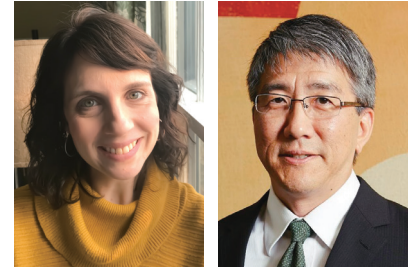


# Redistributing Happiness: How Social Policies Shape Life Satisfaction (Part 2)



Author  
Kristen Schultz Lee

Author  
Hiroshi Ono

By Kristen Schultz Lee & Hiroshi Ono

In this two-part series, we highlight the main findings from our book *Redistributing Happiness* (Praeger, 2016), with a particular focus on *how social policies shape life satisfaction*. In Part 1 ([https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/232nd\\_Special\\_Article\\_03.pdf](https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/232nd_Special_Article_03.pdf)), we focused on economic redistribution and taxation, and their effects on people's happiness. In this second article, we focus on social conceptions of gender, family and parenthood, and explore how social policies can shape family formation and fertility decisions. First, we examine what factors make married people happier than their cohabiting and single peers. We tackle the question of whether it is marriage itself that makes people happier or if it is instead something about the social norms and beliefs in a society that celebrate and support marriage and make married people happier. Then, we focus more closely on happiness in marriage. We ask what makes people happy in marriage and how this varies in two specific countries: Japan and the United States. We conclude with a discussion of policies related to family behavior, informed by our research findings.

An extensive research literature supports the popular belief that marriage makes people happier than cohabiting with a partner or being single. Marriage and family scholars argue that married people are happier; they enjoy more intimacy and they take better care of themselves because they have someone relying on them. But it's also the case that married people are happier for reasons not intrinsic to the experience of being married but rather because of the social support married people receive compared to everyone else. Married people are in part happier because many social policies have a pro-family bias and bestow greater benefits on married persons (as discussed in Part 1), and because social norms and religious beliefs uphold marriage as the preferred way to live an adult life.

We set out to investigate to what extent the benefits of marriage for well-being are largely intrinsic to marriage and universal, and to what extent they are due at least in part to the social support received by married people and therefore context-specific. This question has critical policy implications. Marriage promotion policies have been propagated in the US, particularly as part of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, based on social research that marriage makes people happier and healthier. If, instead, the well-being benefits of marriage are

rooted in the social context and the social support given to married people, then this points to different policies that are needed to promote health and well-being in the population.

To investigate this question of the role of social context in shaping the relationship between marriage and happiness, we analyzed data from 27 countries in the 2002 International Social Survey Programme's Family and Changing Gender Roles module. Details of these data and our analytic approach can be found in Part 1. We started by estimating the aggregate happiness levels of married, cohabiting, and single people in these different countries. The *Table* shows aggregate happiness by marital status across countries.

TABLE  
**Descriptive statistics by country**

Country	GDP Per Capita	Religious Climate	Gender Climate	Happiness by Marital Status		
				Single	Cohabiting	Married
Australia	42,279	0.10	-0.10	5.09	5.34	5.45
Austria	46,019	0.18	0.09	5.54	5.88	5.71
Belgium	43,430	-0.50	0.01	5.22	5.43	5.27
Brazil	8,114	1.51	0.74	5.39	5.24	5.55
Chile	9,645	1.28	0.59	5.47	5.55	5.65
Czech Republic	18,139	-1.71	0.00	5.12	5.15	5.14
Denmark	55,992	-0.92	-0.63	5.28	5.51	5.45
Finland	44,491	0.14	-0.25	4.86	5.41	5.35
France	41,051	-0.88	-0.22	5.08	5.34	5.42
Germany (East)	40,873	-1.15	-0.71	5.15	5.34	5.26
Germany (West)	40,873	-1.15	-0.18	4.92	5.05	5.17
Hungary	12,868	-0.56	0.38	5.03	5.20	5.28
Latvia	11,616	-0.17	0.16	4.86	4.71	5.03
Mexico	8,000	1.71	0.50	5.57	5.20	5.63
Netherlands	47,917	-0.83	-0.15	5.22	5.36	5.41
New Zealand	29,000	0.01	-0.07	5.40	5.57	5.57
Norway	79,089	-0.58	-0.45	5.25	5.41	5.41
Philippines	1,745	2.00	0.16	5.27	4.57	5.48
Poland	11,273	1.45	0.07	4.86	5.29	5.15
Portugal	21,414	0.94	0.35	5.15	5.12	5.39
Russia	8,676	-0.36	0.27	4.88	5.09	5.12
Slovakia	16,176	0.48	0.18	4.90	4.68	5.02
Spain	31,774	-0.40	-0.03	5.28	5.29	5.37
Sweden	43,654	0.11	-0.51	5.15	5.33	5.37
Switzerland	63,629	-1.18	0.06	5.43	5.55	5.67
Taiwan	16,400	-0.08	-0.05	5.19	4.86	5.24
UK	35,165	0.31	-0.20	5.21	5.50	5.60
US	46,436	1.50	-0.24	5.46	5.53	5.70

Source: *Redistributing Happiness: How Social Policies Shape Life Satisfaction* by Hiroshi Ono and Kristen Schultz Lee (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016) and Lee and Ono, "Marriage, Cohabitation and Happiness: A Cross-National Analysis of 27 Countries", *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74 (2012)

Although married people reported higher happiness levels than singles in all countries, married people were not on average happier than cohabiters in every country. Indeed, cohabiting people reported greater happiness than their married counterparts in countries like Austria and Belgium but reported considerably lower levels of happiness than married people in other countries like Taiwan and Mexico. This evidence of variation in the happiness gap between married and cohabiting individuals across countries was our first piece of evidence that the marriage premium in happiness is in fact context-specific and not universal. Based on this initial descriptive finding, we set out to uncover what characteristics of the social context could help explain this cross-national variation in marriage and happiness.

### Descriptive Statistics by Country

As seen in the [Table](#), we focused our attention on economic development, societal beliefs about gender, and religious beliefs as reflections of the different social, economic and institutional contexts for marriage. We hypothesized that, due to the support for marriage found in many religious faiths, married people in more religious societies would report a greater happiness premium than married people in more secular societies, in comparison to single and cohabiting people. Similarly, traditional beliefs about gender are based on traditional marriage and the beliefs that men and women should perform specialized roles to create interdependency in marriage, with one spouse specializing in work and the other on the household and family. We therefore hypothesized that married people would report a greater happiness premium in societies with more traditional beliefs about gender than in more gender egalitarian societies. Gross Domestic Product was included as a country-level control for

economic development in all of our analyses.

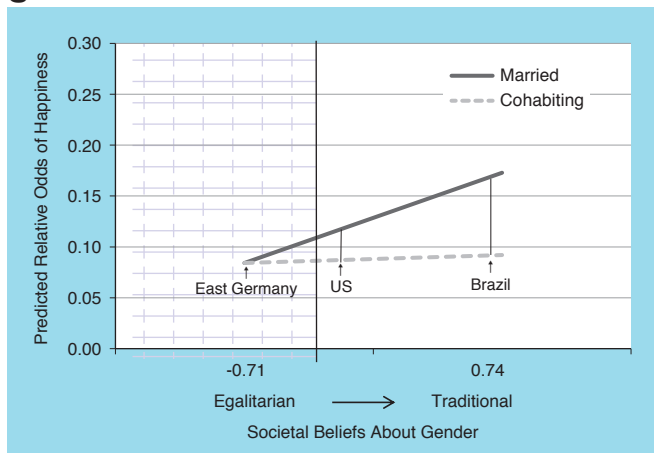
Our results provide support for the hypothesis that the association between marriage and happiness varies based on the societal religious and gender context. Due to the different experiences of men and women in marriage, we analyzed men and women's happiness in different relationship statuses separately. For men, marriage is associated with greater happiness regardless of levels of societal religiosity or gender egalitarianism. For women, the relationship between marriage and happiness varies depending on the social context. In societies with more traditional beliefs about gender, the happiness gap between married and cohabiting women is much greater than in societies with more egalitarian gender beliefs. [Chart 1](#) illustrates how the happiness gap between married and cohabiting women increases in increasingly gender conservative societies. In the most egalitarian gender contexts (the cross-hatch area of the graph), there is no measurable difference in the reported happiness of married and cohabiting women.

Similarly, the difference between married and cohabiting women's happiness varies as a function of the societal religious context. [Chart 2](#) illustrates the widening happiness gap between married and cohabiting women in increasingly religious societies. Again, in the most secular countries (those countries falling in the cross-hatch region of the graph), no measurable difference in the happiness of married and cohabiting women was found.

Together these results support the hypothesis that the relationship between marriage and happiness varies depending on the social context for women. For men, marriage is associated with greater happiness than cohabitation regardless of social contexts. But why is there this difference between men and women, with women's happiness more closely tied to the social context? We argue that women are more harshly judged when violating the religious and

CHART 1

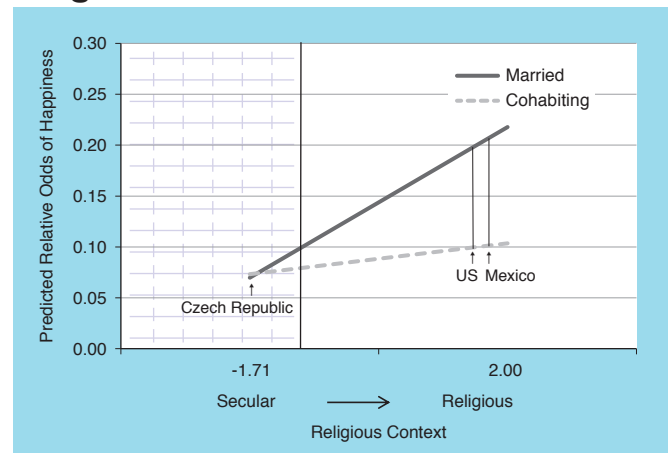
### Predicted happiness for married & cohabiting women as a function of gender context



Note: The cross-hatched area of the graph indicates a non-significant happiness gap.  
Source: *Redistributing Happiness: How Social Policies Shape Life Satisfaction* by Hiroshi Ono and Kristen Schultz Lee (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016) and Lee and Ono, "Marriage, Cohabitation and Happiness: A Cross-National Analysis of 27 Countries", *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74 (2012)

CHART 2

### Predicted happiness for married & cohabiting women as a function of religion context



Note: The cross-hatched area of the graph indicates a non-significant happiness gap.  
Source: *Redistributing Happiness: How Social Policies Shape Life Satisfaction* by Hiroshi Ono and Kristen Schultz Lee (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016) and Lee and Ono, "Marriage, Cohabitation and Happiness: A Cross-National Analysis of 27 Countries", *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74 (2012)

gender norms in a society and perhaps better rewarded when conforming to these norms. Men may be given more leeway in violating societal religious beliefs and non-marital cohabitation may not even be viewed as a violation of traditional masculinity in many countries.

Based on these results, we conclude that the happiness benefits of marriage are due in large part to the social support given to married couples in some contexts, rather than being intrinsic to the marital bond and being universal. We also found that women’s happiness is lower when they have dependent children in the home whereas men’s happiness is not affected. We conclude that marriage in and of itself does not cause people to become happier. Instead, marriage has different meanings and benefits associated with it in different countries.

### Marital Happiness in Japan & the US

In other research, we focus our analytical lens on what makes men and women happier (and less happy) in marriage in just two countries: Japan and the US. We were again interested in investigating gender differences in marriage, building off the same themes in the first analysis, in countries with different life course patterns and norms surrounding work and family life. This comparative analysis provided us with the leverage to more precisely analyze what features of the social and institutional context are associated with greater (and lower) happiness among men and women in marriage.

Compared to women in the US, Japanese women marry later, are less likely to cohabit before marriage, and are also less likely to divorce. Although Japanese women’s labor force patterns have changed dramatically across the 20th and into the 21st centuries, Japanese women have a high likelihood of exiting the labor force after becoming mothers. Japanese women are also more likely to perform the majority of unpaid household labor compared to their Western counterparts. According to 2016 OECD statistics, Japanese men spent just 41 minutes per day on housework, compared to Japanese women’s 224 minutes.

Structural factors underlie these differences in women’s life course patterns in the two countries. Japanese taxation policy implicitly discourages married women from seeking full-time employment. Although this policy has changed over time, if a spouse earns under a threshold amount, their income is tax exempt and they can be claimed as a dependent, providing an incentive for women (who on average earn less than their husbands) to restrict their labor force earnings. Some Japanese employers also give their regular employees allowances for dependents that are reduced or eliminated if the spouse is employed. These distortions both underlie and reflect implicit gender beliefs in Japan that are more supportive of a gendered division of labor than in the US. In other words, there is more support for the belief that men should work outside of the home and women should care for the family than in the US. Some scholars have argued that the role of housewife is both more professionalized and associated with greater power due to the wife’s customary

control of the household budget in Japan compared to in the US. This may in part explain the relatively greater support for this domestic role for women in Japan.

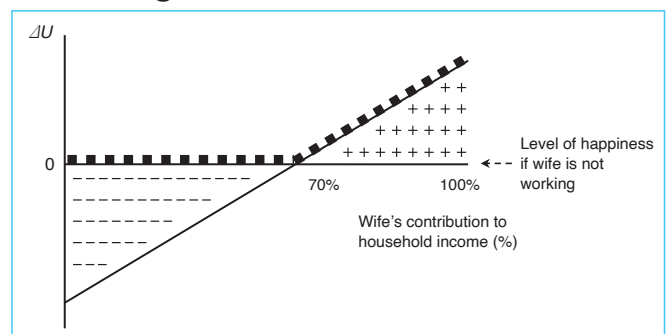
For this project, we analyzed data from the 2000, 2002 and 2004 General Social Survey in the US, and the 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 Japanese General Social Survey (JGSS). We again estimated separate models for men and women and analyzed marital happiness. What we found was surprising.

In the US, men and women report being equally happy in marriage but, in Japan, women are less happy in their marriages than men. American women’s marital happiness is less tied to their husband’s income than is Japanese women’s happiness. Instead, American women and Japanese men report greater marital happiness associated with their own income. What is surprising is that by default, American men report greater marital happiness when their wife is not working, with the one exception being when the wife is contributing a great deal to the household budget. *Chart 3* shows that for American men, their wives have to earn at least 70% of the household income for men to report greater happiness than when their wives are not working outside the home.

These findings point to competing values rooted in the social structure, what some have called sociological ambivalence. Americans are generally more supportive of gender equality but, at the individual level, men still report greater marital happiness when their wives are not working or when their wives are earning a lot of money. Japanese women report greater happiness in marriage when their husband earns more and they are not working themselves. And Japanese men report greater marital happiness when they themselves earn money, independent of their spouse (similar to American women). And yet, despite Japanese women’s endorsement of specialized roles in marriage, they report lower levels of happiness in their marriages than do their husbands.

Perhaps these findings reflect the uneven pace of change in Japan and the US: different groups within a society may change their beliefs at different rates. This may help explain why American women are

CHART 3  
**Relationship between wife’s contribution to household income & men’s happiness in marriage in the US**



Source: *Redistributing Happiness: How Social Policies Shape Life Satisfaction* by Hiroshi Ono and Kristen Schultz Lee (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016) and Lee and Ono, "Specialization and Happiness in Marriage: A U.S.-Japan Comparison", *Social Science Research* 37 (2008)

happier in marriage when they earn higher incomes and contribute to their families financially while American men are divided: some are happier in marriage when their wives are specialized in domestic labor while others are happiest when they are economically dependent on their wives. Similarly, this might explain why Japanese women report greater happiness in marriage when economically dependent on their spouses and yet report lower levels of marital happiness overall compared to men. Over time, as social structures adapt to changing beliefs about gender and changes in family roles, we would expect some of these seeming disjunctures to disappear. One finding that cut across social contexts, however, was that the presence of children in the household was associated with lower levels of marital happiness, particularly for women.

### Social Policies & Life Satisfaction

Our research points to particular policies that target family formation and childbearing. First, we return to the question of the efficacy of marriage promotion programs. As we mentioned earlier, some countries (notably the US) have invested federal dollars in programs to promote marriage based on the understanding that marriage makes everyone better off. However, we add to the critiques voiced by other family scholars who have questioned both the effectiveness of marriage promotion programs in encouraging marriage and in improving child well-being. To those critiques, we add our finding that it is not something intrinsic to marriage and therefore universal that makes married people happier. Instead, it is the support received by married people, and the stigma faced by those who are not married, in certain social contexts marked by essentialist beliefs about gender and strong religious beliefs that explain the marriage premium in happiness. This finding suggests that it is not marriage promotion that we need but rather greater economic and social support for families who are not married to narrow the gap in happiness by marital status. Specifically, programs that boost the well-being of single parent and cohabiting families, as well as policies and programs that provide poor families with access to education, jobs, mental healthcare and other key resources would make children and parents happier overall.

Our research on parenthood and happiness also offers some guidance to governments concerned about fertility decline. Many existing policies to address fertility decline attempt to offset the rising costs of childrearing by providing couples with baby bonuses and paid childcare leave. But there is no strong evidence that these policies are associated with a higher fertility rate. We argue that, in addition to considering the rising costs of children as driving fertility decline, we should also consider the link between ideology, happiness and childbearing. We showed that children are associated with lower levels of happiness for women cross-nationally, except in the social democratic welfare states of Scandinavia where the state provides generous institutional support (see Part 1). We argue that this is because women perform the majority of the unpaid, time-inflexible family labor associated with childbearing. As sociologists, we are interested in identifying the structural pressures associated with

mothers' unhappiness around the world.

Social policies that reduce work-family conflict and make the household division of labor more gender equitable could make parenthood more desirable for women. However, parental leave policies (over six months) have been shown to exacerbate rather than reduce gender inequality in parenting. Instead, paternal leave policies could give couples a chance to establish a more equal division of household labor early in the child's life and potentially contribute to change in cultural conceptions of men's involvement in childrearing and housework. In addition to paternal leave, policies or collective agreements to reduce the maximum work week could reduce work-family conflict and make men in particular more available for household labor. Indeed, as we discussed in Part 1, the policies of the social democratic welfare states, including paternal leave policies and subsidized childcare, give parents greater flexibility in balancing work and family. As our research shows, the negative effect of children on happiness disappears in the countries with high levels of public spending. This is particularly relevant for Japan. As the country invests in building a social infrastructure to overcome super-low fertility, removing the negative effect of children on happiness will be effective in providing incentives for women to have more children.

What about our finding that Japanese women are happier in marriage when they have a more specialized division of labor? It is important to note that we also found Japanese women are less happy in marriage overall compared to men and that their marital happiness was further diminished by the presence of children in the home. Other scholars have argued that Japanese women are experiencing ambivalence rooted in a desire for equality and the structural barriers preventing them from achieving it. In response to this ambivalence, Japanese women are postponing marriage and fertility or forgoing it altogether. Policies targeting the gendered division of labor and work-family conflict have the potential to make families happier and therefore encourage family formation and childbearing. These policies also have the potential to change cultural conceptions about who is most suited to care for young children and what kind of balance between work and family is appropriate.

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**JS**

Kristen Schultz Lee, Ph.D. is associate professor of Sociology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.

Hiroshi Ono, Ph.D. is professor of Human Resources Management at Hitotsubashi University Business School and affiliated professor of Sociology at Texas A&M University.