

# **Mind the “happiness” gap: the relationship between cohabitation, marriage, and subjective well-being in Australia, the UK, Germany, and Norway**

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Many studies have found that married people have higher subjective well-being than those who are not married. Yet the increase in cohabitation raises questions about whether only marriage has beneficial effects. In this study, we examine differences in subjective well-being between cohabiting and married men and women in mid-life, comparing Australia, Norway, the UK, and Germany. We apply propensity-score weighted regression analyses to examine selection processes into marriage and differential treatment bias. We find no differences between cohabitation and marriage for men in the UK and Norway, and women in Germany. We do find significant differences for men in Australia and women in Norway. The differences disappear after controlling for selection in Australia, but they unexpectedly persist for Norwegian women, only disappearing when accounting for relationship satisfaction. For German men and British and Australian women, those with a lower propensity to marry would benefit from marriage. Controls eliminate differences for German men, but not UK women, but relationship satisfaction reduces differences. Overall, our study indicates that especially once selection and relationship satisfaction are taken into account, differences between marriage and cohabitation disappear in all countries. Marriage does not lead to higher subjective well-being; instead, cohabitation is a symptom of economic and emotional strain.

**Key words:** Marriage, cohabitation, subjective well-being, cross-national comparison, life satisfaction