	0.025***
Unemployed	0.002	0.07
Subjective income	0.114***	0.130***
Marital status ^a		
Divorced/separated	-0.004	0.159***
Never married	-0.02	0.322***
Widowed	-0.027**	0.223***
Cohabit	-0.016	0.074**
Country Characteristics		
Mean of happiness	-0.009	0.139***
HDI	0.202	1.437
Intercept	0.941***	1.989*
Variance Components		
Country variance	-1.809***	-0.782***
Individual variance	-0.088***	0.491***
N	256,765	260,898

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

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2016 European Social Surveys.

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

^a Omitted category: married.

Table 2. *Coefficients of Multilevel Analyses of Happiness and Marital Status in Interaction with Social Capital, Age 30 and above*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Individual Characteristics				
Female	0.081***	0.085***	0.086***	0.082***
Age	-0.037***	-0.038***	-0.041***	-0.034***
Age squared	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
Subjective health	0.523***	0.476***	0.482***	0.502***
Years of schooling	0.006	0.001	0.001	0.004
Does not feel discriminated	0.414***	0.387***	0.389***	0.408***
Degree of religiosity	0.062***	0.057***	0.058***	0.059***
Unemployed	-0.364***	-0.369***	-0.364***	-0.373***
Subjective income	0.528***	0.497***	0.505***	0.511***
Marital status ^a				
Divorced/separated	-0.586***	-0.598***	-0.824***	-0.929***
Never married	-0.635***	-0.661***	-0.873***	-0.852***
Widowed	-0.725***	-0.753***	-0.996***	-0.845***
Cohabit	-0.147***	-0.153***	-0.12	-0.406***
Social Capital				
Social activities (1-5)		0.177***	0.195***	
Social meetings (1-7)		0.114***		0.121***
Marital status*social activities				
Divorced/separated			0.090***	
Never married			0.092***	
Widowed			0.104***	
Cohabit			-0.008	
Marital status*social meetings				
Divorced/separated				0.069***
Never married				0.035
Widowed				0.019**
Cohabit				0.052*
Country Characteristics				
Mean of happiness	0.771***	0.762***	0.774***	0.756***
HDI	-2.398***	-2.595***	-2.410***	-2.600***
Intercept	0.598	0.286	0.498	0.391
Variance Components				
Country variance	-1.723***	-1.722***	-1.783***	-1.658***
Individual variance	0.571***	0.556***	0.560***	0.563***
N	260,549	254,700	255,463	259,532

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

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2016 European Social Surveys.

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

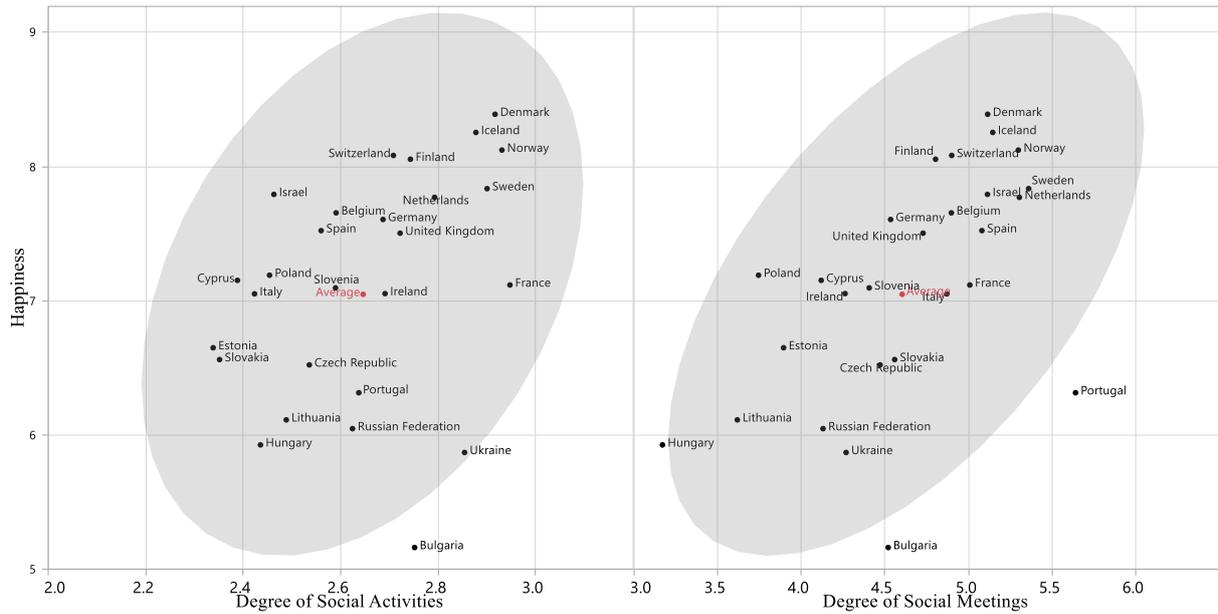
^aOmitted category: married.

Appendix Table A1. Characteristics of Marital Status Groups, Age 30 and above.

Variable	Divorced/Separated	Married	Never Married	Widowed	Cohabit
N	33,858	178,224	24,077	35,162	8,318
% total	12.11%	63.73%	8.61%	12.57%	2.97%
% women	60.70%	50.44%	46.23%	79.26%	46.58%
Mean age	52.85	53.34	46.11	71.54	39.98
Mean happiness (0-10)	6.62	7.40	6.79	6.26	7.53
Mean satisfaction (0-10)	6.24	7.01	6.53	6.10	7.18
Mean social activities (1-5)	2.67	2.71	2.67	2.50	2.72
Mean social meetings (1-7)	4.79	4.66	5.04	4.58	4.95
Mean subjective health (1-5)	3.60	3.73	3.81	3.08	4.02
Mean years of education	12.62	12.30	13.25	9.70	13.90
% feels discrimination	9.06%	5.99%	9.77%	5.20%	8.03%
Mean degree of religiosity (0-10)	4.30	4.96	4.26	5.86	3.39
Mean subjective income (1-4)	2.69	3.00	2.87	2.59	3.13
% unemployed	5.99%	3.10%	8.14%	0.89%	6.38%

Source: Own elaboration on 2002-2016 European Social Surveys.

Appendix Figure 1. The level of Happiness in Relation to the Degree of Social Meetings and Social Activities on the Country Level, Age 30 and above.



Source: Own elaboration based on ESS round.

Notes: Round 6 is only in use in order to adjust for different participation in different rounds of the ESS. Grey ovals signify 95% confidence level.