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**Marriage Matters  
Spousal Similarity in Life Satisfaction**

**Berlin, September 2006**

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## **Abstract**

Examined the concurrent and cross-lagged spousal similarity in life satisfaction over a 21-year period. Analyses were based on married couples ( $N = 847$ ) in the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). Concurrent spousal similarity was considerably higher than one-year retest similarity, revealing spousal similarity in the variable component of life satisfaction. Spousal similarity systematically decreased with length of retest interval, revealing similarity in the changing component of life satisfaction. Finally, there was considerable spousal similarity in the stable component of life satisfaction over 20-years. The implications of these findings for causal theories of life satisfaction and studies in line with behavioural genetics are discussed.

**JEL Classification:** B49, D01, Z1

**Keywords:** Subjective Well Being, Life Satisfaction, Marriage, Couples, Spousal Similarity, Heritability, Assortative Mating, Longitudinal Panel, SOEP

## Marriage Matters: Spousal Similarity in Life Satisfaction

Traditionally, societies' and individuals' well-being has been assessed with objective indicators (GDP, income). In the 1960s, social scientists noted the limitations of this approach and developed subjective indicators of well-being (Cantril, 1965). One of the most prominent social indicators of well-being is life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Over the past decades, research on life satisfaction has increased exponentially (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999).

The main goal of life satisfaction research is to uncover the determinants of life satisfaction. Determinants of life satisfaction can be broadly classified into internal determinants, (e.g., genes, biological dispositions) and external determinants (e.g., income, employment, social relationships). Internal and external determinants of life satisfaction have different implications for public policy and for the use of life satisfaction as a subjective indicator of well-being. Internal determinants of life satisfaction raise normative concerns about the value of life satisfaction as a measure of well-being (Sumner, 1996). For example, if an individual's high life satisfaction were based on a distorted, irrational, or delusional assessment of his life, it would provide misleading information about the individual's well-being. Internal determinants of life satisfaction also pose a problem for public policy makers because the main objective of public policy is to create sustainable environments and social structures that maximize well-being. If life satisfaction were largely internally determined, public policies would have no effect on them.

A comprehensive review of the literature suggests that internal determinants of life satisfaction are stronger than external determinants of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999). Evidence for internal determinants of life satisfaction stems from three lines of research. First, life satisfaction is highly correlated with personality traits (Heller, Watson, & Hies, 2004; Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004), which are known to be very stable (Conley, 1984, 1985; Terracciano, Costa, & McCrae, 2006), and to a large extent genetically determined (Riemann, Angleitner, & Strelau, 1997). Second, many positive or negative life events have relatively short-lived effects on life satisfaction (Headey & Wearing, 1989; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). These events produce temporal variability, but not real changes in life satisfaction. Third, behavioural genetics studies reveal that life satisfaction itself is partially genetically

determined (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Nes, Roysamb, Tambs, Harris, & Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2006; Stubbe, Posthuma, Boomsma, & De Geus, 2005). This evidence has led some researchers to propose that individual differences in life satisfaction are largely determined by an internal set point to which people return after they adapt to environmental changes (Headey & Wearing, 1992; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996).

However, several recent studies suggest that external determinants of life satisfaction are more powerful than previously thought. First, the unique data of the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) have provided new information on the stability of life satisfaction over long time intervals (Ehrhardt, Saris, & Veenhoven, 2000; Fujita & Diener, 2005, Headey, 2006). These studies show significant changes in life satisfaction. A study with three waves of assessments can be used to separate true change from measurement error and momentary fluctuations using a simple formula (Heise, 1969). Applying this formula to Fujita and Diener's (2005) findings, we find a one-year stability of  $r = .94$ , whereas the retest stability over 16 years is only  $r = .42$ .

The SOEP data have also provided the first information on the nature of external determinants of life satisfaction that produce lasting changes in life satisfaction. Divorce, unemployment, and disability produce a lasting decrease in life satisfaction (Lucas, 2005; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004). Marriage is not associated with an average increase or decrease in life satisfaction, but it seems to produce lasting changes in individual's life satisfaction (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). In other words, life satisfaction before marriage increases for some individuals and decreases for other individuals in the years after marriage.

The present article extends research on internal and external determinants of life satisfaction by examining spousal similarity in life satisfaction. Spousal similarity in life satisfaction is theoretically important because spouses share many environmental factors, but are not genetically related (i.e., they are not blood relatives). Thus, spousal similarity in life satisfaction can reveal environmental influences on life satisfaction in the same way as similarity between monozygotic twins can reveal genetic influences.

Numerous cross-sectional studies have reported spousal similarity in life satisfaction (Bookwala & Schulz, 1996; Tambs & Moum, 1992). One problem of cross-sectional studies is that they fail to provide conclusive evidence for environmental influences because spousal similarity may be due to positive assortative mating. That is, men and women with similar levels of life satisfaction may be more likely to marry each other. If their pre-marriage life satisfac-

tion were genetically determined, spousal similarity in life satisfaction would still reflect genetic influences even though spouses are not genetically related. One way to test these alternative explanations is to examine spousal similarity over time. A longitudinal study allows to distinguish three components of spousal similarity in life satisfaction. First, the variable component of spousal similarity in life satisfaction is revealed by spousal similarity that is unique to a single assessment (wave). This component can be due to shared method variance or valid environmental influences due to shared life events that have a temporary influence on both spouses life satisfaction. Second, the changing component of spousal similarity in life satisfaction is revealed by systematically decreasing spousal similarity with increasing time between assessments. These systematic changes provide the strongest evidence for environmental influences on life satisfaction and show that the changes in spouses' environment produce similar changes in spouse's life satisfaction.

Finally, the stable component of spousal similarity in life satisfaction reflects spousal similarity that is constant from the first to the last assessment. This component can be due to assortative mating or stable environmental influences. The SOEP provides a unique opportunity to separate these three components of spousal similarity.

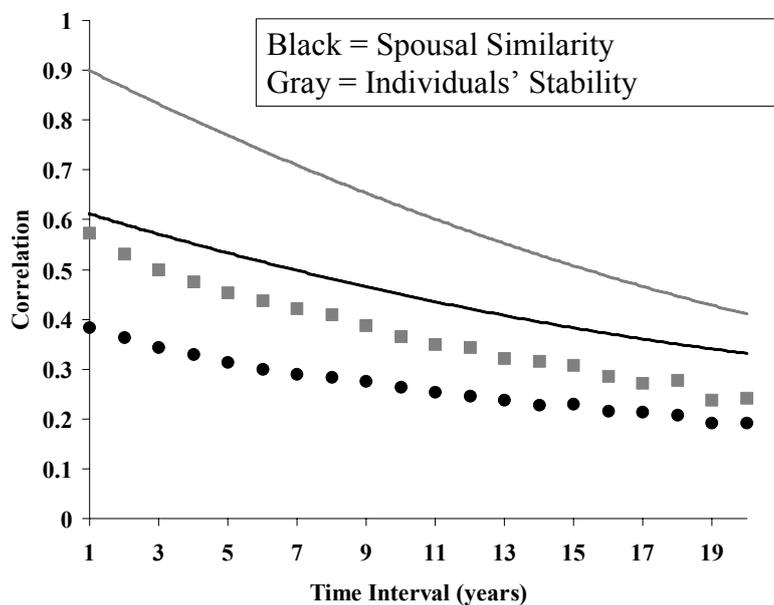
Our data analyses are based on all available waves of the SOEP from 1984 to 2004 (Wagner et al., 2006). Life satisfaction was assessed with an 11-point scale (Fujita & Diener, 2005, Kroh, 2005). We first examined cross-sectional spousal similarity for each of the 21 waves. The average spousal similarity was  $r = .54$ . Variability across waves was small (range  $r = .52$  to  $.59$ ). It is noteworthy that spousal similarity in the SOEP data is higher than the typical spousal similarity in previous studies ( $\sim .3$  to  $.4$ ).

To examine whether spousal similarity in life satisfaction changes, we computed time-lagged cross-spouse correlations. These analyses are based on 847 couples that participated in all 21 waves. The cross-sectional spousal similarity for this subsample of couples was virtually identical to the cross-sectional spousal similarity of the full sample ( $r = .52$ ).

True change in life satisfaction is revealed by decreasing spousal similarity over longer time intervals (Conley, 1984). The observed correlations provide clear evidence of change (Figure 1). Figure 1 also shows individuals' (averaged across husbands and wives) retest correlations of life satisfaction. The results replicate previous findings of change in life satisfaction (Fujita & Diener, 2005). We used Heise's (1969) formula to estimate the stability corrected for measurement error as well as the reliability of life satisfaction ratings (see also Conley, 1984). We

then used the reliability estimates to correct observed spousal similarity for measurement error. The trendlines in Figure 1 show the measurement corrected changes in individuals' life satisfaction and spousal similarity. The estimated spousal similarity over the short-term is consistent with Schimmack, Pinkus, and Lockwood's (2006) study that yielded an estimate of  $r = .59$ .

Figure 1:  
**Cross-lagged spousal similarity and retest stability of life satisfaction over retest intervals of 1 to 20 years (N = 847 couples).**



Another noteworthy finding is that a considerable portion of spousal similarity in life satisfaction is stable even over 20 years. Furthermore, a comparison of the trendlines for individuals' life satisfaction and spousal similarity reveals a shallower trendline for spousal similarity than in individuals' life satisfaction. To illustrate, individuals' life satisfaction is a much better predictor of their own life satisfaction than partners' life satisfaction one year later ( $r = .96$  vs.  $r = .64$ ; effect size  $q = 2.67$ ; Cohen, 1988). However, over an interval of 20 years, this difference decreases ( $r = .53$  vs.  $r = .35$ ;  $q = 0.45$ ). The small gap between the two lines over the 20-year interval suggest that most of the stable variance in life satisfaction of married individuals is shared with a spouse.

Another important finding is the large difference between the observed concurrent spousal similarity in life satisfaction and the lagged one-year stability ( $r_s = .54$  vs.  $.38$ ,  $q = .41$ ), which is much larger than the difference between other one-year lagged correlations (e.g., one-year vs. two-year;  $r_s = .38$  vs.  $.36$ ,  $q = .02$ ). This finding shows that spouses are also similar in the variable component of life satisfaction.

In sum, our results show evidence that spouses are similar in all three components of life satisfaction, namely the variable component that produces temporary variability in life satisfaction, the changing component of life satisfaction, and the stable component of life satisfaction over time. Whereas spousal similarity in the changing component of life satisfaction provides strong support for environmental influences on life satisfaction, the nature of spousal similarity in the other two components is more ambiguous.

## Discussion

Our findings of spousal similarity in the stable component of life satisfaction over a 20-year period have important implications for the interpretation of behavioural genetics studies of life satisfaction (Nes et al., 2006). These studies imply that genetic factors account for most of the stable variance in life satisfaction. If this interpretation of the data were correct, our finding of high spousal similarity would imply strong assortative mating for life satisfaction, and high genetic similarity between spouses. As a result, common behavioural genetics models that assume random mating make incorrect assumptions about the genetic similarity of dizygotic twins and first-degree relatives. Thus, the published estimates of heritability, especially estimates of additive genetic effects, should be interpreted with caution.

It is also possible that spousal similarity in the stable component of life satisfaction is influenced by stable environmental factors. One possible stable environmental factor is the partner's personality. Schimmack, Pinkus, and Lockwood (2006) conducted the first study that tested this hypothesis. They found that depression had a moderate negative correlation with partners' life satisfaction. Although this finding does not prove causality, it suggests partners' depression as a potential environmental cause of stable spousal similarity in life satisfaction. To conclude, spousal similarity in life satisfaction is an important phenomenon that deserves more attention by well being researchers.

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