Removing the Stigma of Divorce: Happiness Before and After Remarriage

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Abstract   Many studies confirm that marriage does not have lasting effects on levels of happiness, whereas divorce induces serious, scarring effects through social stigma. However, few academic efforts have been made regarding how remarriage after divorce impacts the subjective well-being (SWB) of the divorced. Taking into consideration that remarriage often entails regaining social acceptance, this paper examines the possibly different patterns of happiness depending on marital order. Specifically, this longitudinal study uses the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data set in order to compare SWB trajectories around first and subsequent marriages. The results show that the remarried go through a significantly greater boost in happiness than the first-married during the transition phase. Moreover, while life satisfaction that increased in the years around the first marriage quickly returns to the initial baseline, remarriage generates a lasting increase. This paper provides a complementary perspective to existing researches on divorce and debates over the hedonic treadmill theory.

Keywords   Remarriage · Subjective well-being · Life course · Social stigma

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Introduction

Marriage is no longer a once-in-a-lifetime event for many people in modern society. In Germany during the year 2015, a total of 400,155 couples got married, with almost one third (32.8%) of them involving at least one spouse who had been previously married. This demographical trend is strongly driven by the rising rate of divorce. According to the *Statistische Bundesamt*, as many as 163,335 divorces were obtained in the same year, adding up to more than 40% of the number of new marriages – a notable increase from 1950 (17.9%) and 1990 (30.0%).

Since Brickman and Campbell (1971) introduced the hedonic treadmill theory, it has been generally accepted that, within several years after marriage and many other favorable and adverse life events, people tend to return to their baseline level of happiness (Headey and Wearing 1989). However, subsequent research on marital transition revealed that social stigma can pose dire threats to the subjective well-being (SWB) of the divorced. Berman and Turk, for example, traced which factors make divorce "a stress-inducing life crisis" (Berman and Turk 1981, 2). One hundred and six subjects were asked about their current mood and overall life satisfaction. By both standards, the most constant source of distress was none other than interpersonal-social problems such as stereotyping and distancing by others. Similarly, after interviewing 104 divorced men and women, Gerstel wrote, "to argue that the divorced are no longer stigmatized is to misunderstand their experience" (Gerstel 1987, 12). She could observe many signs of stigma strongly associated with conditions surrounding divorce. Her interviewees repeatedly reported they were socially excluded, blamed, and devaluated.

Other studies found that divorce undermines one's life satisfaction even permanently. According to Johnson and Wu (2002), divorce is followed by long-lasting unhappiness largely due to social isolation, lack of social support, economic hardship, and additional childcare responsibilities. Lucas (2005) also asserted that the divorced adapt only incompletely, as it took five years for them to reach a new set point of life satisfaction, which was still lower than the initial baseline.

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In contrast to this accumulation of researches on divorce, however, few academic efforts have been made regarding the relationship between happiness and the subsequent life event, remarriage. One pioneering longitudinal study on remarriage was conducted by Spanier and Furstenberg, Jr. (1982). The researchers interviewed 180 divorced men and women living in the United States. They discovered no significant difference in welfare between those who stayed divorced and those who eventually remarried, which made them conclude that remarriage does not settle the problem of threatened well-being. However, questions remain about their result because of the limited representativeness of the samples. The enquiry was based on interviews with a relatively small number of purposively gathered respondents, and only 35% among them eventually remarried by the time of the second data collection. Apart from the quality of sampling, it has also been more than three decades since the research was conducted.

The aim of this article, therefore, is to reinvestigate how remarriage impacts on the life satisfaction of the divorced. The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data set allows researchers to draw a significant outcome from larger, more representative, and up-to-date samples.

Theory & Hypotheses

This paper analyzes whether remarriage affects the life satisfaction of the divorced, and if so, how. To a social scientist studying how critical life events affect one's SWB, of huge interest is the intermediary role of social institutions. Marriage itself is one of such institutions, as it is loaded by many formal and informal norms and possibilities of sanctions.

Divorce is often accompanied by negative reactions from others and a long-lasting recession of life satisfaction. Stigma is defined as "any characteristic that sets an individual or group apart from the majority of the population, with the result that the individual or group is treated with suspicion or

hostility" (Giddens 2001, 160). It is not a self-dependent concept, but rather a product of social interaction. Feelings of disapproval can be a considerable and a constant threat to one's mental health. It exposes individuals to an undesirable process of "labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination" (Link and Phelan 2001, 367).

Goffman (1963) classified the stigmatized into two categories. One belongs to *the discredited* if his stigma symbol is too visible to hide, e.g., who are physically challenged or from a racial minority. Their primary concern is how to manage tension in a mixed interaction. On the other hand, for the other group called *the discreditable*, which consists of people with less visible stigma symbols, to *hide* or *remove* the stigma by information management is now the major strategy.

Of course, remarriage is not solely a decision for information management. As far as remarriage obliterates the stigma of divorce, however, whether such process is consciously sought or not is not really a matter of concern. More important is the changed reaction of the people surrounding the remarried. Many of the remarried can regain social acceptance they had once lost. In this regard, remarriage is not merely a merge with one partner. It is in fact a reunion with the society at large. Therefore, this paper expects following characteristics from the SWB trajectory of the remarried.

   1. Additional boost hypothesis: While marriage in general is a pleasant life event, remarriage would be even more gratifying because it removes social stigma from the divorced. Therefore, the amount of increase in life satisfaction will be greater during the years around remarriage than the first marriage.

   2. Heightened baseline hypothesis: Researches on divorce show that social exclusion is a continuous source of dissatisfaction (Johnson and Wu 2002; Lucas 2005). If remarriage helps to lift the socio-psychological burden of stigmatization, then the remarried will report a higher set point of life satisfaction after the adaptation period.

Data

In examining the SWB trajectories of people before and after a critical life event, longitudinal research design has a clear advantage over cross-sectional one. Longitudinal data sets allow researchers to observe how the same person's level of happiness changes over time, making the findings less prone to selection bias. Specifically, this study made use of German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data set. As one of the largest, long-running panel studies, it has been accumulating information about German households and individuals every year since 1984 (SOEP at DIW Berlin in the Net). Its characteristic of being "clearly centered on the analysis of the life course and well-being" (Wagner et al. 2007, 8) makes it a perfect basis for the current research.

Data Management

Statistical software STATA (ver. 13.1) was adopted as the main tool of data management. To create the final data set for this study, I merged three data files: two panel data files called *pl* and *pgen*, and a biographical one named *biomarsy*, all from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP, data for years 1984-2012, version 29, 50% campus version) offered by the German Institute for Economic Research (also known as DIW Berlin).

Among two pre-cleaned panel data sets, *pl* covers a wider range of person-related information, while smaller and more manageable *pgen* contains "person-related status and generated variables" (DIW Berlin in the Net). Since *pgen* does not carry information about individuals' life satisfaction, the corresponding variables were merged from *pl* into *pgen*.

Despite being pre-cleaned data files, some of the marital reports in *pl* and *pgen* are logically absurd. For example, albeit few, there were naturally impossible transitions from *married* to *single*

and never married before status, with some going back to *married* again later. These cases were particularly problematic for this study because they might be remarriages in disguise as a first.

To alleviate such concern, an additional data source was required for cleaning the marital information in the data set. Merged for this purpose was a data file named *biomarsy*, which carries detailed information about "yearly marital biography" of the panel respondents (DIW Berlin in the Net). The event variable of first marriage, made from *pl* and *pgen* data, could then be cleaned via comparison with the yearly marital record from *biomarsy*. By so doing, a total of 34 misreports of first marriage were eliminated.

Measures

Marital Status and Event Variables

The independent variable of this research is the change in marital status. The SOEP Individual Questionnaire classifies the respondents' marital status into (i) *married*, (ii) *married but separated*, (iii) *single and never been married*, (iv) *divorced*, (v) *widowed*, and (vi) *husband/wife abroad*. Using the SOEP panel data set, three event variables were created: the occurrence of first marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

First, the event of first marriage was operationalized by a variable that marks transition from *single and never been married* to *married*. As previously mentioned, misreports of first marriage were then carefully removed from the data set. Next, the event of divorce was defined as a transition from either *married* or *separated* to *divorced*. In Germany, one prerequisite for divorce is that the couple must have at least one year of separation, or *Trennungsjahr*. Lastly, it is important to note that this study restricted the event of remarriage to indicate only marital transition from divorce and not from widowhood. The divorced and the widowed are not likely to face the same type of social disapproval

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(Mastekaasa 1994). Since this study is theoretically interested in the attachment and removal of stigma, I decided to restrict the last event variable as the transition only from *divorced* to *married*. In so doing, this research aims at maintaining a stronger connection between its logical assumption and empirical analysis.

The resulting sample size was large enough to allow a significant scientific enquiry. From 1984 to 2012, the final data set included 1,963 cases of first marriage, 888 cases of divorce, and 515 cases of remarriage.

Happiness as Life Satisfaction

According to Haybron (2013), there are three major approaches to conceptualizing happiness. Hedonism and emotional state theory regard happiness as a *feeling*, either a sensual pleasure or a positive emotional mood. Life satisfaction theory, on the other hand, evaluates happiness in terms of overall *judgement*. Only this last approach is appropriate for measuring the long-term impact of marital transition on individual's perceived happiness.

When answering to the SOEP Individual Questionnaire, the respondents are asked to evaluate their satisfaction with life in general by a scale from 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). Diener and Diener (1996) found that most people are most of the time happy rather than emotionally neutral. This study's sample reaffirms their finding. The respondents' average life satisfaction was mildly positive (7.009). The standard deviation was rather narrow (1.824), which means even a small change can be significant in subjectivity.

Analytic Strategies

This study expects to observe an additional boost and a heightened baseline in the trajectory of happiness before and after remarriage occurs. I attempted basic analysis first, and then employed more elaborated conditions to test the robustness of the results. These analytic strategies will be explained in the following passages.

First, for testing the additional boost hypothesis, I created trajectories of average life satisfaction before and after first marriage and remarriage. Then I observed the transition effects that appear between the event ($t = 0$) and two years before it ($t = -2$). If the hypothesis is valid, the remarried should report a significantly larger transition effect than the first-married. T-test was conducted to check whether each boost of happiness was statistically significant, and more importantly, so was the differential between them.

Subsequently, I added two strict conditions to test the robustness of the result. First, I excluded from my data set those with missing values of life satisfaction during the transition phase ($t = -2 \sim 0$). By so doing, the sample now showed only the same number of individuals during the period. The second restriction was a safety distance between the events of divorce and remarriage. Lucas (2005) reported that the divorced needed five years to adapt to their new life condition. When divorce is very quickly followed by remarriage, the adaptation period of the preceding event might overlap the anticipation and transition phases of the subsequent one, which leads to an illusionary increase of SWB. By setting a safety distance, I could exclude people who had divorced between $t = -7$ (five years before the starting point of the transition phase) and $t = 0$ (the event of remarriage).

Secondly, to test the heightened baseline hypothesis, I wanted to see whether a complete adaptation takes place in cases of first marriage and remarriage. After making this basic comparison, I additionally applied the same safety distance ($t = -7 \sim 0$) to prevent the remarried from having their initial baseline happiness measured too low. Also, to protect the analysis from another potential bias, I set another safety distance *after* remarriage – in this controlled condition, I made the remarried

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exclude those who divorced again within the next four years (t = 1 ~ 4).

Empirical Results

Additional boost hypothesis

By the first hypothesis, I argued that the remarried would exhibit a greater transition and anticipation effects than the first-married, due to removal of social stigma. I measured the two effects combined by the differential of life satisfaction between the marital event (t = 0) and two years before it (t = -2).

The sample contained 1,963 cases of first marriage and 515 cases of remarriage. The (A) row in Table 1 summarizes the results of the basic analysis. The first-married reported an increase in life satisfaction by +0.237 points, while for the remarried it was +0.459, exceeding the former by +0.222 points. Not only both increments (P = 0.000) but also the differential between them (P = 0.008) were statistically significant.

Then I introduced two controls to test whether the result was robust. First, those who submitted missing values during the transition and anticipation phases (t=-2 ~ 0) were all sorted out. As a result, during that period, the number of samples was fixed to 1,648 first marriages and 444 remarriages. The outcome is displayed at the row of condition (B) of Table 1. The additional boost, which recorded +0.252 this time, did bear the control and successfully kept its statistical significance (P=0.008).

Next, I set a safety distance. Since remarriage occurs after divorce, if the adaptation period of divorce overlaps with the anticipation and transition phases of remarriage, the resulting trajectory can be biased in favor of overrated increment. Therefore, the analysis in condition (C) excluded those who divorced within the anticipation and transition periods of remarriage (t = -2 ~ 0) or during five years before the reference time point (t = -7 ~ -3). Five years is a criterion that had been reported by Lucas (2005) as the adaptation period of divorce. The differential, +0.218 points, was similar to the original.

The P value had slightly increased due to the reduction of sample size, but it nonetheless remained within the significance interval (P=0.042).

The last condition (D) employed both restrictions, the case-number and safety-distance controls. Even under this most strict restriction, the resulting differential +0.243 was confirmed to be robust (P=0.043). By all standards examined, the first hypothesis was proven relevant.

Heightened baseline hypothesis

Wherever marriage is regarded as a norm, divorce can easily be stigmatized. Remarriage is supposed to help manage the stigma. In a research of Lucas et al. (2003), Germans reported a complete adaptation for marriage, but an incomplete one for divorce. What if we divide the monolithic category of marriage into the first and non-first ones? Would the adaptation trajectory of the remarried reflect their distinct moral career and show a heightened baseline of happiness?

Figure 1 illustrates the trajectories of life satisfaction around the events of first and non-first marriage. Four years before the event (t = -4) was set as the reference time point for measuring the baseline happiness. A symmetrical trajectory of the first-married seems to reaffirm the hedonic treadmill theory, indicating that they return to the baseline happiness within two years after the event. The second to fourth rows of Table 2 exhibit how many first-married persons are found at each time point, how satisfied they are by their life, and how significantly different these life satisfaction values are when compared to that of four years ago. Quite contrarily, the remarried generated an asymmetrical trajectory, providing a strong evidence of betterment. In Table 2, the fifth to seventh rows exhibit detailed figures regarding characteristics of adaptation after remarriage.

The results stayed robust when I introduced a safety distance for the remarried. I found the initial baseline basically unchanged even after I excluded those who remarried within five years after their

divorce. The results are shown on the eighth to tenth rows of the Table 2. Setting the four years before the event as the reference time point, the P values of each year of the adaptation period (t = 1 ~ 4) passed the significance test. It means that the remarried kept enjoying a higher level of happiness.

For an elaborated analysis, I compared the gross and net results in Figure 2 and Table 3. The same length of safety distance was applied to each. To extract the net impact of remarriage, those who divorced again within the first four years of adaptation (namely, the observed section) were excluded. As one may expect, the level of basic life satisfaction has increased after the event in the net finding as well. Even though such upward movement of the baseline had been already observed in the gross finding, the net finding reconfirms the results by eliminating a potential bias.

Conclusion

In the theory and hypotheses section, this paper expected that the remarried would recover from the stigma of being divorced, which will make their perceived happiness more strongly boosted and long-lasting. The statistical results based on the SOEP longitudinal data set were highly consistent with these assumptions. The findings have several important points to consider.

First, this study catches hold of social reality more firmly by subdividing the monolithic category of marriage. As soon as we dissolve this catch-all concept, we could figure out that marital order matters to individual well-being via social context. Since family is the most basic social unit, social scientists need a better understanding of how people experience different types of marriage indeed differently.

Second, this article offers a complementary perspective to the existing empirical studies on divorce, which merely focus on the one-way influence of social stigma to individual lives. Based on

Goffman's theory and a huge empirical data set of SOEP, the current research shed light on the agency who navigates through and often overcome the social force of stigmatization.

Lastly, the socio-psychological dynamic of remarriage is a meaningful supplement to the academic debate on the hedonic treadmill theory. The theory had been widely appreciated in the field of social science since Brickman and Campbell (1971) had promoted the idea, until recently a substantial revision was proposed by a group of scholars (Diener, Lucas & Scollon 2006). Various topics were involved in the debate, including widowhood (Lucas et al. 2003), unemployment (Lucas et al. 2004), and divorce (Lucas 2005), but not remarriage. With a partial exception of Lucas (2005), where remarriage was only briefly mentioned as a moderator of adaptation after divorce, this increasing marital event has hardly been a central topic of an in-depth research until now. This study offers a convincing evidence for the importance of the life event.

Putting aside the research significance discussed above, this article also has several limitations. First, although overall a longitudinal design, this research is not entirely free from a cross-sectional characteristic, since it compares two distinct groups of the first-married and remarried. Readers might doubt whether the additional boost was really caused by a socio-psychological dynamic of stigma or in fact just a reflection of different personalities of the two groups. One potential suspect would be age effect, given that the median value of age when marriage and remarriage occur in those samples were 29 and 43 years old, respectively. However, there is no obvious reason to believe old age should lead to additional and continuous satisfaction in marital life. Others can also claim there might be self-selection effect. For instance, preexisting mental health problems may cause divorce and emotional unsettledness at the same time, the latter of which can be expressed as a radical fluctuation in one's perceived happiness. However, such suspicion is undermined if not refuted, considering the remarried in my samples showed a stable long-lasting pattern in life satisfaction. Nonetheless, these criticisms would not be completely disproven until extra scientific enquiries take place. One solution to these problems would be a more genuinely longitudinal approach to investigate the SWB trajectory of the

divorced around their *first* marriage. I could not conduct this analysis myself, however, because there were too few observable cases of first marriage of the divorced in the samples.

Second, the results of this study do not exclude other factors that are possibly working in consonance with the obliteration of stigma. Critics might insist that remarriage could also lift other unfavorable life conditions such as austerity and additional childcare burden (e.g., Johnson and Wu 2002). According to the extensive research by Berman and Turk (1981), however, interpersonal-social problems were accounted the most influential factor to overall life satisfaction, while financial concerns worked as a less crucial element. Stresses related to the children and former spouse hardly had any impacts at all, and quite amusingly, pragmatic concerns helped people to relieve distress. Nevertheless, stigmatization and these other factors are not mutually exclusive, so there might be some complementary effects.

Finally, while this research intentionally narrowed its scope to remarriage and its impact on happiness, it inevitably disregarded another important category of partnership, cohabitation. After divorce, some people may prefer a less official form of relationship to remarriage. The current research did not touch upon this point for the sake of simplicity, just as it had already excluded widowhood from its concern. Still, the changing landscape of partnership-forming is a call for more extensive further researches.

Social scientists should be concerned with social problems. The fact that remarried individuals report higher and lasting happiness does not make remarriage a satisfactory solution to stigma, because the divide between *the normal* and *the stigmatized* remains fundamentally unchanged. In other words, stigma is removed only from the individuals and not from the society at large. Furthermore, the infectious nature of social stigma poses a particular threat. Goffman posited that "the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections provides a reason why such relations tend either to be avoided or to be terminated, where existing" (Goffman 1963, 30). Although this article did not investigate intergenerational impacts of social stigma, the

family and especially the children of the divorced might also be socially excluded (Demo and Acock 1988; Green et al. 2005). Intergenerational and life course research on stigma and happiness is a promising area of enquiry for both scholars and policy makers.

Appendix: a note on the safety distance

Divorce is often betokened by the preceding marital separation. They are closely related phases of marital disruption and even treated as of a kind (e.g., Bloom et al. 1978). Formal and legal divorce is not the initial cause but an eventual outcome of the process. Thus, the individual's SWB can start to change considerably ahead of the official dissolution. Personal distress, as well as social exclusion, quickly come after the initial decision and following unofficial disunion. It could be especially the case in countries like Germany, where a certain period of separation is officially required for legal divorce.

The SWB trajectory of the separated goes well with the commonsense idea of how people would react subjectively to an unfavorable event: a negative transition effect and incomplete adaptation. In contrast, what the trajectory around divorce means is rather unclear. The pattern may reflect the effect of stigma that had already begun to form before divorce, or it may express the subjective ambivalence the divorced might feel at the final station. As Weiss put it, "the decision to divorce may also have mixed implications: not only gratification that freedom appears within grasp but also sorrow that the spouse will be irretrievably lost." (Weiss 1976, 144)

The presumption of preexisting stigma would explain why the happiness set point does not seem to change much before and after the event of divorce, while the freedom part of the ambivalence may solve the puzzle of how divorce can accompany a positive transition effect.

In this regard, studies on SWB should pay more attention to the event of separation as well as divorce. Nonetheless, in the current article, safety distance was set from divorce, not separation. This research primarily deals with German individuals who are required by law to first separate and then divorce. Therefore, emotional and social problems would have already been in effect before the point of legal divorce in most cases. This fact makes the safety distance even safer.

Table 1. Additional boost

Control	Event	Life satisfaction (SWB)					
		t = -2	n	t = 0	n	increase	P value
(A) None	first marriage (a)	7.349	1,652	7.586	1,963	+0.237	0.000
	remarriage (b)	6.804	448	7.262	515	+0.459	0.000
	differential (b-a)					+0.222	0.008
(B) Missing values	first marriage (a)	7.348	1,648	7.542	1,648	+0.194	0.000
	remarriage (b)	6.795	444	7.241	444	+0.446	0.000
	differential (b-a)					+0.252	0.008
(C) Safety distance	first marriage (a)	7.349	1,652	7.586	1,963	+0.237	0.000
	remarriage (b)	6.787	258	7.242	322	+0.455	0.003
	differential (b-a)					+0.218	0.042
(D) Both	first marriage (a)	7.348	1,648	7.542	1,648	+0.194	0.000
	remarriage (b)	6.772	254	7.209	254	+0.437	0.009
	differential (b-a)					+0.243	0.043

Table 2. Heightened baseline

Event		t = -4	t = -3	t = -2	t = -1	t = 0	t = 1	t = 2	t = 3	t = 4
First Marriage	SWB	7.273	7.283	7.349	7.430	7.586	7.424	7.324	7.318	7.330
	n	1,214	1,423	1,652	1,953	1,963	1,742	1,605	1,454	1,355
	P	ref.	0.864	0.199	0.006	0.000	0.010	0.392	0.455	0.359
remarriage	SWB	6.513	6.579	6.804	7.037	7.262	6.887	6.879	6.898	6.968
	n	347	382	448	513	515	444	397	352	313
	P	ref.	0.632	0.028	0.000	0.000	0.005	0.007	0.006	0.002
remarriage (safety distance)	SWB	6.518	6.643	6.804	7.082	7.238	6.950	6.996	6.992	7.005
	n	195	224	281	343	345	298	269	240	212
	P	ref.	0.478	0.088	0.000	0.000	0.009	0.005	0.006	0.006

Table 3. Remarriage: Gross and net findings

event		t = -4	t = -3	t = -2	t = -1	t = 0	t = 1	t = 2	t = 3	t = 4
remarriage (gross)	SWB	6.518	6.643	6.804	7.082	7.238	6.950	6.996	6.992	7.005
	n	195	224	281	343	345	298	269	240	212
	P	ref.	0.478	0.088	0.000	0.000	0.009	0.005	0.006	0.006
remarriage (net)	SWB	6.460	6.651	6.765	7.061	7.216	6.954	7.032	7.044	7.088
	n	187	215	268	327	329	280	251	225	194
	P	ref.	0.287	0.075	0.000	0.000	0.004	0.001	0.001	0.020

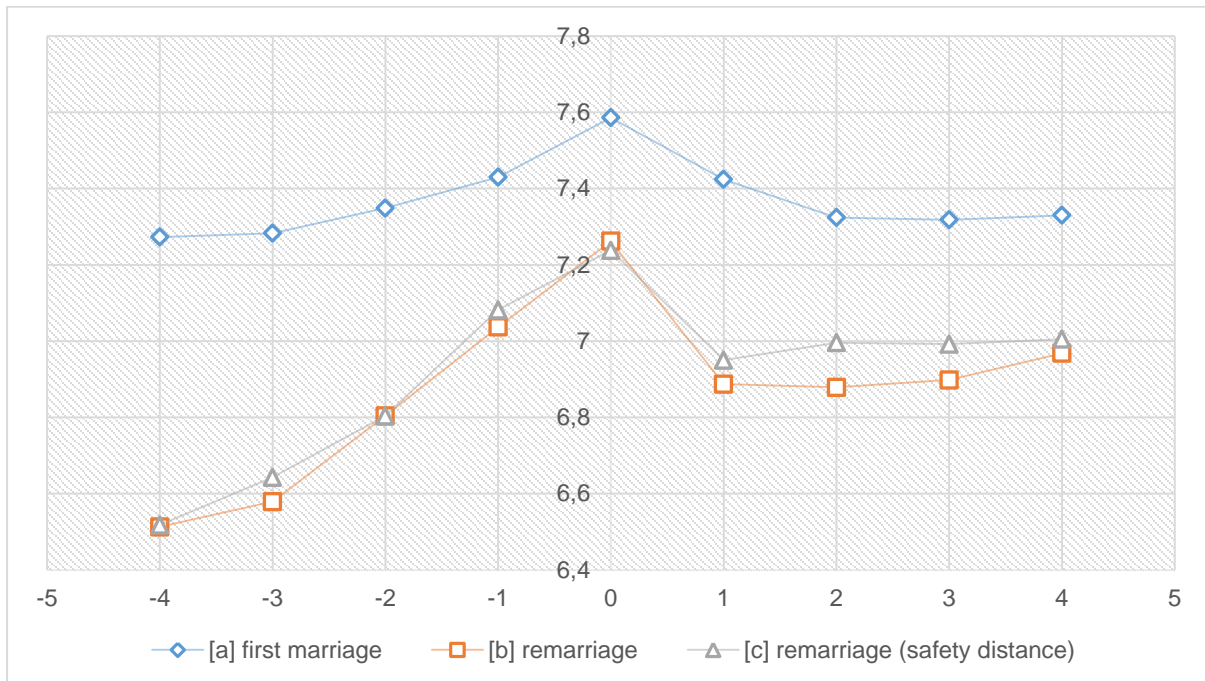Figure 1. First marriage and remarriage: SWB trajectories

Figure 2. Remarriage: Gross and net findings
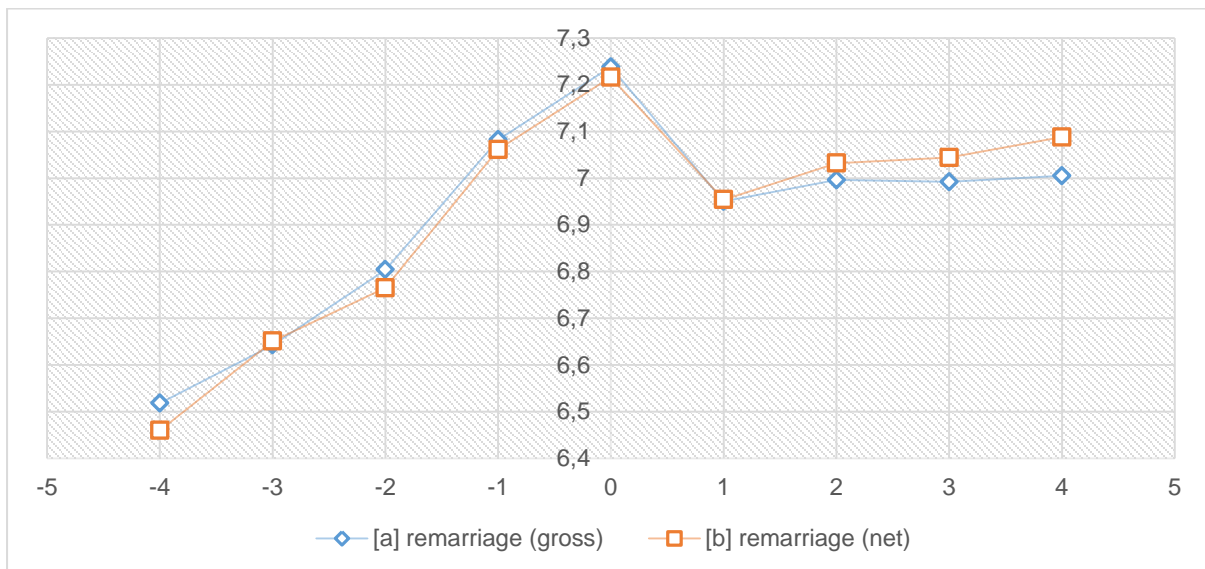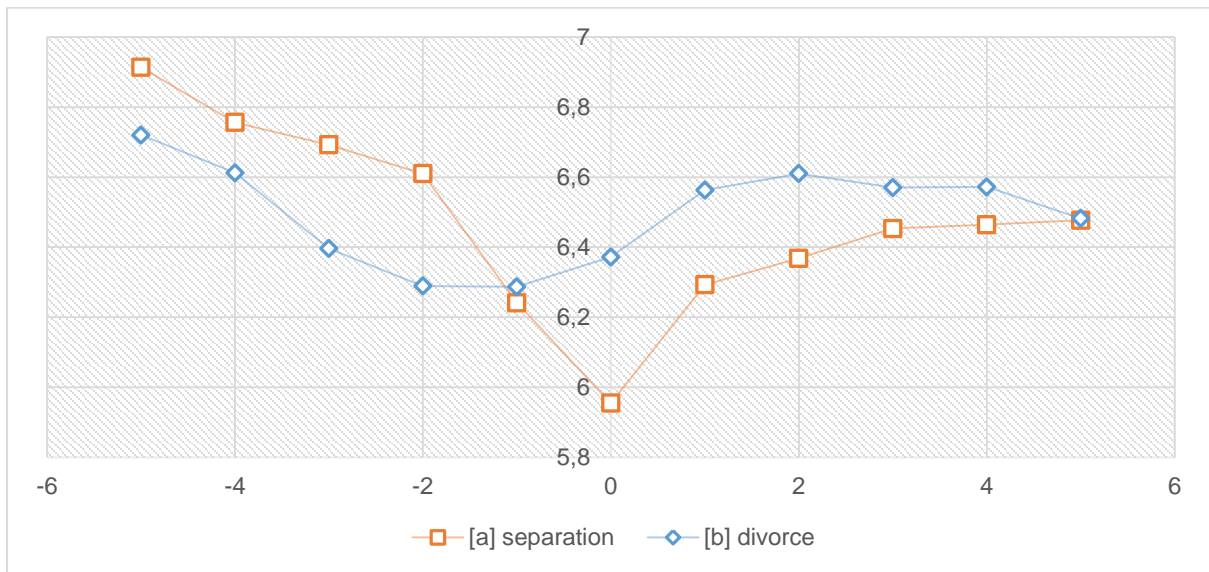
Figure 3. Separation and divorce: SWB Trajectories

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