

Specialization and happiness in marriage: A U.S.–Japan comparison [☆]

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between specialization and happiness in marriage in the U.S. and Japan. Our findings, based on the General Social Surveys in the U.S. and Japan, indicate both similarities and differences in the determinants of marital happiness in the two countries. In the U.S., the findings are mixed. Women's reported marital happiness in the U.S. is more likely to follow the predictions of the bargaining model where their happiness is determined by their own income. Men's marital happiness in the U.S. follows the predictions of the specialization model; they are happier if their wives are not working or, alternatively, if they are financially dependent on their wives. In Japan, we find support for the specialization model, particularly in the case of women; they are happier if they are specialized in the household and they have a higher household income. Our research highlights how marital quality is affected by the institutional context and the normative environment.

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1. Introduction

The pursuit of happiness is one of the fundamental assumptions underlying the analysis of human behavior. And yet, it is only in recent years that scholars have become seriously engaged in “happiness science.” The study of discovering what makes people happy is far from complete. Western societies are now richer, and their standard of living is substantially better, but the people are no happier today than they were fifty years ago (Layard, 2005). The disconnect between economic well-being and subjective well-being has led to a renewed interest in investigating what makes some people happier than others.¹

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¹ For example, Kahneman and colleagues (2004) are developing a new estimation technique which will be used to calculate a “national well-being account,” a measure comparable to economic indicators such as the GDP.

The aim of this paper is to identify the determinants of marital happiness, as a component of general happiness, in the U.S. and Japan. The economics of family literature predicts that specialization between the sexes increases the economic gains to marriage vis-à-vis efficient household production. However, specialization also increases interdependency between the spouses by offsetting the costs and benefits of marriage (Oppenheimer, 1997). While the literature is rich in empirical evidence documenting the economic gains to specialization, we know little about how specialization affects happiness in marriage.

Continued concern regarding the stability of the institution of marriage and the increasing attention paid to the benefits of a healthy, satisfying marriage (Waite and Gallagher, 2000), have made it increasingly important to understand the factors that determine happiness in marriage.² While scholars have been studying this question extensively for decades (see Glenn, 1990; Hicks and Platt, 1970; Spanier and Lewis, 1980), prominent theories of marital quality are based on the case of U.S. marriages, and little attention has been paid to cross-national variation in the determinants of marital quality.

We hypothesize that happiness and well-being are associated with the social-institutional context. What makes people happy in one society may not be the same in another if we consider the possibility that individual behavior is guided by market and non-market constraints specific to the institutional context. With an attention to differences in the normative environment shaping marital quality in these two countries, we examine how the importance of economic resources, dependency, and children vary. Based on our empirical findings, we evaluate the explanatory power of existing models of marital quality, identifying models that have more salience in an international context.

2. Background

Investigations of marital quality draw on factors such as the presence of children (Twenge et al., 2003), the duration of marriage (Vaillant and Vaillant, 1993; VanLaningham et al., 2001), and the economic characteristics of the family (e.g., Rogers, 2004; Rogers and DeBoer, 2001) in predicting marital happiness and divorce proneness. Included in the category of economic characteristics are: men's employment, income, and job characteristics (Amato and Rogers, 1997; Fox and Chancey, 1998); women's employment, income, and job characteristics (Locksley, 1980; Rogers, 2004; Rogers and DeBoer, 2001; Sayer and Bianchi, 2000; Schoen et al., 2002); and family income (Amato et al., 2003; White and Rogers, 2000).

The economics of family literature predicts that specialization increases the gains to marriage vis-à-vis efficient household production (Becker, 1991). Compared to a system in which individuals invest in both market and household human capital, a gendered division of labor is more efficient in that individuals only invest in skills in which they have a comparative advantage. The gendered division of labor leads to *interdependency* in marriage—each spouse dependent on the other for the labor in which he or she has not specialized. The household benefits from the increased efficiency resulting from specialization.

The specialization model has clear implications regarding the incentives to marry (or not to marry) as well as the costs and benefits of marriage but is more ambiguous regarding marital happiness. Becker (1991) argues that without specialization the gains to marriage will decline but does not make an explicit connection between specialization and marital happiness. Parsons comes closer in the sociological version of the specialization argument in claiming that, without specialization, status competition will arise between husband and wife (Parsons, 1942; Parsons and Bales, 1955). While Parsons' main interest was in the function of the family in the larger society and economy, implications of status competition for marital quality can be drawn. Competition, as opposed to cooperation, between spouses is likely to lead to a decline in marital quality. Synthesizing these specialization models, we can conclude that specialization results in both increased marital harmony and efficiency gains in the family.

Related to the specialization model is the independence hypothesis advanced in the family demography literature. The hypothesis predicts that an increase in women's market work increases the risk of marital disruption.

² In the literature, several terms are often used interchangeably to represent the same concept: marital satisfaction, marital happiness, and marital quality. According to Campbell et al. (1976), a distinction exists in that "happiness" refers to an emotional state while "satisfaction" involves a cognitive judgment against some standard. In this paper, we use the term "marital happiness" because the survey measure specifically asks about "happiness" and we consider marital happiness to be an indicator of marital quality.

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