

Chapter 8: Life-Events, Adaptation, and SWB

8.1 Introduction

People make major life decisions hoping to become happier. They search for a partner, pursue careers, buy homes, and start families. But do these choices actually produce lasting changes in well-being? The previous chapter showed that personality traits, especially Depressiveness and Cheerfulness, account for a large share of stable individual differences in SWB. If personality is so important, do life circumstances matter at all?

For decades, the dominant answer was no. Adaptation theory, introduced by Brickman (1975) and popularized through the metaphor of the hedonic treadmill, held that people quickly adjust to changes in their circumstances. A lottery winner enjoys the windfall briefly, then returns to baseline. A person who becomes disabled suffers initially, then adapts. On this view, the pursuit of happiness through life changes is futile—like running in place. This chapter shows that this pessimistic view was wrong, but not entirely wrong.

The evidence reviewed here reveals a more nuanced picture. Some life changes produce lasting effects on well-being and others do not. The pattern is partly predictable from the framework introduced in Chapter 2. SWB reflects people's evaluations of their lives against their ideals. As people make progress towards their goals, their actual lives become more aligned with ideal lives. And some life domains like housing do show increasing satisfaction with age.

However, the ideal-based framework also raises a puzzle. If people are gradually achieving their goals over the life course—finding partners, advancing in careers, buying homes—why doesn't SWB rise steadily with age in all life domains? Something is working against the accumulation of gains.

Several mechanisms can explain this pattern. First, people's ideals can change. The fashion industry constantly creates new ideals of beauty so that people have to buy new clothes to keep up with changing trends. Smart people keep their clothes and wait till the old ones are back in fashion. Another problem are rising aspirations. The new phone in 2026 is outdated in 2028. Thus, while many products are becoming objectively better, satisfaction with these products remains the same. Whether it is income, career status, or housing, as long as the ideal moves in step with the actual level, SWB stays flat.

The second mechanism operates on affect: emotional responses tend to be triggered by changes rather than stable states. Moving into a better house is exciting, but once the comparison to the old residence fades and the novelty wears off, the affective boost diminishes.

This is hedonic adaptation in the narrow sense—habituation of emotional responses to persistent stimuli.

These two mechanisms are empirically distinguishable and may operate differently across life domains. Aspiration spirals are most likely to affect domains where social comparison is salient, such as income. Hedonic adaptation is most likely to affect domains where novelty drives the emotional response, such as housing. For domains that are central to people’s ideals and involve ongoing engagement rather than passive consumption—such as close relationships—neither mechanism may operate strongly, which would explain why the effects of partnership on SWB persist.

Before reviewing the evidence domain by domain, the next section examines the historical roots of adaptation theory and explains why psychologists long underestimated the impact of life circumstances on SWB. The remaining sections then examine the major life events and circumstances that have been studied most extensively: partnership, divorce, widowhood, unemployment, disability, and housing.

8.1.2 The Neglect of Life Circumstances

During the reign of behaviorism, followed by cognitivism, mainstream psychology ignored topics like emotions, let alone happiness. When Diener (1984) introduced SWB as an important topic, it resonated most strongly with personality psychologists, who were interested in demonstrating that personality traits have real world consequences (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). As a result, research focused on personality predictors of SWB and the influence of life-events and life-circumstances was neglected.

Early review articles also suggested that demographic variables like education level or marital status explain only a small portion of the variance in SWB. A common assumption was that life-events mostly produce short-term fluctuations in SWB around stable levels of SWB that are determined by personality (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Diener et al., 1999). The dominant theory that suggested effects of life-changing events on SWB are only temporary was adaptation theory (Brickman, 1975).

8.1.2 Adaptation Level Theory

Brickman’s Adaptation-Level Theory (1975) assumed that people do not compare their actual lives to some independently and authentically created ideal. Instead, they compare their current lives to their lives in the recent past. Without a fixed anchor for life evaluations, the same life can be a good life, if the recent past was bad, or a bad life, if the recent past was good. This theory allows for changes in life-satisfaction when life gets better (winning the lottery) or worse (the onset of a chronic illness). At the same time, the theory suggests that the new life-circumstances become the comparison standard for future evaluations of life-satisfaction. For

example, the wealthy lottery winner will have caviar for breakfast leading to an immediate increase in happiness, but then getting used to eating caviar every day. The theory implies that stable environmental factors do not contribute to differences in life-satisfaction. People who eat cornflakes or caviar for breakfast everyday will have the same level of happiness. The only reason why they differ in happiness would be their personality traits. A cheerful person eating cornflakes every day would be happier than a gloomy billionaire eating caviar every day. This pessimistic prediction became widely known through the metaphor of the hedonic treadmill—no matter how hard you run, you stay in place.

It is interesting to examine the treadmill analogy a bit further. Why keep running, if you do not get happier? One could just get off the treadmill and be just as happy. This idea may not have occurred to Brickman because the treadmill analogy ignores personality differences. People with a cheerful disposition do not have to run to be happy. In contrast, people who are disposed to feel unhappy may try to run from their unhappiness, and when they stop running, they slip back into depression. Sadly, this may have been Brickman's life story. Brickman was a highly successful psychologist, married with children, but who nonetheless struggled with deep unhappiness. When treatment did not work, he tragically took his own life at 38 (Senior, 2020).

Although Brickman's personal life may have influenced his theory, it does not explain the popularity of adaptation theory in psychology. It seemed to provide an explanation for the common observation that many people find it hard to be happy, even if they seem to have objectively good lives. However, adaptation level theory fails to explain why some people do find lasting happiness, like couples who are happily sharing their lives for 50 years or more. The past two decades have produced some insights into the factors that make changes in SWB temporary or lasting.

8.1.3 First Empirical Evidence

Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) compared lottery winners, paraplegic accident victims, and a control group of ordinary Americans to test adaptation level theory. Lottery winners were only slightly happier than controls—a difference that could be a statistical fluke—and accident victims were less happy, but not as much as one might expect. Diener's influential 1984 review article implied that the three groups were practically equally happy: "Lottery winners are no happier, and quadriplegics no less happy, than normal controls."

However, the study had serious limitations: small samples, modest lottery winnings (not life-changing jackpots), a cross-sectional design that captured only a single moment rather than tracking change over time, and—most importantly—it was never replicated. Better studies that showed lottery winners are happier (Chapter 6) and that disability leads to lower SWB (Lucas, 2007) were only published several decades later.

Studies with university students also have limitations. Suh, Diener, and Fujita (1996) found that only life events in the past six months influenced their SWB, but getting over a bad grade is different from divorce, unemployment, or other major life events. Serious tests of adaptation level theory emerged only in the early 2000s, when SWB researchers started analyzing data from panel studies that followed adults for several years (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). The following sections review this evidence domain by domain.

8.2. Effects of Major Life Events on SWB

8.2.1 Unemployment and SWB

While welfare economists are concerned with human welfare, other economists are more concerned about the welfare of the economy. Low unemployment gives workers more power to negotiate higher salaries, which leads to wage increases and inflation. A second argument is that some job destruction is necessary for economic progress. Industries lose customers as technology and consumer preferences change, and protecting obsolete jobs—whether postal workers or, increasingly, workers displaced by AI—slows down adaptation to a changing economy. From this perspective, unemployment is a necessary cost of an efficient market economy.

Unemployment looks very different for workers who are made redundant. Loss of income alone is likely to reduce their SWB (Chapter 6). Collective schemes like unemployment insurance can help to buffer these effects, but these programs are limited in duration and replacement rate. Moreover, unemployment may also have psychological effects on SWB beyond the loss of income. Work provides structure, social contact, a sense of purpose, and identity. Some theories even suggest that experiencing unemployment can have lasting negative effects on SWB even after people find new work.

Empirical studies of unemployment and SWB were among the first to use panel data to test adaptation theory. Clark and Oswald (1994) established that unemployment has a substantial negative effect on well-being, and subsequent longitudinal studies confirmed that individuals do not simply adapt to long-term unemployment (Esche, 2020). It is now well established that unemployment is one of the life events with the strongest and most persistent effects on SWB.

Unemployment can influence well-being in many ways. Domain satisfaction judgments make it possible to explore which aspects of life are most negatively affected. Using the 2017 wave of the German panel study (SOEP), I examined the effects of unemployment on satisfaction with specific life domains and compared them to the effects of Neuroticism, the personality trait most strongly associated with lower SWB (Chapter 7).

The results reveal an important difference between unemployment and personality. Unemployment has strong but domain-specific effects: it hits satisfaction with household income hardest (~ 1 point), followed by housing satisfaction (~ 0.6 points), with weaker effects on other domains like health, social life, and leisure. This pattern makes sense because unemployment directly reduces financial resources, which in turn affects domains that depend heavily on income.

How do these domain-specific effects add up to influence overall life-satisfaction? This depends on how strongly each domain contributes to global evaluations. In the German panel study, income satisfaction is a strong predictor and explains most of the relationship between unemployment and life-satisfaction. In contrast, housing satisfaction contributes little to the relationship of unemployment and life-satisfaction. However, these results can vary across studies and are likely to vary across individuals.

Aside from material effects, unemployment also lowers self-perceptions of status, which also has an effect on SWB. Additional factors include a sense of purpose and time structure (Paul, Scholl, Moser, Zechmann, & Batinic, 2023). These results suggest that it is important to find meaning and purpose in other activities. Even volunteering may be beneficial, while finding new work is important to regain financial independence.

Adaptation theory predicts that the decrease in SWB is temporary and that SWB increases during the time of unemployment. It also predicts that finding a job after a period of unemployment raises SWB over the level of individuals who did not experience joblessness. Neither of these predictions is supported by evidence. SWB stays low during unemployment. It increases after finding a job and the associated increase in income. There is no honeymoon period of elevated SWB after finding new work. Initial evidence that unemployment leaves scars even after finding new employment did not replicate in studies that better controlled for confounding factors (Anusic, Yap, & Lucas, 2014). The finding that most of the effect of unemployment is related to income suggests that any lasting scars are small and likely reflect lingering income losses rather than psychological damage.

Researchers have attempted to identify factors that make some people more vulnerable to the effects of unemployment than others. Older studies sometimes found that unemployment affected men's well-being more than women's, but newer studies do not replicate this finding. This may reflect societal changes where women's income is more important when women live alone or contribute substantially to household income. As Chapter 6 showed, SWB is influenced by household income and women contribute increasingly to household income.

One might expect unemployment to hit singles harder than couples, since a partner's income can buffer the loss. However, I did not find consistent support for this hypothesis in the German data.

A few studies have examined Big Five personality traits as moderators—for example, Neuroticism might amplify negative emotions during stressful times, or Conscientiousness might make job loss more distressing for people with high work aspirations—but this line of research has produced no robust findings (Anusic et al., 2014).

In conclusion, unemployment has substantial negative effects on well-being that do not simply fade with time, but largely disappear when people find a new job. Their SWB depends more on actual living conditions than on temporal comparisons. A major factor is the influence of employment on income. Unemployment is distinct from retirement. Retirement has only a small effect on purchasing power. It is also not associated with a loss of status like unemployment. This further suggests that income and status drive the effect of unemployment on SWB.

8.2.2 Housing and SWB

Housing is one of the biggest expenses in most people's lives, often accounting for a third or more of household income. It fulfills basic needs for shelter and safety, but it also serves as a marker of status and a target of aspirations. The popularity of home renovation shows suggests that many people dream of living in a perfect home. But how important is housing for well-being? Housing may be a domain where adaptation theory has some validity. Consider hotel rooms: a dated but clean room may feel disappointing at first, but after a few days it is just the place where you sleep. If the same logic applies to homes, people may invest heavily in housing without a lasting boost to their well-being.

Nakazato and Schimmack (2010) examined this question using the German panel data. Participants were followed even when they moved and we were able to compare their well-being from 5 years before the move to 5 years after the move. The results for housing satisfaction show that individuals tend to move when they become less satisfied with their current dwelling. This finding further contradicts adaptation theory. Satisfaction can decrease even if actual conditions remain the same.

Moving boosted housing satisfaction and remained above the starting level in the old dwelling. Apparently, investing into a better home is not a waste of money. However, housing satisfaction is just one aspect of well-being. When we look at the typical indicator of well-being, life-satisfaction judgments, we see basically no changes before or after moving.

Nakazato and Schimmack (2010) discussed several reasons for this finding, but none of them were supported by additional analyses. A simpler explanation is provided by the path models that relate life-satisfaction to domain satisfaction. In the German panel study, housing

satisfaction has a negligible influence on global life-satisfaction judgments. This raises an important methodological question. Do these weights really reflect the importance of housing, or do they underestimate how much housing contributes to SWB?

A study of slum dwellers in El Salvador, Mexico, and Uruguay raises the same question (Galiani, Gertler, & Undurraga, 2018). In a randomized field experiment, extremely poor families received prefabricated houses to replace their makeshift dwellings of cardboard and tin. Housing satisfaction increased substantially and the gain persisted over time. Yet satisfaction with quality of life, while initially boosted, faded completely within about 28 months. Even a dramatic improvement in housing — from a shack to a real house — did not produce a lasting change in global life evaluations, despite lasting improvements in housing satisfaction.

One interpretation is that housing simply does not matter much for well-being. But this seems implausible given the resources people invest in their homes and the clear preferences they express when asked. A more likely explanation is that housing is a domain that fades into the background of daily life. As Kahneman noted, "Nothing in life is as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it." When people evaluate their lives globally, they draw on whatever is most accessible — typically relationships, work, and health. Housing satisfaction is real and stable, but it does not come to mind spontaneously. Domain satisfaction measures correct for this by directing attention to each life domain separately. When asked specifically about their housing, people provide valid and reliable judgments that reflect genuine differences in their living conditions. The problem is not that housing doesn't matter, but that global life-satisfaction measures underweight domains that are stable and unobtrusive.

Housing satisfaction is a good example to demonstrate why domain-specific analyses are essential for understanding what contributes to a good life. For individuals, it is not important to understand why housing satisfaction is a weak predictor of life-satisfaction. They know how important housing is for them. For people who spend a lot of time at home, it is sufficient to know that adaptation effects are small to justify investing in this life domain. A more important question is whether some aspects of housing are more important than others. How important is ownership versus renting, a garden, or a great view of the skyline?

Here it is noteworthy that features that seem important on first sight may be less important than features that influence day to day living. Poor conditions can have a negative effect on SWB (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024). For example, in Mexico replacing dirt floors with concrete floors improved children's health and adults' SWB (Cattaneo et al., 2009). Another important feature is noise. Living close to an airport, noisy street, or noisy neighbours can lower SWB.

Crowding is another problem, although it may be less of a problem these days, when everybody is just on their own phones and requires little space. In the old days, some people needed a lot of space for book and CD collections. Smartphones have also solved that problem. Space also seems to show an effect of aspirations. Foye (2021) found that moving from a two-bedroom apartment to a three-bedroom apartment increased housing satisfaction less than moving from a 1-bedroom to a 3-bedroom apartment.

Harder to see for young people is how aspirations have shifted over time and shape housing markets. Nowadays two-bedroom apartments come with two bathrooms, whereas families often shared a single bathroom in the past. The new standards make housing more expensive. To afford these higher living standards, people have to work more. Some people are actively resisting this aspiration spiral. The growing popularity of tiny homes illustrates this logic in practice. People who choose to live in 20 square meters are not sacrificing well-being — they are trying to minimize the cost of housing, while focusing on the essential function of housing without paying for unnecessary space.

8.2.3 Disability and SWB

Disability was central to the study that launched adaptation theory. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) reported that paraplegic accident victims were not as unhappy as one might expect, and this finding was widely cited as evidence that people adapt to even the most severe changes in life circumstances. But as we saw in Section 8.1, that study had serious methodological limitations. What does better evidence show?

Lucas (2007) used two large national panel studies—the German SOEP and the British BHPS—to track life satisfaction before and after the onset of disability. The results showed moderate to large drops in life satisfaction, with little evidence of adaptation over time. However, this study has an important limitation. Many participants who acquired a disability were older adults experiencing age-related health decline. For these individuals, the onset of disability may have been part of a broader trajectory of deteriorating health ending in death—what gerontologists call terminal decline. The absence of adaptation in these cases is not surprising and does not tell us much about how younger people adjust to disability.

A more informative comparison is between people born with a disability and those who acquire one later in life. Bogart (2014) found that people with congenital mobility disabilities reported higher life satisfaction than those with acquired disabilities. Importantly, the key predictor was onset (congenital vs. acquired), not duration of disability. People who had lived with an acquired disability for decades did not reach the same level of satisfaction as those who were born with one. This finding is difficult to explain through simple adaptation—if adaptation were the mechanism, duration should matter more than onset.

The ideal-based framework from Chapter 2 offers a straightforward explanation. People born with a disability develop their identity and their conception of the ideal life alongside the disability. Their ideals incorporate the disability from the start, so there is no actual-ideal gap to overcome. In contrast, people who acquire a disability later in life must revise ideals that were formed when they were non-disabled. This revision is psychologically difficult and may never be complete. Bogart found that disability self-concept—a positive identity as a person with a disability—mediated the relationship between onset and life satisfaction. Health care professionals who try to “normalize” individuals with disabilities may be working against this process; fostering a positive disability identity may be more effective.

Outsiders consistently overestimate how unhappy people with disabilities are—a phenomenon known as the disability paradox (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999). Kahneman’s focusing illusion applies here as well: when non-disabled people imagine life with a disability, they focus on what they would lose and neglect the many domains of life that remain unaffected. In reality, people with disabilities still enjoy relationships, work, food, entertainment, and all the other activities that make up daily life. The disability is not the whole of their experience.

Domain satisfaction measures help to clarify which aspects of life are most affected by disability. Not surprisingly, health satisfaction shows the largest negative effect. But disability also reduces satisfaction with income, social life, and leisure (Powdthavee, 2009). These spillover effects vary enormously depending on the type and severity of disability, the availability of social support, and the quality of public services. In countries with good public health care and disability support, the financial and social consequences of disability are buffered. Research on spinal cord injury illustrates this point: the level of injury (tetraplegic vs. paraplegic) does not predict life satisfaction, despite large differences in functional impairment. The strongest predictors are economic sufficiency and perceived health.

These findings suggest that “disability” is too broad a category to make simple generalizations about adaptation. A young person who loses a leg in an accident and receives good rehabilitation, prosthetics, and social support faces a very different situation from an older person with progressive multiple sclerosis. The former may adapt substantially over time as they rebuild their life around revised ideals; the latter faces ongoing deterioration that makes adaptation unlikely. Similarly, the birth of a child with Down syndrome produces a lasting decrease in maternal life satisfaction ($d = -.66$), whereas the birth of a child with a curable condition like cleft lip and palate has only a temporary effect on maternal distress (Langvik & Borgen, 2014).

In sum, the influence of disability on SWB is best understood in terms of the influence of a disability on goal progress. Like other resources or lack of resources, disability has negative effects when it impedes goal progress. For people who acquire a disability later in life, it is likely

to interfere with their goals. A time of adjustment is needed to create new goals that are attainable with the disability. This may not be entirely possible, but blind musicians like Stevie Wonder are examples of living fulfilling lives with a disability.

8.2.4 Relationships and SWB

In modern societies, marriage is not the only way to share a life with somebody else. Research often shows little differences between those who get married and those who live in less traditional long-term relationships. I therefore will use the term partnership to refer to two people who are sharing their lives with each other.

Cross-cultural studies show that in most countries, individuals with a partner report higher wellbeing than singles. Rather large differences are visible in Anglo countries like Canada, the United States, and Australia. Maybe a bit surprising is the finding that many countries also show similar levels of wellbeing for male and female individuals with a partner. However, Japan shows a relatively large sex difference with lower wellbeing of married women. Smaller sex differences are also found in the US and Canada. This finding suggests that getting married can have lasting positive effects on wellbeing. However, correlations do not prove causality and some researchers have proposed that partnerships do not make people happier.

Some social scientists argue that marriage does not make people happier. The leading proponent of happy singlehood is Bella DePaulo, who has been single for all of her life (Time Magazine). According to her self-report she is happy. This is consistent with subjective accounts of wellbeing. However, she also claims that marriage does not make other people happier and that scientific claims to the contrary are false. So, we need to look beyond the correlation between partnership and happiness and examine whether marriage makes the majority of happy people happier.

DePaulo cites a meta-analysis of prospective studies to support her claim (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). The study shows that wellbeing after people get married is not higher than wellbeing before the wedding. The problem with these studies is that people are not singles, meet somebody, and get married the next day. For example, a study by Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener (2003) found no lasting increases in wellbeing after marriage. However, this study ignored that Germans often cohabit for several years before they officially tie the knot. Zimmerman and Easterlin (2006) found that singles became happier when they started cohabitating. They also became happier one year before marriage, but then happiness decreased back to the level during cohabitation. Importantly, it did not decrease back to the level during singlehood, suggesting that, on average, partnership leads to higher wellbeing. Other studies suggest that even having a partner without living together is related to higher wellbeing (Evans, Gray, & Reimondos, 2023).

Another reason why partnership might increase wellbeing is that having a partner appears to be a universal value with high importance in all cultures, even modern ones. Remember that in

Chapter 3, family was the most important value and people who valued family also reported higher wellbeing. If getting what you want increases wellbeing, people who want a partnership should be happier when they have a partner. At the same time, people who do not want a partner, like Bella DePaulo, should be happy without a partner.

To test this hypothesis, I compared the well-being of true singles, those who do not value partnership (a rating of 1 or 2 on a scale from 1 to 4) in 2008, 2012, and 2016. Only 2% (185 out of 8,451) of participants had consistently low interest in partnership over an 8-year period, whereas 87% (7,345 out of 8,451) of participants consistently rated partnership as important (3 or 4).

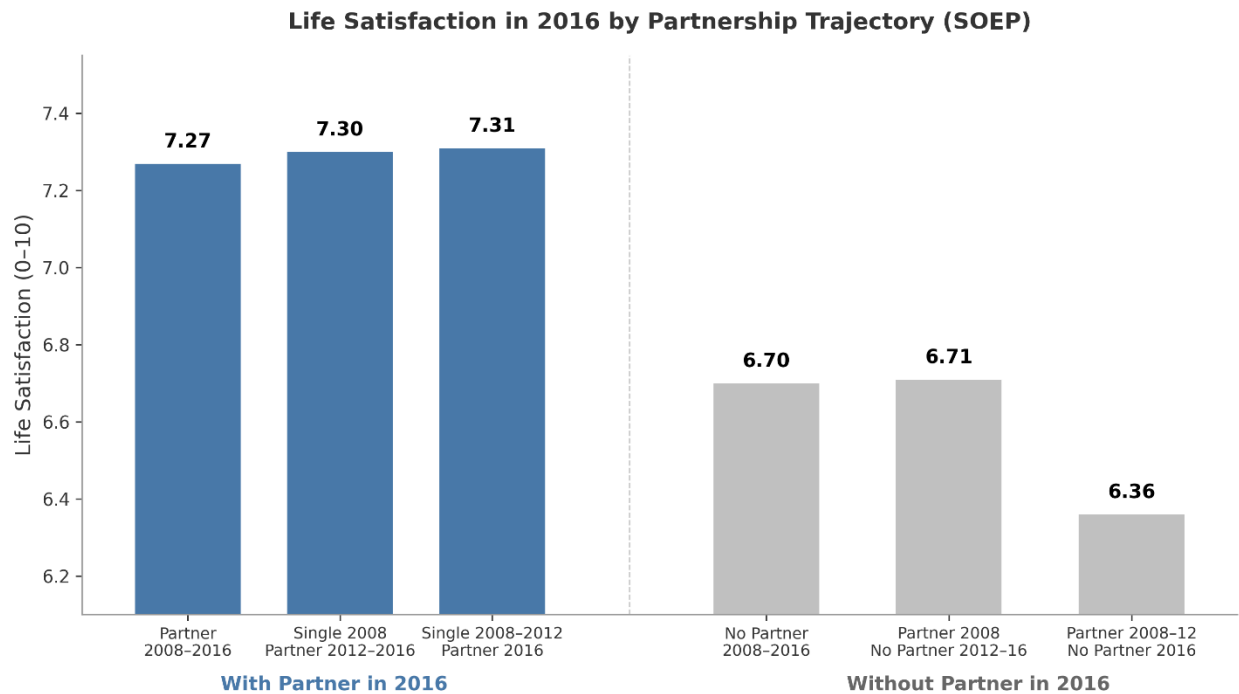
Even the small percentage of singles does not represent singles like DePaulo, who were never in a relationship. Out of the 185 participants, 37 were widowed and 56 were divorced, leaving only 88 (1%) participants who were life-long singles. A comparison of these 88 participants with the average of the other participants showed lower wellbeing on several indicators such as life-satisfaction, positive affect, and family satisfaction. Thus, happy singles are the exception rather than the rule. For most people, remaining single is not a desirable option, presumably because the need for partnership is a fundamental psychological need.

A key problem in past research was the focus on marital status. Marital status is only loosely related to partnership. For example, some singles are in a committed relationship even if they do not live together and some officially divorced people are already living again with a new partner. For example, in the 2008 wave of the SOEP, 51% of singles and 49% of divorced participants had a partner. Even 18% of widowed participants reported a partner.

Regression analysis shows that partner status is more important than marital status for wellbeing. Participants with a partner had an average that was half a point higher on the 0-10 life-satisfaction scale than participants without a partner in 2008. Being single was associated with a 0.23 point difference. This means that singles with a partner are slightly happier and singles without a partner are less happy than married people.

More conclusive evidence comes from looking at the relationship between partnership and wellbeing over time. Life-satisfaction was 7.27 for participants who were with a partner over the 8-year period, 7.30 for those who were single in 2008 and with a partner in 2012 and 2016, and 7.31 for those who were single in 2008 and 2012 and with a partner in 2016. The results for people without a partner are slightly different. People without a partner from 2008 to 2016 had an average score of 6.70. Those who were with a partner in 2008 and without a partner in 2012 and 2016 had a similar average of 6.71, but those who were with a partner in 2008 and 2012, but without one in 2016 had a score of 6.36. This pattern is consistent with the earlier analysis that divorce has an additional negative effect on wellbeing in the short-term, but not in the long-term. Thus, people seem to be able to adjust to negative effects of divorce except for the lack of a

partner. These analyses provide strong evidence that most singles without a partner are not happy because most people want a partner.



Note. Life satisfaction in 2016 for participants with stable marital status across 2008, 2012, and 2016 (SOEP).

These analyses show how scientific evidence can be misleading. While weddings are a time of higher wellbeing, these effects are relatively short-lived, but the positive effects of partnership are long lasting. These positive effects have been overlooked because social scientists focused on marital status, but interpreted these results as if they reflect the effects of partnership.

An effect size of 0.5 points on the Happiness Ladder is roughly equivalent to a \$50,000 income increase. Finding a partner that increases wellbeing can be difficult, but it may be one of the biggest environmental influences on happiness that does not show adaptation effects.

8.2.5 How does Partnership Influence Well-Being?

Young, unmarried people may dream about finding a soulmate and living happily ever after, but real marriages also involve working together, which in our modern world also means working and spending money together. One advantage of cohabitation or marriage is that couples share their earnings and expenses. Chapter 6 showed that higher household income predicts higher wellbeing and couples have higher household income than singles. Thus, money rather than love may explain the higher wellbeing of partnered individuals. To test this prediction, I added

household income as a predictor. As predicted, partnered individuals reported higher household income and higher household income predicted higher life-satisfaction. However, this effect explained only 0.10 points on the happiness ladder, leaving 0.40 points unexplained. Moreover, this finding may be spurious and may disappear when other predictors are included in the model.

The SOEP does not ask a question about relationship satisfaction. Moreover, many people without a partner do not answer these questions. However, the SOEP includes a question about family satisfaction. For people without a partner, this question can be answered by focusing on other family members (parents, siblings, children). For partnered individuals, this question can also include these family members, but it is likely to take the quality of the partnership into account. If partnered individuals benefit from their partnership, their family satisfaction should be higher than the family satisfaction of people without a partner (you can choose your spouse, but not your parents).

Chapter 8 already showed that family satisfaction is a life-domain that contributes to wellbeing. This finding was replicated in this analysis. In addition, partnership predicted higher family satisfaction. Together, these effects contributed 0.25 points to happiness. This is about half of the effect of partnership. The effect of income remained unchanged (0.10). Thus, the results suggest that partnership has both material and emotional advantages.

Some aspects of partnerships are similar to other social relationships. For example, parents or best friends can provide emotional support. However, other aspects are typically reserved for partnership, namely physical intimacy. While some partnerships are open, many partnerships do not tolerate physical intimacy with other and infidelity is a leading cause of divorce. In turn, infidelity may be a symptom of sexual dissatisfaction. Thus, it is likely that sexual satisfaction contributes to wellbeing in couples. In our modern world, it may seem that singles without a partner might be able to have higher sexual satisfaction and that sexual partners are always available on apps like tinder. However, the reality of single life is rather different. Singles report lower sexual satisfaction than people in committed relationships.

Hoan and MacDonald (2024) surveyed a large sample of singles (no partner for 6 months or more) and partnered (in a relationship for 6 months or more) individuals in the UK. In this study, the difference between singles and partnered individuals was about 1.4 points on the happiness ladder. The effect might be bigger because some singles were probably in a relationship in the past year and might be suffering from a break-up or divorce. A 1-point increase in sexual satisfaction would contribute only 0.14 points to this difference. In contrast, a one-point increase in relationship satisfaction contributed about 0.60 points to the difference. Thus, there is evidence that partnership provides some benefits beyond money and sex.

8.2.6 Spousal Similarity in Well-Being

The previous section suggests that partnership has, on average, a moderate positive effect. It is important to emphasize that there is a lot of variability around this average. Studies of married (or cohabitating) couples can reveal why some couples are happier than others.

Chapter 8 showed that spouses have more similar wellbeing than first-degree relatives. There are two interpretations of this finding. First, it is possible that similarity between spouses reveals environmental influences on their wellbeing. For example, Chapter 6 showed that higher household income predicts higher wellbeing for household members. If higher household income makes both spouses happier, it produces a correlation between spouses' wellbeing (a third variable explanation).

An alternative explanation is assortative mating; that is, spouses with similar characteristics marry each other. For example, if extraverts marry extraverts and introverts marry introverts, we would expect a correlation in wellbeing because extraversion predicts higher wellbeing. However, there is very little assortment for personality traits that influence wellbeing like Neuroticism or Extraversion, and traits that show assortment (e.g., height, intelligence) do not predict wellbeing. Thus, it is more likely that similarity in wellbeing reflects environmental factors than genetic factors, but the evidence is not conclusive.

Stronger evidence comes from studies that follow people over time. Assortative mating predicts higher similarity in the beginning of the relationship. If traits change over time, similarity would decrease. In contrast, if environmental factors like household income change, they would change wellbeing of both spouses in the same direction. Thus, spouses remain similar over time.

To test this prediction, I examined similarity of over 800 spouses over a 20-year period (Schimmack & Lucas, 2010). The main finding was that wellbeing of spouses changed over time, but spousal similarity remained high over the 20-year period. This means, the wellbeing of spouses changed in the same direction. Further evidence that spousal similarity reflects environmental influences comes from the study of life domains. Spouses were more similar and changed more in the same direction for shared domains like satisfaction with household income and housing. There was less similarity for domains like health and leisure that are less influenced by shared influences.

Somewhat surprising was the finding that spouses were also similar in the variance that was stable over 20 years. Twin studies suggested that most of this variance is heritable (Chapter 7). Thus, there is a possibility that spouses also assort on genetic traits that influence wellbeing. However, these traits are unknown. Furthermore, not all of this stability seems to be heritable because spouses became less similar after divorce (Lucas [YEAR]). This suggests that some couples do indeed live happily ever after they get married, but currently we do not know what predicts this desirable outcome.

8.3 Conclusion

Life events may not change life forever, but they can have lasting effects on SWB. Thus, pursuing happiness is not a futile goal. However, how life events influence SWB is not as simple as achieving a goal or getting married and living happily ever after. The main influence of life events on SWB comes from changes in day-to-day experiences. Moving to a big house in the countryside may seem appealing, but daily commutes may have a bigger effect on SWB than nice views. Another lesson from this research is that adaptation is not an automatic process. Divorce or unemployment lower SWB until people find a new partner or a new job, respectively. Events like disability can have lasting and irreversible effects. In these cases, it is not sufficient to just accept a loss, but to create new goals that are compatible with the disability.

SWB also means that people have to be clear about their priorities. For some people, a nice house is important and spending time at home or renovating and decorating it will increase their wellbeing. For others, money is better spent on vacations or other activities. Novelty can be exciting, but it can wear off. A focus on the long-term effects of life events is likely to lead to better decisions.