

## RESEARCH NOTE: The psychological benefits of marriage

By Daniel Lees, April 2007

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international social science evidence is saying about a number of family related issues including, marriage, separation and divorce, parenting, child care and outcomes for children. This Research Note specifically examines the research around the psychological benefits of marriage for spouses, as compared with other family forms. It is also available on Maxim Institute's website [www.maxim.org.nz](http://www.maxim.org.nz)

### Introduction

Most people want a satisfying and healthy relationship. While there are factors which can strengthen the quality of a relationship, such as good communication, research shows that the *type* of relationship can also have an effect on people's emotional or psychological well-being.

Research has consistently found that married couples have higher levels of emotional and psychological well-being than singles, the divorced and cohabiting couples.<sup>1</sup> This is important because levels of depression and emotional well-being are an important influence on family life, not only because depression negatively affects relationship quality and therefore the probability that a relationship will last, but also because levels of depression in adults have been associated with decreased well-being in children.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the role of marriage in promoting well-being should not be dismissed.

This Research Note sets out a number of claims about the psychological benefits of marriage, and supporting evidence of the differences in psychological well-being between married couples and other relationship forms. Possible explanations for why these differences exist are also discussed.

### Marriage is associated with happiness and better health

A substantial survey carried out by Stack and Eshelman measuring marital status and happiness across 17 nations using a sample of 18,000 adults concluded that married couples were more likely to report being happy than those

who cohabited.<sup>3</sup> This result remained constant even when financial resources, health benefits, socio-demographic dynamics and national character were taken into account.

The authors of this study expected that cohabitation would also protect against levels of depression, and while cohabitation did tend to protect from adverse psychological well-being, its effect was far lower than it was for married couples. Marriage was three times as likely to be associated with the variance in happiness in the data than cohabitation was.

After analysing the results and questioning why marriage is related to lower levels of depression, Stack and Eshelman concluded that increased financial resources and better health for those who were married were the most important underlying factors. When addressing the question of whether marriage played a role in causing these benefits, or if happier people were chosen into marriage, what is known as a selection effect, the authors concluded that causation, and not selection into marriage, was the strongest factor operating.

### Why married couples tend to be happier

There have been various explanations offered as to why married couples have higher levels of happiness and psychological well-being than singles, divorced or cohabiting couples.

The first is that married people are generally healthier than unmarried people and those who are healthier are likely to be happier.<sup>4</sup>

Other explanations include greater commitment levels within marriage, which in turn have an effect on people's perception that the relationship will last. Another consequence of the perception of greater commitment is that there tends to be lower levels of stress and higher levels of security among married couples, and, therefore, better psychological well-being.<sup>5</sup>

A further explanation is that the greater financial stability within marriage, associated with the higher income of married men, leads to lower levels of stress, and higher levels of well-being and relationship quality.<sup>6</sup> Increased sexual satisfaction has also been offered as an explanation because studies show that married couples rate their sex lives more satisfying, on average, than do those involved in cohabiting relationships.<sup>7</sup>

### Are happier people just more likely to get married in the first place?

There have been several general explanations advanced to explain these advantages occurring within marriage. They have been labelled 'social selection' and 'social causation.' Social selection means that people who get married would be more likely to be selected (chosen) as spouses because they already had higher levels of well-being; in essence, stable and well-adjusted people are more likely to be chosen as a marriage partner. Social causation, on the other hand, means that something about marriage causes these advantages. If social causation is operating then there is something about the marital relationship and/or the supporting mechanisms connected to the institution of marriage which combine to give this advantage.

It is important to discern if selection effects or causation effects are operating. If selection effects are the strongest factor then people's psychological well-being was already determined before they were married, and those with lower well-being were rejected as marriage partners due to their temperament. If this were true then it would be wrong to attribute any of these advantages to marriage.

Yet research indicates that selection effects cannot account for all of the advantages married couples experience over and above singles, the divorced or cohabiting couples. Studies have found that selection cannot explain all of the difference between those who are married and those who are not.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, the results of a study by Wu, Penning and Hart et al

showed that men with lower psychological well-being were *more likely* to enter into marriage. However, once they married their mental health increased so that it was better, on average, than single, divorced or cohabiting men's emotional well-being.<sup>9</sup> In some cases it is likely that a combination of selection and causation could be operating, but the studies show that selection alone cannot explain the advantages accruing from marriage.

The following are fuller explanations of how social causation seems to work within particular aspects of the marital relationship.

### Levels of commitment and attitudes to marriage

One of the reasons offered for this difference in psychological well-being is that married people generally have higher levels of long-term commitment towards each other, when compared to those who live in de facto relationships. Yet a caution is needed here because there are different types of de facto arrangements. While some treat a de facto relationship relatively casually, others treat it as a trial for marriage. Below are some of the specific ways that attitudes towards relationships affect psychological well-being.

- **Marriage protects against depression**

A study conducted by Kirsten Marcussen on levels of depression in cohabiting and married couples found that married people generally had lower levels of depression.<sup>10</sup> An important conclusion drawn from this research was that people's perceptions of marriage, their level of commitment to each other, and their attitudes towards the permanence of marriage, affected rates of depression.

This study also measured levels of depression before people married. Results showed that tendencies toward depression or happiness before marriage could not explain levels of depression after marriage. Therefore Marcussen concluded that there is something about the marital relationship itself that protects against depression.

- **Depression linked to relationship instability**

Correspondingly, research has found that, in general, higher rates of relationship instability in cohabiting relationships can explain why levels of depression tend to be higher for cohabiting couples. According to Susan Brown's study, cohabitators in longer relationships reported

depression levels that were about one third higher than their married counterparts. This research surveyed more than 13,000 people and showed that cohabiting couples had significantly higher levels of depression than those who were married.<sup>11</sup> This was linked to two primary causes: increased relationship instability associated with cohabitation and the presence of children increasing depressive symptoms for cohabiting couples, particularly in longer relationships.

- **Children more likely to have depressive effects on cohabitators**

The presence of children did not have the same effect on married couples' depressive symptoms. It is possible that the well-being of people in co-habiting relationships is affected by the presence of children; there is possibly resentment towards providing financially for children who are not related, as is the case in many de facto relationships. Susan Brown's statistical analysis revealed that income advantage could not explain all of the difference in well-being between married and de facto couples.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the increased mutual commitment within marriage and the increased relationship stability of marriage plays an important role in protecting against depression.

- **Selection effects not significant**

Susan Brown's study found no evidence that the psychologically unhealthy were selected into cohabitation. This means that people's levels of depression before marriage or cohabitation did not differ significantly between married and cohabiting individuals. This finding strongly suggests that there is something about these relationship forms that are causing (in the case of cohabitation) or protecting (in the case of marriage) against depression.

## The protective effects of marriage

A more recent study by Susan Brown investigated the effect of cohabitation on depression levels, asking if cohabitation has a similar protective effect to marriage.<sup>13</sup> The researchers found that cohabitators reported significantly higher levels of depression than married couples, even when taking economic resources, social support and physical health into account. The protective effect of marriage was stronger for men than for women.

## Conclusion

Some have argued that selection effects are responsible for the various psychological benefits of marriage. However, the reality is there is a lot of evidence that suggests there is a causal relationship between couples' happiness and various processes. Married people's mental health is generally better than that of single, divorced and cohabiting individuals. Marriage also appears to have a causal relationship with couples' happiness which is mediated through: economic advantage; higher levels of physical health; greater relationship stability; and increased emotional support. However, this is not the whole story. Even when studies include methods that take out the effect of economic advantage, marriage continues to be causally associated with better psychological well-being. Yet some studies do suggest that a similar protective psychological effect is operating in cohabiting unions, albeit to a lesser degree.<sup>14</sup>

Cohabitation seems to be more strongly associated with depressive symptoms than marriage. Cohabiting couples, according to various studies, have significantly higher levels of depression.<sup>15</sup> This has been linked to two primary causes: increased relationship instability when compared to marital unions, and the presence of children which tends to increase levels of depression. By comparison, among married couples the presence of children was not strongly connected to increased levels of depression.

In summary, marriage has a positive effect on well-being and mental health that appears to arise from its nature, form and expectations. Married people are less likely to be depressed, more likely to be psychologically stable and more likely to be protected from adverse mental health effects than people in other relationship forms. Marriage is therefore a significant protective factor, protecting the mental health of both the adults who enter it, and children raised by married parents. ■

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> S. Brown, "Relationship Quality Dynamics of Cohabiting Unions," *Journal of Family Issues* 24, no. 5 (2003); S.L. Brown, "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-being: Depression among Cohabitators versus Marrieds," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41, no. 3 (2000); B. Hahn, "Marital Status and Women's Health: the Effect of Economic Marital Acquisitions," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55, no. 2 (1993); Y. Hu and N. Goldman, "Morality Differentials

- by Marital Status: An International Comparison," *Demography* 27, no. 2 (1990); J.K. Kiecolt-Glaser and T. Newton, "Marriage and Health: His and Hers," *Psychological Bulletin* 127, no. 4 (2001); L. Lillard and P. Constantijn, "Marital Status and Mortality: The Role of Health," *Demography* 33, no. 3 (1996); L.A. Lillard and L.J. Waite, "Til Death Do us Part: Marital Disruption and Mortality," *The American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 5 (1995); K. Marcussen, "Explaining Differences in Mental Health Between Married and Cohabiting Individuals," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (1999); S. Stack and R. Eshelman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60 (1998); K.A.S. Wickrama and F. Lorenz, "Marital Quality and Physical Illness: A Latent Growth Curve Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59, no. 1 (1997).
- 2 M. Diego, T. Field, and N. Jones, "Withdrawn and Intrusive Maternal Interaction Style and Infant Frontal EEG Asymmetry Shifts in Infants of Depressed Mothers," *Infant Behavior and Development* 29 (2006).
  - 3 S. Stack and R. Eshelman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study." While Stack and Eshelman show that cross-culturally marriage continues to have a significant correlation with psychological well-being, we do require further New Zealand-based research before strong conclusions can be drawn about the effect of cohabitation on psychological well-being in New Zealand. A recent study sponsored by the Families Commission, for example, indicates that married people and those who cohabit have similar levels of relationship satisfaction: J. Robertson, "New Zealanders' Satisfaction with Family Relationships and Parenting" *Blue Skies Report*, 10/06 (Wellington: Families Commission, 2006). This is relevant because conflict or stability within relationships is a major cause of negative psychological well-being: S. L. Brown "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-being: Depression among Cohabitators versus Marrieds." The research by Robertson and funded by a Families Commission Blue Skies fund, argues that a possible reason for this difference between relationship type and satisfaction overseas and in New Zealand could be that in New Zealand cohabitation is treated more like marriage; in other words, the findings "may reflect the lesser distinction between marriage and cohabitation for New Zealanders compared with those living in the US" (31). While this is a reasonable observation, it is only the findings of one study which is not as strong methodologically as the international research. Further, it was not measuring psychological well-being per se, so more New Zealand-based research is needed before strong conclusions can be drawn. Broadly speaking this is a problem for many topics of inquiry into the psychological benefits of relationships as the bulk of social science research is carried out in the United States or the United Kingdom and cannot be assumed to translate directly into the New Zealand context. Stack and Eshelman; J. Roberston; S.L. Brown.
  - 4 Z. Wu et al, "'In Sickness and in Health': Does Cohabitation Count?" *Journal of Family Issues* 24, no. 6 (2003).
  - 5 K. Marcussen, "Explaining Differences in Mental Health between Married and Cohabiting Individuals"; S. Brown, "Relationship Quality Dynamics of Cohabiting Unions."
  - 6 S. Korenman and D. Neumark, "Does Marriage Really Make Men More Productive?" *Journal of Human Resources* 26, no. 2 (1991).
  - 7 D.G. Blanchflower and A.J. Oswald, "Money, Sex and Happiness: An Empirical Study," *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 106, no. 3 (2006).
  - 8 S.L. Brown, "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-being: Depression among Cohabitators versus Marrieds"; Z. Wu, M.J. Penny, R. Hart, and M.S. Pollard, "'In Sickness and in Health': Does Cohabitation Count?"
  - 9 Z. Wu, M.J. Penny, R. Hart, and M.S. Pollard, "'In Sickness and in Health': Does Cohabitation Count?"
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  - 12 S.L. Brown, "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-being: Depression among Cohabitators versus Marrieds."
  - 13 S.L. Brown, G.R. Lee, and R.J. Bulanda, "The Significance of Nonmarital Cohabitation: Marital Status and Mental Health Benefits among Middle-Aged and Older Adults," *The Journals of Gerontology* 60, no. 1 (2005).
  - 14 Z. Wu, M.J. Penny, R. Hart, and M.S. Pollard, "'In Sickness and in Health': Does Cohabitation Count?"
  - 15 S.L. Brown, "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-being: Depression among Cohabitators versus Marrieds"; S.L. Brown, G.R. Lee, and R.J. Bulanda, "The Significance of Non-marital Cohabitation: Marital Status and Mental Health Benefits among Middle-Aged and Older Adults."