

## Relationship Transitions and Subjective Wellbeing: A Longitudinal Analysis

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## **Abstract**

We examine trends in subjective wellbeing across marital status using 9 waves of HILDA data. We advance previous research by examining two measures of wellbeing – happiness and life satisfaction, examining a wide range of possible marital statuses and examining variations within couples. Our analyses differentiate those who are single and not in a relationship, those who are in a relationship but not living together and those who are in a relationship with a live-in partner, either cohabiting or married. We compare results for cohabiters who plan to marry from those who do not, and examine differences between those in a first marriage and those in a higher order marriage, as well as respondents who are separated, divorced and widowed. We estimate a series of fixed effect models on each of the outcome variables that control for unmeasured heterogeneity and also hold constant key independent variables likely to influence wellbeing. Results indicate that men and women who are married have higher levels of wellbeing than those who are not married. We find that transitions into relationships, marriage or cohabitation, significantly increase wellbeing while transitions out of relationships because of separation, or widowhood, negatively impact on wellbeing. We find no gender differences in these patterns and no significant differences between cohabitation and marriage.

There is considerable research showing that married people enjoy higher levels of subjective wellbeing than their unmarried counterparts, including cohabiting couples (Coombs 1991; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Much of this research has been cross-sectional comparing different marital status groups at a single point in time, although there are some recent analyses of longitudinal data enabling examination of wellbeing across marital status transitions (Kamp Dush and Amato 2005; Soons, Liefbroer and Kalmijn 2009). Longitudinal analyses are important because they enable some assessment of whether social causation or social selection enhances wellbeing after marriage. The social selection argument suggests that individuals with high levels of wellbeing are more likely to marry than those with lower levels of wellbeing. The social causation argument on the other hand, suggests that marriage leads to higher levels of wellbeing, possibly as a result of the increase in economic and material resources that come from marriage, or the increased levels of social and emotional support available to married people as opposed to single people.

But there are other reasons to reassess previous findings. First there have been important changes in the demography and meaning of marriage in recent years which suggests that the experience of marriage may have also changed. One of the most important demographic shifts has been the rise in unmarried cohabitation rates. In Australia the percentage of couples cohabiting in de facto relationships rose from 4 to approximately 15 percent between 1986 and 2006, while the percentage cohabiting prior to marrying was even more marked rising from 3 percent of people who married in the 1960s to over three quarters in the 2000s (ABS 2007). There has also been a decline in the proportion of people in registered marriages, the trend toward partnering at a later age, the rise in the proportion of same sex couples living together and the rise in ex-nuptial births (ABS 2009). Cherlin (2009) and others have argued that these trends

signal the deinstitutionalisation of marriage and the loss of its practical significance in place of a union that is increasingly symbolically important as a capstone, rather than the starting point, for the adult life course.

A second reason to reassess the relationship between marriage and wellbeing concerns the movement of married women into paid work. Between 1986 and 2006 the labour force participation rate amongst women aged 15 years and over in Australia increased from 48 percent to 58 percent (ABS 2009) whilst amongst married women it increased from 39 per cent in 1979 to 56 per cent in 2004 (ABS 2006). Economic and employment arrangements within couples have changed considerably compared to previous generations. Although women's employment patterns still look quite different to men's, with many Australian women moving from full time to part time employment while children are young, women increasingly juggle paid and unpaid work responsibilities throughout their married lives.

Together, these demographic and economic changes suggest that the experience of marriage may have changed in recent decades. The difficulties involved in achieving an acceptable work-family balance when both partners are in paid employment may mean that there are fewer benefits from marriage for married men and women compared to single people than in the past. In addition, if marriage is being deinstitutionalized this may also diminish its benefits to men and women. If Cherlin is correct, some of the social and psychological gains from being in a well-recognised and established institution may be disappearing. As cohabitation becomes more widespread and increasingly "institutionalised" with more people choosing to cohabit long term or as an alternative to marriage, there may be few differences in wellbeing outcomes for those living in a cohabiting compared to a marital relationship.

It is also important to consider how the patterns vary by gender. Nearly 40 years ago, Jessie Bernard described the experience of marriage as not one, but two marriages – “his” and “hers” (Bernard 1972). She argued that marriage is good for men but not for women. Married men are better off than single men she suggested in terms of health, happiness and economic wellbeing. For women however, marriage often leads to deteriorating health, poorer psychological wellbeing, increasing unhappiness and loss of status (Bernard 1972). Twenty years later, Waite (1995) argued that marriage was now good for both men and women because of the greater social, economic and political support for women who chose to combine mothering with paid work. But although there have been considerable changes in women’s lives since the 1970s, some things have stayed the same, including women’s responsibility for most unpaid household and care work. The unevenness of the shifts toward gender equality (England 2010) and problems with managing work and family demands may result in poorer wellbeing outcomes for married women compared to married men.

Our paper examines these issues using data from the Households, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. We make several important advances on previous research. First we assess how subjective wellbeing varies using nine waves of longitudinal data from a large national household panel survey in Australia with models that control for unmeasured heterogeneity. Second, we differentiate many different kinds of relationship states including individuals who are never married, cohabiters who plan to marry, cohabiters who do not plan to marry, couples in a first marriage, couples in re marriages and individuals who are separated, divorced and widowed. There are a number of reasons, detailed below, why we might expect different patterns across these various relationship states. Third for some models we include measures of both partners characteristics to assess how similarities and differences in

partner characteristics contribute to subjective wellbeing. As we discuss below, homogeneity of partner attributes may contribute to better outcomes than relationships where partners are heterogeneous in orientations and characteristics. Fourth we examine two indicators of subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction and happiness, which we refer to as subjective wellbeing. Following other researchers, we argue that happiness and life satisfaction are qualitatively different measures of wellbeing (Diener, Helliwell and Kahneman 2010; Inglehart 2010). Happiness may be defined as an emotional state that is subject to greater variation and affect in relation to short-term variations in circumstances and day-to-day experiences while life satisfaction may be defined as a less emotive and more balanced evaluation of life achievements. We examine both measures, referred to throughout as subjective wellbeing, in order to gain a more complete picture of the effect of relationship transitions on subjective wellbeing.

### **Marriage and Subjective Wellbeing**

There is a wealth of material across a range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, health and economics, investigating the relationship between marriage and wellbeing (Coomb's 1991). It is not possible to review this vast literature here. Instead we identify some of the key arguments and discuss the most recent advances focusing on studies that have investigated either life satisfaction or happiness. One of the problems in synthesising findings from previous studies is the wide range of indicators used to measure wellbeing, including mental health, psychological and physical health, relationship satisfaction, life satisfaction and happiness.

From a sociological standpoint, marriage provides social support, social integration, love and companionship, as well as social status through entry into a recognised, socially and legally-supported institution (Gove, Hughes and Style 1983). Other types of relationships may also

provide some of these same benefits, but not all. For example, steady dating relationships and cohabitation may provide the benefits of social support, love and companionship, but not the symbolic status of commitment and secure legal institutional status that comes from marriage. Marriage might also lead to greater economic security as many married couples may pool their financial and material resources and thus derive stronger benefits from economies of scale and economic security than unmarried individuals, or couples in cohabiting relationships. There is also considerable research showing that married men earn more than unmarried men (Gray, 1997; Korenman and Neumark, 1991; Loh, 1996) which in turn may lead to higher levels of wellbeing for both partners through access to higher standards of living and less risk and uncertainty about financial security. Research consistently shows that married men and women have lower mortality rates and better psychological and physical wellbeing (Williams 2003). This may stem from lower levels of substance or alcohol abuse, lower rates of depression and higher rates of self esteem, which in turn lead to better lifestyle habits and improved health outcomes.

The rise of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage raises questions about whether marriage continues to confer greater benefits to subjective wellbeing over marriage. Cohabitation may provide many of the same outcomes as marriage in terms of social support, integration, economies of scale, and lifestyle habits and behaviours. But this may partly depend on the stability and degree of commitment in the cohabiting relationship as indicated by whether the couple intends to marry. Cohabitors who do not intend to marry may not experience the same levels of happiness and life satisfaction as cohabitors who plan to marry or married people. This may be because their relationship is not as secure as those who plan to marry or married people, leading to more uncertainty and security about the future. Cohabitors who do not plan to marry

may not pool resources to the same extent as those who are planning marriage, and may also behave more like single people in terms of lifestyle, habits and behaviours. It is thus important to differentiate cohabitators according to marital intentions.

There may also be different patterns for different types of married couples, although the expected patterns here are not clearcut. Couples in a first marriage may have higher levels of wellbeing as a result of the stability offered by a long-lasting, satisfying marital union. This may vary depending on the length of the union with those in the early years of marriage experiencing higher levels of wellbeing than those who have been married longer. On the other hand, couples in a second or high-order marriage may have higher levels of wellbeing if they have left an unhappy relationship and moved to a new, more rewarding relationship. But some studies have shown that remarried relationships are less stable in duration than first marriages (Carmichael and Webster 1996; Poortman and Lyngstad 2007; Teachman 2008), and remarried individuals may have lower levels of wellbeing if they have recently experienced unpleasant or difficult marital break-ups, or are dealing with child custody issues or step-parenting arrangements.

These issues highlight the importance of controlling for time since relationship transition. Previous research has argued that individuals have a baseline level of subjective wellbeing determined in part by personality and genetic make-up (Headey and Wearing 1989; Suh, Diener and Fujita 1996). Life events that increase or decrease this baseline level may only have short-term consequences with subjective wellbeing reverting to baseline, or close to baseline levels after a period of time. For example, a transition to marriage may lead to an increase in subjective wellbeing for a period time, but over time, wellbeing will decline to the pre-marriage baseline level. Similarly, a negative life event, such as marital separation, may have a negative effect on subjective wellbeing for a period, but over time the effect will decrease and subjective wellbeing

will rise to the pre-separation baseline level. Results testing these arguments are somewhat mixed. Recent research has found that subjective wellbeing took about 10 years to return to baseline levels after entry to a union and also that individuals experienced a gradual decline in wellbeing even if no relationship transition took place (Soons, Liefbroer and Kalmijn 2009).

It is also important to examine gender differences in the affect of relationship transitions on subjective wellbeing. Bernard (1972) argued that women's loss of status upon entry to marriage led to increased depression and unhappiness for married women compared to married men. Although women have made considerable gains over recent decades in access to education and employment, there have been only small changes in men's involvement in predominately female jobs, including housework and unpaid care tasks (England, 2010). Many recent studies have shown that men gain more from entry to a union than women in terms of time spent on unpaid household labor (Gupta 1999; Baxter, Hewitt and Haynes 2008). Women's continuing responsibility for household work and care may mean women's subjective wellbeing declines after entry to marriage, despite their increased access to higher education and increased involvement in paid work. Moreover, the expectation that women will juggle both unpaid labor and employment demands may lead to increased stress and unhappiness for married women compared to single women.

On the other hand, some have argued that marriage is good for both men and women (Waite and Gallagher 2000) and research has shown that most women do not define unequal divisions of labor in the home as unfair (Baxter 2000), suggesting that time spent on unpaid labor may not necessarily lead to lower subjective wellbeing. If women are supportive of traditional domestic labor arrangements entry to marriage may lead to higher levels of subjective wellbeing than for women who hold more liberal views about gender arrangements.

Additionally, if marriage has become a symbolic status marking the capstone to a successful adult life, transitioning to marriage may enhance both men and women's subjective wellbeing (Cherlin 2009).

Finally, it is also important to consider the level of homogamy in spousal traits (Gaunt 2006). The considerable body of research on assortative mating shows that like tend to marry like, particularly in relation to education and orientations (Mare 1991). There is also evidence that educational homogamy has increased in recent years (Schwartz and Mare 2005) and evidence that individuals with higher socio-economic resources are more likely to marry than those in lower socio-economic groups (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Heard 2006; Hewitt and Baxter forthcoming). If one of the reasons that marriage confers greater subjective wellbeing is because of the greater companionship, shared interests and social support offered from a partner, then it is likely that partners with similar characteristics and orientations will have higher levels of subjective wellbeing than those who do not share similar orientations and characteristics. Education and attitudes to gender roles are two key areas where we expect similarity in views and attainment to lead to greater levels of subjective wellbeing.

## **Data**

To investigate the associations between relationships status and well being we use the first nine waves of The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, collected between 2001 and 2009. Wave 1 comprised 7,682 households and 13,969 individuals.

Households were selected using a multi-stage sampling approach, and a 66% response rate was achieved (Watson and Wooden 2002). Within households, data were collected from each person aged over 15 years using face-to-face interviews and self-completed questionnaires, and

achieved a 92% response rate of household members (Watson and Wooden 2002). Waves 2 to 8 had, respectively, response rates of 86.8%, 90.4%, 91.6%, 94.4%, 94.9%, 94.7% 95.2% and 96.3% (Watson 2011). In the current study we include all respondents aged over 18 who participated in at least one wave of data collection. The panel is unbalanced, allowing for respondents to enter and exit the panel over the nine waves, irrespective of item and wave non-response and when they entered the panel. Our final analytic sample comprised 18,568 respondents over the nine waves, with 9,036 men and 9,622 women and an average of 6 wave observations per person.

### **Measures of Subjective Wellbeing**

We examine two measures of subjective wellbeing. The first measure is happiness, which is an *affective* indicator of subjective wellbeing (Diener, Helliwell and Kahneman 2010). This measure was taken from a question asking: “*How much of the time during the last few weeks have you been a happy person?*” (note this item is taken from the SF-36, see Ware & Sherbourne 1992). The scale ranged from 1 “None of the time” to 6 “All of the time”. Our second measure is life satisfaction which is a more global measure of subjective wellbeing (Diener, Helliwell and Kahneman 2010). This measure was derived from a question asking: “*All things considered how satisfied are you with your life?*” Respondents were asked to give a score between 0 and 10 with 0 indicating not at all satisfied and 10 indicating completely satisfied. Preliminary analysis indicated that this measure was skewed (with a mean of 7.9/10). For this reason we take the natural logarithm to better approximate a normal distribution for the regression models.

### **Relationship Status**

For our key independent variable we used the respondents' relationship status at every wave including married, cohabiting, separated, divorced, widowed and never married. For those who were married or cohabiting we further differentiate between first and higher order marriages, as well as cohabitators intending to marry and cohabitators not intending to marry. To differentiate between first and higher order marriages we used information on the number of times a respondent had been married. To differentiate between cohabitators intending to marry from those who were not, we used information from a question asking cohabitators: "*How likely are you to marry your current partner?*" The responses were on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 = "very likely" to 5 "very unlikely". Those who replied that they were 1 = "very likely" or 2 = "likely" were considered to intend to marry their cohabiting partner. Our final measure of relationship status comprises: 1 = married (1<sup>st</sup> marriage), 2 = remarriage, 3 = cohabiting (intend to marry), 4 = cohabiting, 5 = separated, 6 = divorced, 7 = widowed and 8 = never married.

## **Controls**

We include a range of controls in our models that may also be associated with subjective well being. We include three controls for socioeconomic position, income, education and employment status. Household income is included as a continuous measure and is scaled to \$10,000. Highest level of education is measured as 1 = Yr 12 or Less, 2 = Trade/Certificate, 3 = Diploma, and 4 = Bachelor degree or higher. Employment status is measured as: 1 = Employed full time, 2 = employed part time, 3 = unemployed and 4 = not in the labour force. We also include a measure for overall general health derived from the SF-36, this is a scale that ranges from 0 – 100 with 0 indicating poor general health. Age is included as a continuous measure. Finally, we include a measure of gender role attitudes indicating agreement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 10

(strongly agree) with the statement: “*It is better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children*”.

Table 1 reports means, proportions and standard deviations for all variables separate for men and women. Note that these results show almost identical happiness scores for men and women, but women score more highly than men on levels of overall life satisfaction.

### Table 1 About Here

#### **Analytical Strategy**

Both of our dependent variables are scale items with a relatively large response range. Thus for analytic purposes we treated them as continuous measures and used a linear model to examine the association between relationship status and subjective well being. However, given that we had repeated observations on individuals over time, the structure of our data violates the assumption of independent observations and ordinary least squares regression would not be appropriate. Instead we used a linear fixed-effects model to account for clustering of observations by individual and control for between individual variation (Singer and Willett 2003). This approach is also appropriate for unbalanced panels. The fixed-effects model controls for unobserved heterogeneity because it produces estimates that are net of all observed and unobserved differences between individuals that are time-invariant.

To exploit the longitudinal nature of the data and better capture the association between relationship status and changes in subjective wellbeing we included our eight-category relationship status variable, as well as one-year lagged effects for relationship status in our models. The coefficient for the original relationship status variable indicates the association between current relationship status and subjective wellbeing. The coefficient for the lagged

relationship status indicates the association between relationship status in the previous wave on wellbeing. Together with the main effect of relationship status, the inclusion of the lagged relationship status measure enabled us to estimate the short-term effect of a transition in relationship status. The combination of associations captures changes in subjective wellbeing following changes in relationship status.

We first estimate a model with each of the relationship status variables and relationship status at  $t-1$ . In model 2 we add all of our control variables. The models were estimated separately for men and women, however, because we are interested in gender differences we also estimated a model interacting gender with all model covariates to determine whether the coefficients for men and women were statistically significant (results not shown). We report significant gender interactions in the table footnotes.

## **Results**

In Table 2 we present the transitions between relationship states that occurred over the 9 waves of HILDA for our sample. The rows in the table represent relationship status at  $T-1$  and the columns represent any relationship transitions that occurred by the following wave. Note that these transitions could have taken place any time during the nine waves of the panel. Overall, there was quite a lot of movement into and out of relationships over the nine waves. For the married we find that the majority remained stably married. Although, a relatively large number of married people transitioned at some time between waves to become separated ( $n = 508$ ) or widowed ( $n = 221$ ), and a much smaller number of people transitioned from marriage into a remarriage ( $n = 15$ ) or cohabiting relationship ( $n=19$  for cohabiting intending to marry;  $n = 24$  for cohabiting). For remarriage, we observe 139 people who transitioned to separated.

## Table 2 About Here

For cohabitators intending to marry their partner there is a lot of movement into and out of relationships. First, a large number marry ( $n = 836$ ) or remarry ( $n = 263$ ). Interestingly, a large number change their status from cohabiting intending to marry to cohabiting during the nine waves ( $n = 648$ ). This suggests that the experience of cohabiting with their partner has helped them decide that they do not want to marry their current partner. Finally, there were 314 respondents whose cohabiting with intention to marry relationships ended. For those who were cohabiting (with no stated intention of marrying), there was a large movement of people into the cohabiting and intending to marry status ( $n=729$ ) suggesting that for these people the act of cohabitation with their partner increased their commitment to marry that person. A relatively large number of these relationships also ended ( $n = 306$ ). For those who were separated the largest transition was into divorced ( $n=430$ ), with smaller numbers moving into new relationships such as remarriage ( $n = 47$ ), cohabiting intending to marry ( $n = 79$ ) and cohabiting ( $n = 94$ ). The largest transitions for those who were divorced were into new relationships with 74 remarrying, 115 cohabiting with intentions to marry and 134 cohabiting. There was very little movement for the widowed who were by far the most stable group. Finally, for those who had never married there were a large number of transitions into cohabiting with intentions to marry ( $n = 851$ ) and 393 cohabiting. There were also a smaller number of them who married ( $n = 219$ ). In summary, there was a lot of movement and stability in relationships overall across the nine waves, with the most transient groups those moving into and out of cohabiting relationships.

In Table 3 we present the results for the models estimating the associations between relationship status, relationship transitions and happiness. As the results show, adding the controls does not substantially change the association between relationship status and happiness. Overall, there is a strong indication that relationship status is important for happiness, although this varies depending on the relationship type and the transition experienced. Men who are cohabiting with the intention of getting married are not significantly different in their levels of happiness than men who are in their first marriage. In contrast men who are cohabiting with no intention of getting married have lower levels of happiness than married men. Men who have recently remarried after being divorced or widowed are significantly happier than men stably married in their first marriage. For men who are separated, divorced or widowed, those who have recently experienced those events are significantly less happy than men who remained stably married in their first marriage. Within a year of marital loss, their levels of happiness show some improvement, although they do not return to the same levels of stably married men. Finally, there is a small, but significant, negative association between happiness in the previous wave and happiness in the current wave, suggesting that over time people in the sample became less happy irrespective of any transitions.

Table 3 About Here

For women, there is very little difference in levels of happiness between those in any relationships. Our results indicate that women who are remarried, cohabiting – either with the intention of marriage or not – have similar levels of happiness to women in their first marriage. In contrast, women who have recently experienced separation, divorce, or widowhood from

marriage have lower levels of happiness than women stably married in their first marriage. Interestingly, within a year of the event their happiness levels improve, and for women who are divorced or widowed happiness levels increase to be slightly higher than for women who are stably married.

Overall, the results are similar for men and women. The only groups where there were statistically significant gender differences were those who are never married and those who are widowed. For men, those who recently transitioned into never married had significantly lower levels of happiness, but within a year of being never married their levels of happiness had recovered. This may be because the main transition into never married was from cohabiting into never married (see Table 2), suggesting that for the majority of these men their cohabiting relationship had ended. These same transitions had little or no association with women's levels of happiness. In contrast, for women becoming widowed had a large negative impact on their levels of happiness, but within one year of becoming widowed their levels of happiness recovered to be higher than those who were stably married. For men, these same transitions had a more moderate association with their happiness. In relation to the controls, the only control that is associated with happiness was general health where those who had higher levels of general health were happier.

In Table 4 we present the results for life satisfaction. First, we look at the models for men. In general, there is not a lot of difference in life satisfaction between men in their first marriage and men who were cohabiting with the intention of getting married and men who were cohabiting. Men who had remarried had significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than men in their first marriages, but the difference is small. In contrast, men who recently separated, divorced or widowed from marriage had significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than

married men. For men who were divorced, their life satisfaction improved within a year of divorce and they had similar levels of life satisfaction to married men. Men who became never married (i.e. separated from a cohabiting relationship – see Table 2) had lower levels of life satisfaction than married men.

#### Table 4 About Here

For women, the results suggest that there is no difference in levels of life satisfaction for women who are cohabiting compared to married women. Women who remarried after separation or divorce however, report higher levels of satisfaction than married women. Women who are separated, divorced or widowed from marriage have lower levels of life satisfaction than married women, but their levels of life satisfaction improved significantly within a year of the event. The gender interactions models suggest that women's life satisfaction improved more than men's in the year after separation, divorce or becoming widowed. Women who are never married have lower levels of life satisfaction than married women.

Overall, the controls were more important for life satisfaction than happiness. General health is significantly and positively associated with life satisfaction. Having a child in the household also improves men's life satisfaction, but has no association with women's levels of life satisfaction. Finally some socioeconomic measures were important for life satisfaction. Household income had a small positive, but significant, association with life satisfaction for men and women. Finally employment status was important for men and women, but in different ways. For men, being unemployed or not in the labour force is negatively associated with their

life satisfaction compared to men employed full time. In contrast, our results suggest that for women being employed part-time increases life satisfaction relative to those employed full time.

## **Discussion**

This paper examines the effect of relationship transitions on subjective wellbeing measured by levels of happiness and overall life satisfaction. Demographic changes in pathways into and out of relationships, as well as important changes in women's levels of involvement in paid work, suggest that the experience of marriage may be undergoing change. Some have argued that marriage is being deinstitutionalised with the norms and values governing marital relationships changing over time, and that marriage now holds much greater symbolic than practical importance in our lives compared to previous generations (Cherlin 2009; Edin and Kefalas 2005). One of the trends most often cited in support of these changes is the large rise in unmarried cohabiting unions, even though in many cases, cohabiters proceed to marriage. Some have asked why individuals continue to marry given the possibility of cohabiting long-term with little fear of legal ramifications or societal disapproval (Cherlin 2004).

Our results show that there is little difference in wellbeing outcomes for those in a marital relationship compared to those in a cohabiting relationship with an intention to marry. The wellbeing benefits accrued are similar for both relationship types. Interestingly, there is evidence that men in cohabiting relationships without an intention to marry are less happy and less satisfied than men in married relationships, suggesting that men's wellbeing is dependent on the level of commitment in a relationship. This supports our earlier argument that cohabiting and intending to marry is more similar to marriage in terms of commitment and stability than cohabiting couples who either do not know whether they will marry or do not intend to marry.

Further our results indicate that remarried men are happier than men in their first marriage, while remarried women are more satisfied than women in their first marriage. This may suggest that remarried individuals make better choices about partners than those who are marrying for the first time. Or perhaps those who are remarried report levels of wellbeing in reference to an early period when they were considerably less happy and satisfied with their life.

But the largest differences in wellbeing are between those who are married and those who are separated, divorced and widowed. Here we see large and negative effects compared to those who are stably married, indicating that marital breakdown has a substantial negative impact on wellbeing for both men and women, although recovery within a year of the event is apparent for both groups, particularly widowed women's levels of happiness. Here we see that within a year, widowed women have recovered to levels of happiness higher than stably married women.

Finally our results indicate the importance of relationships for wellbeing outcomes. Our models control for a range of additional variables relating to socio-economic status, education and health. Of these, health is the only consistent additional factor contributing to wellbeing outcomes for both men and women. Our results consistently show that good health is a strong determinant of higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction. Interestingly our analyses indicate that higher income leads to higher levels of life satisfaction but not to greater happiness.

The models reported here are preliminary and will be improved in two main ways in further iterations of the paper. First we will develop a time-varying measure of years and month in a relationship or since relationship dissolution. Our relationship lag variables enable us to examine change in wellbeing outcomes if there was a change in relationship status in the previous wave. But it is also important to control for the long-term consequences of an event to

assess the extent to which people adapt and return to baseline levels of wellbeing. Second we will also estimate separate models for those in a live in relationship including measures of both partner's attributes. These models will enable estimation of whether couples who are similar in characteristics are happier and more satisfied than those who are heterogeneous. Such analyses will provide further insight into similarities and differences amongst the various types of cohabiting and marital relationships in terms of subjective wellbeing.

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**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for dependent variables and controls**

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
	Mean/Proportion (SD) <sup>a</sup>	Mean/Proportion (SD) <sup>a</sup>
Happiness (1-7)	4.43 (1.1)	4.42 (1.1)
Life satisfaction (0-10)	7.83 (1.5)	7.91 (1.5)
Life satisfaction (logged)	2.16 (0.2)	2.17 (0.2)
Highest level of education:		
Yr 12 or Less	42	54
Trade/Certificate	29	15
Diploma	9	09
Bachelor degree or higher	20	22
General health (mean)	67.18 (21)	68.85 (21)
Child aged <18 in household (1 = yes)	29	35
Household Income (scaled \$10,000) (mean)	6.37 (4.7)	5.94 (4.6)
Employment status:		
Employed Full time	62	30
Employed part time	10	27
Unemployed	3	3
Not in the labour force	25	40
Ethnic background:		
Australian born	76	77
Migrant: English Speaking	11	9
Migrant: non-English speaking	13	14
Age (Mean)	46.00 (17)	46.75 (17)
Male breadwinner attitudes (Mean)	3.90 (2.0)	3.54 (2.1)
Union duration (Wave1)	12.96 (15.7)	13.43 (15.7)
Total N		
Person Years		

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<sup>a</sup> Note standard deviations only reported for Mean scores

**Table 2: Pooled marital status transitions over 9 waves, all respondents aged 18 or over (HILDA 2001 to 2009)**

	<b>Transitional marital status:</b>							
	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Remarriage	Cohabiting (intend to marry)	Cohabiting	Separated	Divorced	Widowed	Never married
<b>Marital status:</b>								
Married (1st)	40,028	15	19	24	508	7	221	9
Remarriage	0	6,970	8	12	139	7	42	0
Cohabiting (intend to marry)	836	263	3,953	648	7	53	3	314
Cohabiting	38	40	729	3,142	34	120	9	306
Separated	79	47	79	94	1,991	430	35	9
Divorced	0	74	115	134	60	5,167	99	23
Widowed	0	10	6	13	11	61	4,850	8
Never Married	219	0	851	393	4	1	2	14,460
Totals	41,200	7,419	5,760	4,460	2,754	5,846	5,261	15,129

**Table 3: Fixed effects models of relationship status, lagged relationship status and happiness (HILDA 2001-2009)**

	Men (Model 1)		Men (Model 2)		Women (Model 1)		Women (Model 2)	
	Coeff	se	Coeff	se	Coeff	se	Coeff	se
<i>Marital Status</i>								
Married (1 <sup>st</sup> ) (ref)								
Remarriage	0.18**	0.07	0.22**	0.08	0.00	0.07	0.05	0.08
Cohabiting (intend to marry)	-0.00	0.04	-0.03	0.06	-0.05	0.04	-0.02	0.06
Cohabiting	-0.14**	0.05	-0.18**	0.07	-0.12*	0.05	-0.06	0.06
Separated	-0.28***	0.05	-0.30***	0.06	-0.34***	0.05	-0.36***	0.05
Divorced	-0.21***	0.06	-0.23**	0.08	-0.27***	0.05	-0.14*	0.07
Widowed	-0.30***	0.09	-0.29**	0.10	-0.40***	0.06	<sup>a</sup> -0.54***	0.07
Never Married	-0.19***	0.05	-0.27**	0.09	-0.08	0.05	<sup>a</sup> -0.02	0.09
<i>Lagged Marital Status (T-1)</i>								
Remarriage	-0.12	0.07	-0.17*	0.08	-0.06	0.07	-0.07	0.08
Cohabiting (intend to marry)	0.14***	0.04	0.08	0.05	0.09*	0.04	0.04	0.05
Cohabiting	0.15**	0.05	0.09	0.07	0.13**	0.05	0.03	0.06
Separated	0.20***	0.05	0.24***	0.06	0.30***	0.05	0.22***	0.05
Divorced	0.27***	0.06	0.34***	0.08	0.33***	0.05	0.27***	0.07
Widowed	0.10	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.50***	0.06	0.72***	0.07
Never Married	0.28***	0.05	0.28**	0.09	0.09	0.05	0.02	0.09
Happiness (t-1)	-0.05***	0.01	-0.08***	0.01	-0.05***	0.01	-0.06***	0.01
<b>Controls:</b>								
Highest Level of Education:								
Yr 12 or less								
Trade/Certificate			0.05	0.07			-0.01	0.05
Diploma			-0.16	0.10			0.13	0.11
Bachelor Degree or higher			-0.09	0.10			0.09	0.09

General Health	0.02***	0.00	0.02***	0.00
General health squared	-0.00*	0.00	0.00	0.00
Child under 18 in household	-0.05	0.03	0.01	0.03
Household Income (Scaled \$10,000)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Employment status:				
Employed full time				
Employed part time	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.02
Unemployed	0.00	0.05	-0.00	0.05
Not in the labour force	-0.04	0.03	-0.00	0.02
Age	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00
Male breadwinner attitudes	0.01*	0.01	-0.00	0.00
_cons	4.62***	3.78***	4.62***	3.70***
Person years	33,226	22,667	38,679	24,730

Note: ethnicity and union duration are omitted from models because they are fixed characteristics and the fixed effects model excludes characteristics where there is no change over time. Numbers vary between models due to the exclusion of respondents who did not change over time on the selected covariates.

\* Gender interactions models indicate that this coefficient is significantly different from the same coefficient for men at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 4: Fixed effects models of relationship status, lagged relationship status and life satisfaction (HILDA 2001-2009)**

	Men (Model 1)		Men (Model 2)		Women (Model 1)		Women (Model 2)	
	Coeff	se	Coeff	se	Coeff	se	Coeff	se
<i>Marital Status</i>								
Married (1 <sup>st</sup> ) (ref)								
Remarriage	0.00	0.01	0.03*	0.01	0.05***	0.01	<sup>a</sup> 0.07***	0.01
Cohabiting (intend to marry)	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Cohabiting	-0.03***	0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Separated	-0.12***	0.01	-0.11***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01	-0.09***	0.01
Divorced	-0.10***	0.01	-0.07***	0.01	-0.09***	0.01	-0.06***	0.01
Widowed	-0.09***	0.02	-0.07***	0.02	-0.10***	0.01	<sup>a</sup> -0.13***	0.01
Never Married	-0.05***	0.01	-0.07***	0.02	-0.05***	0.01	-0.05**	0.02
<i>Lagged Marital Status (T-1)</i>								
Remarriage	-0.01	0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.04***	0.01	-0.04**	0.01
Cohabiting (intend to marry)	0.03***	0.01	0.03***	0.01	0.02***	0.01	0.02	0.01
Cohabiting	0.02*	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02**	0.01	-0.00	0.01
Separated	0.03**	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.06***	0.01	<sup>a</sup> 0.06***	0.01
Divorced	0.05***	0.01	0.05**	0.02	0.06***	0.01	0.07***	0.01
Widowed	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.05***	0.01	<sup>a</sup> 0.10***	0.01
Never Married	0.04***	0.01	0.05**	0.02	0.03***	0.01	0.01	0.02
Life satisfaction (t-1)	-0.00	0.01	-0.02***	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.03***	0.01
<b>Controls:</b>								
Highest Level of Education:								
Yr 12 or less (ref)								
Trade/Certificate			-0.00	0.01			-0.01	0.01
Diploma			-0.00	0.02			-0.02	0.02
Bachelor Degree or higher			-0.01	0.02			-0.00	0.02
General Health			0.00***	0.00			0.00***	0.00
General health squared			-0.00***	0.00			-0.00***	0.00

Child under 18 in household		0.01*	0.00	<sup>a</sup> -0.01	0.00
Household Income (Scaled \$10,000)		0.00*	0.00	0.00*	0.00
Employment status:					
Employed full time					
Employed part time		0.00	0.00	0.01**	0.00
Unemployed		-0.05***	0.01	<sup>a</sup> -0.00	0.01
Not in the labour force		-0.01*	0.01	<sup>a</sup> 0.01	0.00
Age		-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00
Attitudes to Male breadwinner		-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
_cons	2.17***	2.08***	2.20***	2.11***	
Person- years	38957	23425	44521	25521	

Note: ethnicity and union duration are omitted from models because they are fixed characteristics and the fixed effects model excludes characteristics where there is no change over time. Numbers vary between models due to the exclusion of respondents who did not change over time on the selected covariates.

<sup>a</sup> Gender interactions models indicate that this coefficient is significantly different from the same coefficient for men at  $p < .05$ .