

Married...With Children: The Science of Well-Being in Marriage and Family Life

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Abstract:

As some of the most important relationships in people's lives, marriage and parenthood offer many opportunities for people to experience great joy or to suffer incredible disappointment. In the current chapter, I review current understanding of whether, how, and why marriage and parenthood are associated with well-being, drawing on evidence from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and daily experience studies. I also consider the implications of family structure for the associations between marriage and well-being, and parenthood and well-being, respectively. Current evidence provides relatively robust support for the association between marriage and well-being; however, the association between parenthood is much more complex. I conclude with a number of suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Family, Marriage, Parenthood, Well-Being, Happiness

For many people, getting married and having children represent the ideals of the American dream. Indeed, family relationships are some of the most important aspects of people's lives, influencing their day-to-day experiences, decisions, and broad evaluations of their lives (Gerson, Berman, & Morris, 1991). Not surprisingly, these relationships hold important implications for people's overall happiness and well-being (Nelson, Kushlev, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Saphire-Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). Drawing on literature from psychology, economics, and sociology, this chapter focuses on how marriage and parenthood are associated with happiness and well-being, along with the psychological factors that magnify and minimize the happiness gained from these relationships.

What is Happiness?

The most common scientific approach to defining happiness (also referred to as subjective well-being) includes cognitive (high life satisfaction) and affective (frequent positive emotions and infrequent negative emotions) components (Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). According to this definition, happy people evaluate their lives positively overall (i.e., high life satisfaction), and they experience frequent positive emotions (e.g., love, joy, contentment) and infrequent negative emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, sadness). Other researchers distinguish happiness from meaning in life, which is theorized to include three components—coherence (i.e., the evaluation that life makes sense), significance (i.e., belief in one's value, worth, and importance), and purpose (i.e., feeling that one has important goals and life direction; King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Despite these distinctions, however, happiness and meaning in life are highly correlated (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Many studies also examine how family life is related to symptoms of psychological illnesses, such as anxiety or depression. In the current chapter, I focus primarily on studies that measure subjective well-being or one of its components (life satisfaction, positive emotions, or negative emotions) and meaning in life as they relate to family; however, I also draw on studies measuring symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly when the well-being literature is sparse. I use the terms happiness and subjective well-being interchangeably but refer to specific constructs when discussing findings of individual studies.

Methodological Approaches to Studying Family and Well-Being

Studies of family relationships are remarkably interdisciplinary, drawing on multiple areas within psychology (e.g., developmental psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology), as well as economics and sociology. Moreover, because marriage and parenthood cannot be randomly assigned, drawing causal conclusions about their effects on well-being is difficult. In the absence of experimental approaches, three primary methodologies have been used to investigate the links between family and well-being—each with their own strengths and limitations.

Cross-Sectional Studies

First, research has investigated whether marriage and parenthood are associated with well-being by employing cross-sectional designs comparing the well-being of married participants with unmarried participants (e.g., Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000), or parents with nonparents (e.g., Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; McLanahan & Adams, 1989; Umberson & Gove, 1989). These studies often rely on large, nationally representative surveys, thus avoiding potential sampling biases. In addition, these datasets often include respondents from young adulthood to very old age and provide in-depth demographic information on each respondent. These features allow researchers to thoroughly investigate the associations between family relationships and well-being across the lifespan and in light of a variety of demographic factors (e.g., gender).

Despite these strengths, studies relying on cross-sectional designs should be interpreted in light of a few limitations. Most notably, these studies cannot determine whether getting married or having children causes changes in well-being. Indeed, some evidence suggests that happiness precedes both getting married and having children (Kim & Hicks, 2016; Luhmann, Lucas, Eid, & Diener, 2013; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Cetre, Clark, & Senik, 2016). In an effort to address this limitation and determine whether marriage and parenthood cause changes in well-being, some studies include many demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, income) as covariates in their analyses (e.g., Bhargava, Kassam & Loewenstein, 2014); however, few studies include similar covariates in their analyses, making it difficult to compare across studies, and causality is still impossible to determine in the absence of random assignment or time separation among variables. A more informative approach may be to examine these covariates as moderating variables that may alter the links between marriage or parenthood and well-being, respectively (for a full discussion of this issue as it relates to parenthood and well-being see Nelson, Kushlev, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Nelson, Kushlev, & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Longitudinal Studies

Second, studies have examined whether well-being changes before and after getting married or having children using longitudinal designs (for a meta-analysis, see Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). By relying on a within-person approach, these studies partially address selection biases (that happy people are more likely to get married and have children; Cetre et al., 2016; Kim & Hicks, 2016; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In addition, like the cross-sectional studies described above, many longitudinal studies examining the transition to marriage or parenthood rely on large, nationally representative samples (e.g., Dyrda & Lucas, 2013; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003).

These longitudinal studies are primarily limited by the timing of well-being assessments surrounding marriage and childbirth. A recent meta-analysis of the transition to parenthood, for example, revealed that the average timing of baseline well-being measurement was just 2 months prior to childbirth (Luhmann et al., 2012)—a time likely filled with excitement, anticipation, and celebration in preparation for a new child. Given evidence that well-being begins to change prior to experiencing major life events (Luhmann et al., 2012), these studies should be interpreted in light of when baseline well-being was measured. Furthermore, many couples have children within a few years of getting married (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008), and marriage itself is associated with a boost in happiness that typically lasts for 2 years (Lucas et al., 2003). Thus, changes in happiness in response to childbirth ought to be interpreted in the context of responses to other life events, such as marriage.

Daily Experience Studies

Finally, studies have investigated the links between family and well-being using methods to capture individuals' daily experiences—namely, by employing experience sampling methodology (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007), the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004), and other daily diary procedures (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). In these studies, participants typically provide information about their daily activities and emotions, either in real-time (experience sampling), at the end of the day (daily diary), or the following day (Day Reconstruction Method). Using these approaches, studies could compare the daily experiences of married with unmarried participants, or parents with nonparents (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013, Study 2). Alternatively, some studies

focus on within-person comparisons—for example, by contrasting parents’ emotions during caregiving relative to their other daily activities (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013, Study 3; Nelson-Coffey, Borelli, & River, 2017), or by examining how daily behaviors (e.g., daily sacrifice) are related to relationship satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Thus, one benefit of this methodological approach is its flexibility to address a variety of research questions. In addition, daily experience studies can capture people’s feelings while they are spending time with their spouse or children (in contrast to reports of global well-being, which may reflect feelings during other moments of the day). Finally, because these studies typically rely on in-the-moment reports of emotion, they may be less susceptible to response biases.

Notably, however, daily experience studies also have their limitations. Like the other methodological approaches discussed above, these studies do not provide information about the causal influence of getting married or having children on well-being. In addition, because these studies typically capture reports of momentary emotions, they do not provide insight into how marriage and parenthood are related to global well-being; however, evidence suggests that emotions—especially positive emotions—are important predictors of global well-being (Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008). Finally, daily experience studies may provide a limited portrait of marriage and parenthood, dependent on the type of activity or other influences on people’s days.

Summary

In sum, a variety of methodological approaches have been implemented to better understand how family relationships—namely marriage and parenthood—are related to well-being. One of the great challenges in this line of work involves the desire to understand whether these relationships cause people to be happier. Although social scientists may not be able to directly answer the question of causality, they can draw on the methodological approaches described here to understand whether married people and parents are happier than unmarried people and nonparents, respectively, in a randomly selected group of people (cross-sectional studies); whether people become happier after getting married and having children, and for how long (longitudinal studies); and how marriage and parenthood are related to the emotions felt in daily life (daily experience studies). Furthermore, the strongest evidence supporting links between marriage or parenthood and well-being draws on multiple methodologies and demonstrates replicability. In the remainder of this chapter, I review the current literature on family relationships and happiness, turning first to the links between marriage and happiness and next to parenthood and happiness. In this review, I note areas of consensus and contradiction in the research findings and offer suggestions for future research.

Marriage

Is Marriage Associated with Happiness?

The majority of the evidence investigating the claim that marriage is associated with happiness comes from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies examining objective marital status and well-being. Cross-sectional studies indicate that married people tend to be happier than unmarried people (Coombs, 1991; Diener et al., 2000; Easterlin, 2003; Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun, & Witter, 1985; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Lee & Ono, 2012; Myers, 2000; Williams, 2003; Wood, Rhodes, & Whelan, 1989). These findings are robust and consistent across studies and cultures (Diener et al., 2000; Haring-Hidore et al., 1985; Lee & Ono, 2012). In one study, for example, the association between marriage and subjective well-being was examined in 42 nations. Across countries, married participants reported greater life satisfaction and positive emotions and lower levels of negative emotions, relative to both cohabiting and divorced participants (Diener et al., 2000). Additionally, in a meta-analysis of this literature, married respondents reported significantly higher levels of subjective well-being than unmarried respondents (average $r = .14$; Haring-Hidore et al., 1985).

An important consideration in evaluating cross-sectional studies examining the association between marriage and happiness is whether changes in happiness precede marriage. Evidence suggests that happy people have rich and satisfying social relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002), which may increase their likelihood of getting married. In one classic study on this topic, women’s positive emotional expression in their college yearbook photographs was associated with greater likelihood of being married at age 27 and greater marital satisfaction at age 52 (Harker & Keltner, 2001). Another study found that life satisfaction significantly predicted the likelihood of getting married within 5 years (Luhmann et al., 2013). Thus, the findings from cross-sectional studies may be partially explained by the fact that happier people are more likely to get married.

One way to address these selection biases is to examine whether and how happiness changes before and after getting married with longitudinal designs. Longitudinal research also suggests that getting married is associated with a boost in happiness, which diminishes over time. In one study drawing from the German

Socioeconomic Panel, people reported their life satisfaction and a variety of demographic information annually for 15 years. Researchers were then able to track changes in respondents' life satisfaction after getting married. This study found that people reported an increase in life satisfaction the year they got married, which was followed by a return to their pre-marriage baseline happiness within 2 years (Lucas et al., 2003). In addition, a meta-analysis of this literature found that cognitive well-being (life satisfaction), but not affective well-being (positive and negative emotions), increased after marriage, followed by a subsequent decline (Luhmann et al., 2012). Thus, existing longitudinal evidence suggests that, on average, getting married is associated with a boost in well-being, which typically dissipates by a couple's second anniversary.

Another approach to understanding whether and how marriage is related to well-being is to consider how relationship quality predicts happiness, over and above objective marital status. These studies suggest that the quality of marriage is a more important predictor of happiness than simply being married. One study on this topic found that people who were in the happiest relationships—whether those were marriages, cohabiting, or dating relationships—reported the highest levels of subjective well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Another study examined how changes in marital status and marital quality were related to changes in life satisfaction and symptoms of depression over 5 years. In this study, low marital quality (as indicated by high levels of marital stress and low levels of marital harmony) predicted decreases in life satisfaction and increases in depressive symptoms. In addition, this study found that people who remained in unhappy marriages reported lower levels of well-being than those who remained unmarried (Williams, 2003). Furthermore, in an examination of changes in marital quality and happiness over the life course, participants with the highest marital satisfaction also reported high levels of happiness over the course of 20 years (Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008). Thus, extant evidence—drawing on both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs—suggests that the quality of a person's relationship is an important predictor of well-being, perhaps more important than objective marital status. Indeed, a meta-analysis of 93 studies found that marital quality was significantly associated with well-being (average $r = .37$ for cross-sectional studies and average $r = .25$ for longitudinal studies; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007).

Individual differences. Marriage may be associated with greater well-being for some people than it is for others. Indeed, a number of demographic and psychological factors moderate the association between marriage and happiness. Although a full discussion of the many individual differences in the association between marriage and happiness is outside the scope of this chapter, below I consider two factors—gender and attachment style—that are important predictors of the association between marriage and happiness.

Gender. Some evidence suggests that the link between marriage and subjective well-being differs for men and women. In cross-sectional studies investigating the link between relationship status and well-being, marriage was more strongly associated with well-being for men than for women (Coombs, 1991; Haring-Hidore et al., 1985). Similarly, in one longitudinal study investigating gender differences in reactions to divorce, men experienced a greater drop in well-being following divorce than did women (Lucas, 2005). Notably, however, a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies examining reactions to getting married (rather than divorced) did not find any gender differences in reactions to marriage (Luhmann et al., 2012). One explanation for these gender differences suggests that men benefit more from the social support they receive from their spouses, whereas women—who tend to have stronger social ties outside of marriage—do not rely as heavily on social support from their spouse (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Coombs, 1991; Gurung, Taylor, & Seeman, 2003).

Conversely, other studies have examined gender differences in the association between marriage and well-being by focusing on relationship quality rather than relationship status. In these studies, relationship quality tends to be more strongly associated with happiness for women than for men (Proulx et al., 2007; Saphire-Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). For example, in one study of older married couples, perceptions of social support from one's spouse was more strongly associated with greater marital satisfaction and well-being among women than men (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). Together, this evidence suggests that marriage is differentially associated with well-being for men and women. For men, simply being married seems to be sufficient to improve well-being; for women, however, being in a high quality marriage is associated with greater well-being.

Attachment. Attachment style is thought to develop based on individuals' early experiences receiving care from attachment figures (e.g., their parents) and shapes people's feelings, beliefs, and expectations about relationships across the lifespan (i.e., internal working models; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment styles are commonly measured along dimensions of anxiety and avoidance, with secure attachment characterized by low levels of both anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment avoidance is characterized by distrust of relationship partners along with a desire for independence; attachment anxiety is characterized by fear of rejection and desire for extreme intimacy; and

finally, secure attachment is characterized by trust, comfort, and ease in close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2016).

Investigations of attachment style and subjective well-being suggest that, relative to those with insecure attachment orientations (i.e., high attachment anxiety or high attachment avoidance), individuals with secure attachments experience greater subjective well-being overall and within their close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013). For example, in one study, wives high in attachment anxiety and avoidance expressed fewer positive emotions after reuniting with their husbands following an extended separation (Medway, Davis, Cafferty, Chappell, & O'Hearn, 1995). Similarly, another study found that people high in attachment avoidance expressed fewer positive emotions when discussing positive aspects of their relationship with their partner (Tucker & Anders, 1998). Finally, in a daily experience study of attachment, relationship behaviors, and gratitude, people with secure attachments reported more gratitude in response to their partner's positive behaviors, whereas people high in attachment avoidance reported less gratitude in response to their partner's positive behaviors (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006). Although this work does not directly test whether attachment style moderates the association between marriage and happiness, it suggests that individuals with secure attachment styles would experience the greatest happiness in response to marriage.

Why is Marriage Associated with Happiness?

Why is marriage associated with happiness? The bulk of research addressing this question focuses on the importance of relationships, and processes within those relationships, for happiness more generally, rather than the specific importance of marriage. From this perspective, theory suggests that human beings have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and to feel connected to others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, marriage—especially highly satisfying marriages—may offer people opportunities to feel that they belong and that they are connected to others. In addition, a large body of research suggests that social support is beneficial for both physical health and subjective well-being (Cohen, 2004; Siedlecki, Salthouse, Oishi, & Jeswani, 2014). Indeed, receiving adequate support from one's spouse is associated with greater life satisfaction (Wan, Jaccard, & Ramey, 1996), as well as reduced depressive symptoms and perceived stress (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990; Brown, Andrews, Harris, Adler, & Bridge, 1986; Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001).

To my knowledge, an integrated model explaining the association between marriage and happiness does not exist. Drawing on the substantial body of research demonstrating that relationships are beneficial for happiness, future researchers may wish to integrate this literature to develop a unifying theory explaining the links between marriage and happiness. Notably, such a model would help distinguish the extent to which marriage is associated with happiness due to selection effects (e.g., Luhmann et al., 2013), along with psychological processes beneficial to well-being after marriage, such as feelings of connectedness, social support, and others.

Family Structure and Changing Societal Norms

Notably, the majority of past research examining the association between marriage and happiness focused on comparing legally married, opposite-sex couples with those who were never married, divorced/separated, or cohabiting, with variations in comparison groups across studies. Understanding these distinctions is important, given rising rates of cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010) and the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Cohabitation. In general, studies offer consistent evidence that being married is associated with benefits to well-being in comparison with those who have never been married (Easterlin, 2003; Lee & Ono, 2012; Myers, 2000; Williams, 2003), those who were divorced or separated (Diener et al., 2000; Myers, 2000; Williams, 2003) or those who were widowed (Haring-Hidore et al., 1985; Williams, 2003). The evidence comparing marriage with cohabitation, however, is mixed. Some studies found that marriage was associated with greater happiness relative to cohabitation (Diener et al., 2000; Lee & Ono, 2012), whereas others found no difference in happiness levels of married and cohabiting individuals (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Furthermore, cross-cultural evidence suggests that marriage is associated with a larger boost in happiness relative to cohabitation in cultures with stronger religious and social norms against cohabitation (Lee & Ono, 2012; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). In addition, a 1985 meta-analysis of the link between marriage and well-being found smaller effect sizes among more recent studies (Haring-Hidore et al., 1985)—a time also marked by increasing favorability towards cohabitation (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). To my knowledge, a more recent meta-analysis of the association between relationship status and well-being has not been conducted. An updated meta-analysis including studies from the last 30 years is warranted to determine if effect sizes have continued to shrink.

Other research has examined how cohabitation prior to marriage is related to relationship quality

and stability after marriage. Early evidence suggested that premarital cohabitation was associated with lower marital quality and increased risk of divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Schoen, 1992; Thomson & Colella, 1992), but more recent work has suggested that this “cohabitation gap” is moderated in part by social context (e.g., gender climate and religious context; Lee & Ono, 2012; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Stavrova, Fetchenhauer, & Schlosser, 2012; Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). For example, in one study of 30 European countries, the cohabitation gap was larger in countries that were less accepting of cohabitation (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). Additionally, another study found that women who cohabited only once prior to marriage (with their eventual spouse) did not demonstrate increased risk of divorce (Teachman, 2003), further pointing to inconsistency in the association between cohabitation and marital satisfaction.

Three explanations have been offered to clarify why cohabiters may be less happy and less satisfied in their relationships. First, studies finding that the size of the cohabitation gap depends in part on societal norms for cohabitation, gender, and religion (Lee & Ono, 2012; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Stavrova et al., 2012; Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015) suggest that people may be less happy due to their violation of these social norms. Second, people who choose to cohabit prior to marriage may be unique in ways that undermine their happiness and relationship satisfaction. For example, cohabiters may have relatively less favorable attitudes towards marriage and more favorable attitudes towards divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992), which may increase their likelihood of divorce. Third, the experience of cohabiting may alter people’s attitudes in ways that undermine marital quality. One study found that people were more accepting of divorce after cohabiting than they were prior to cohabiting (Axinn & Thornton, 1992), which in turn predicts declines in relationship quality (Amato & Rogers, 1999). Ultimately, research has supported each of these three possibilities, suggesting that they are not mutually exclusive.

Same-sex marriage and partnerships. Same-sex marriages are legally recognized in 23 countries worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2015). Notably, however, the majority of research on romantic relationships (marriage or otherwise) and well-being focus on opposite-sex partnerships. Evidence suggests that the factors that predict relationship quality in same-sex couples are the same as those that predict relationship quality in opposite-sex couples (e.g., trust, communication, conflict-resolution styles; Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Kurdek, 2005). In addition, one study compared lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples on five domains expected to be indicative of relationship health: psychological adjustment (including life satisfaction), personality traits, relationship styles, conflict resolution, and social support. This study found no difference in reported life satisfaction between same-sex and opposite sex couples and that the only area in which same-sex couples fared worse than opposite-sex couples was in the amount of support they received for their relationships from others (Kurdek, 2004). More research incorporating same-sex couples in understanding the links between relationship status, relationship quality, and well-being is needed.

Summary

In sum, married people tend to be happier than single, divorced/separated, and widowed individuals, with the most consistent evidence from cross-sectional studies of opposite-sex couples. Longitudinal research suggests that getting married is associated with a boost in happiness that diminishes over time. Furthermore, despite these overarching trends in the association between marriage and happiness, little work has explained why marriage is associated with happiness.

Parenthood

Is Parenthood Associated with Happiness?

Is parenthood associated with happiness? This simple question assumes that there is a simple answer—parents are either happy or not. Notably, however, parenthood is a complex and dynamic role, involving multiple people (e.g., co-parent, one or more children) and many changes throughout the life course (e.g., parenting a toddler vs. a teenager). Accordingly, parenthood may be better understood as a fluid process that changes over time, and its association with well-being depends on many different factors (see Nelson et al., 2014 for a review).

Highlighting the complexity of parenthood, cross-sectional studies comparing the happiness levels of parents with nonparents have reached conflicting conclusions. Research has indicated that (a) parents report greater well-being than nonparents (Balbo & Arpino, 2016; Nelson et al., 2013); (b) parents report lower well-being than nonparents (Evenson & Simon, 2005; McLanahan & Adams, 1987, 1989); and (c) parents and nonparents do not differ in their reported well-being (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008). Further adding to this confusion, another recent study found that parents reported both more positive emotion and more negative emotion than nonparents (Deaton & Stone, 2014).

Evidence regarding the association between parenthood and well-being from longitudinal studies

appears to be more consistent than evidence from cross-sectional studies; however, this work also supports the idea that parenthood is complex and dynamic. Studies of the transition to parenthood have found that becoming a parent is associated with a rise in well-being followed by a decline (Dyrddal & Lucas, 2013; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015). Moreover, this pattern is not consistent for all parents: Men and people with higher socioeconomic status (people with higher income, more education, and who are employed) have an easier transition to parenthood (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015). Finally, a meta-analysis of this literature confirms the overarching trend—the transition to parenthood was associated with an initial rise in life satisfaction with a subsequent decline. This meta-analysis also revealed that parents reported greater positive emotion after their child was born than they did prior to becoming a parent (Luhmann et al., 2012).

These findings regarding positive emotion are also consistent with evidence from daily experience studies. In an experience sampling study comparing parents' and nonparents' emotions in their daily lives, parents reported significantly more positive emotion and meaningful moments than nonparents (Nelson et al., 2013). Providing a conceptual replication of these results, other work found that parents report more positive emotion and meaning in life during their time spent with children relative to their other daily activities (Musick, Meier, & Flood, 2016; Nelson et al., 2013; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017). These findings may seem contradictory to a classic finding that childcare ranks relatively low in positivity (Kahneman et al., 2004). In this study, a sample of working women (including both parents and nonparents) completed the Day Reconstruction Method, recording all of their activities and emotions for an entire day. When activities were rank-ordered by average positivity across the entire sample, childcare ranked close to the bottom—below having sex, relaxing, and watching TV, among others, but above housework, working, and commuting (Kahneman et al., 2004). Notably, however, this study included both parents and nonparents in their analysis and did not account for whether or not people actually engaged in each of the given activities. Thus, although this study provides preliminary insight regarding people's feelings during childcare, it does not provide conclusive evidence that childcare is significantly associated with lower emotional well-being among parents. In subsequent studies including only parents, their emotions during childcare were compared with their emotions during their other daily activities. In each of these studies, childcare was associated with elevated positive emotion and meaning in life (Musick et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017).

In sum, longitudinal and daily experience studies provide consistent support that parenthood could be associated with elevated well-being—albeit temporarily. Conversely, the evidence from cross-sectional studies is much less consistent. The conflicting evidence could be in part due to differences in statistical approaches and sample characteristics. Indeed, evidence suggests that the association between parenthood and well-being is moderated by a number of parent demographic (e.g., parent gender; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015; Musick et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013) and psychological (e.g., attachment style; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017) characteristics, which may shed light on these conflicting findings (see Nelson et al., 2014).

Individual differences. The happiness associated with parenthood depends in part on parents' age, gender, marital status, as well as their personality and attachment orientation. Indeed, a number of demographic (e.g., gender) and psychological (e.g., attachment style) factors moderate the association between parenthood and well-being. Although a full review of the many moderators of the association between parenthood and well-being is outside the scope of this chapter, in this section I consider gender and attachment style as important factors predicting parents' well-being.

Gender. Evidence suggests that parenthood is more strongly associated with greater well-being for fathers than for mothers. In one study of a nationally representative sample from the U.S., fathers were happier than men without children, but mothers were no more or less happy than women without children (Nelson et al., 2013). Consistent with these findings, other studies have found fatherhood to be associated with well-being (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010; Kohler, Behrman, & Skytthe, 2005). Conversely, studies comparing the relative well-being of mothers with women without children tend to find no differences or a relative well-being deficit among mothers. In one study of Norwegian mothers over the transition to parenthood, self-esteem decreased during pregnancy, increased around childbirth, followed by a gradual decline over the course of 3 years (van Scheppingen, Denissen, Chung, Tambs, & Bleidorn, in press).

One explanation for the gender differences in parents' well-being may involve the nature of mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children. Women tend to spend more time—and more time alone (i.e., solo parenting)—with their children (Musick et al., 2016; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017). In addition, when mothers spend time with their children, they are relatively more likely to engage in basic childcare, childcare management, cooking, and cleaning with their children, whereas fathers are more likely to engage in play and leisure with their children (Musick et al., 2016). These gender differences in

how parents spend time with their children have implications for happiness as well. In this study, for example, play (more common among fathers) was associated with the highest levels of well-being across activities, whereas basic childcare and solo parenting (more common among mothers) were associated with low levels of well-being (Musick et al., 2016). Other work suggests that mothers experience more guilt, particularly in juggling caregiving and employment (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017; Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, in press), suggesting another potential pathway explaining mothers' relatively lower levels of well-being.

Attachment. In addition to shaping people's expectations and experiences in romantic relationships, attachment style also shapes people's experiences caring for their children (Jones, Cassidy, & Shaver, 2015; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Attachment avoidance is associated with greater stress in the transition to parenthood (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006), less reported closeness with children (Rholes, Simpson, & Blakeley, 1995; Wilson, Rholes, Simpson, & Tran, 2007), and lower parenting satisfaction (Cohen, Zerach, & Solomon, 2011; Rholes et al., 2011). Furthermore, two daily experience studies found that parents high in attachment avoidance reported fewer positive emotions while spending time with their adult (Impett, English, & John, 2011) and young (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017) children. Together, this work suggests that attachment avoidance would be associated with relatively lower levels of well-being among parents. In addition, attachment anxiety is associated with greater parent-child conflict (Selcuk et al., 2010), greater parenting stress (Fernandes, Muller, & Rodin, 2012), and greater negative emotion in parent-child interactions (River, Borelli, & Nelson-Coffey, 2016). Notably, however, in a daily experience study, attachment anxiety did not differentially predict positive emotion, negative emotion, or meaning during caregiving relative to parents' other daily activities (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017). Thus, existing evidence more consistently indicates that parents' high in attachment avoidance may experience lower levels of well-being; however, more work is needed to disentangle the moderating role of attachment anxiety in parents' well-being.

Why is Parenthood Associated With Happiness (and Unhappiness)?

Drawing on evidence from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and daily experience studies, my colleagues and I developed a model of parents' well-being to illuminate the psychological factors that predict happiness and unhappiness among parents (Nelson et al., 2014). According to this model, parents report greater happiness when they experience elevated feelings of meaning in life, positive emotions, psychological need satisfaction (i.e., autonomy, competence, and connectedness), and fulfillment of social roles. Conversely, parents report less happiness when they experience elevated negative emotions, financial strain, sleep disturbance, and lower relationship satisfaction.

Notably, not all pieces of this model have been thoroughly tested. Supporting the path to parents' greater well-being, research reliably indicates that parents report elevated meaning in life (Nelson et al., 2013; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017; Umberson & Gove, 1989) and positive emotion (Deaton & Stone, 2014; Musick et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017). Fewer studies have directly tested the links between parenthood and psychological need satisfaction and fulfillment of social roles, although indirect evidence supports that they would be important predictors of parents' well-being. For example, one study found that parenting efficacy, authenticity, and satisfaction with friendships and partner were correlated with life satisfaction among mothers (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015), providing suggestive evidence for the importance of competence, autonomy, and connectedness, respectively. Furthermore, research suggests that holding more social roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Thoits, 1992) and feeling called to fulfill those roles (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) promotes well-being. Thus, parenthood may be associated with improved well-being by providing parents with an additional social role or calling to contribute to their identities.

Supporting the path to parents' lower levels of well-being, research consistently indicates that parents report relatively lower levels of relationship satisfaction (for meta-analyses see Luhmann et al., 2012; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003), along with greater financial strain (Bird, 1997; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Ross & Van Willingen, 1996; Umberson & Gove, 1989; Zimmermann & Easterlin, 2006) and sleep disturbance and fatigue (Chalmers & Meyer, 1996; Gay, Lee, & Lee, 2004; Lee, Zaffke, & McEnany, 2000; Yamazaki, Lee, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2005). The evidence regarding parents' experiences of negative emotions, however, is somewhat inconsistent. Some evidence suggests that parents report greater stress (Deaton & Stone, 2014), anger and frustration (Ross & Van Willingen, 1996; Simon & Nath, 2004), and depression (Evenson & Simon, 2005) compared with nonparents; however, another recent study found that parents did not report greater negative emotion while they were spending time with their children relative to their other daily activities (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017). Notably, more work is needed to better understand parents' experiences of negative emotions, as well as replication of this latter finding.

Furthermore, the parents' well-being model was developed based on a comprehensive review of the

literature and has therefore not been tested extensively. Future work investigating the predictors of parents' happiness and unhappiness in a single study would be informative. In particular, such a study would illuminate whether some factors are more important for parents' happiness than others. For example, past research indicated that positive emotions more strongly predict long-term well-being than negative emotions (Coffey, Warren, & Gottfried, 2015; Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009; Kuppens et al., 2008; Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016). Accordingly, understanding whether these patterns persist among parents is an important direction for future research.

Family Structure

Families come in all shapes and sizes, including biological, adoptive, and blended families, in addition to parents in opposite-sex or same-sex partnerships. Accordingly, it is important to consider the association between parenthood and well-being in light of the variety of family structures (Caballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001).

Adoptive and blended families. Little research focuses on understanding how the well-being of adoptive and step-parents compares with parents in other family structures. Adoptive parents may be coping with infertility, managing intrusive adoption screening, and perhaps even coping with societal discrimination and stigmatization (Bird, Peterson, & Miller, 2002; Caballo et al., 2001), which might predict lower levels of well-being among this group of parents. Notably, however, existing studies do not provide conclusive evidence for differences in the psychological well-being of adoptive and biological parents (Caballo et al., 2001; O'Brien & Zamostny, 2003). For example, one study compared a group of adopted children and their parents with a matched sample of biological children and parents from the National Survey of Families and Households. In this study, biological and adoptive parents did not differ in their reports of happiness or depressive symptoms (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998). In addition, other studies found no differences between biological and adoptive parents in stress, health, or self-esteem (Mainemer, Gilman, & Ames, 1998; Ternay, Willborn, & Day, 1985).

Research comparing stepparents to other family structures is similarly inconclusive. For example, one study found that stepparents reported lower parenting satisfaction than biological parents (Rogers & White, 1998), but another study found no differences between stepparents and biological parents in symptoms of depression, life satisfaction, and self-esteem (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Finally, research comparing the well-being of biological, step-, and adoptive parents indicates that factors associated with family processes (e.g., family cohesion) are stronger predictors of well-being than objective family structure (Lansford et al., 2001).

Same-sex partnership. Most research on parents' sexual orientation has focused on child outcomes. These studies generally do not find any harmful consequences of being raised by parents in same-sex relationships in terms of children's gender behavior and preferences, sexual behavior and preferences, or mental health (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Very few studies have investigated the relative happiness of parents and nonparents in same-sex marriages or partnerships. Parents in same-sex partnerships may face stigmatization, difficult adoption proceedings, or other challenges in becoming parents that might indicate low levels of well-being. However, existing research suggests the reverse: Parents in same-sex partnerships tend to report relatively high levels of well-being. One review of this literature noted that lesbian mothers reported fewer depressive symptoms and greater self-esteem than heterosexual mothers (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Similarly, one study of fatherhood in Israel found that gay fathers reported higher levels of life satisfaction than heterosexual fathers (Erez & Shenkman, 2016). Another study found that the self-perceived parental role—which involves multiple aspects of parent identity, including investment, competence, integration with other life domains, and satisfaction—was associated with meaning in life among gay, but not heterosexual, fathers in Israel (Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2016). Finally, psychological need satisfaction within one's relationship was associated with greater levels of personal growth among lesbian mothers, but not heterosexual mothers (Shenkman, in press). These studies provide preliminary evidence that parents in same-sex relationships do not report reduced well-being, and may even experience elevated well-being in comparison to heterosexual parents. Notably, however, much of this research relied on Israeli samples (where same-sex marriage is not legally recognized and attitudes towards same-sex relationships may differ from other cultures). Accordingly, more work is needed to evaluate how sexual orientation is related to parents' well-being in other cultures.

Summary

In sum, researchers have drawn on a variety of methodological approaches to investigate the association between parenthood and well-being. Cross-sectional studies have reached conflicting conclusions about whether parents are more or less happy than nonparents, but longitudinal and daily experience studies have more consistently indicated a happiness benefit (albeit temporary) for parents. In addition, recent work has focused more on understanding why and for whom parenthood is associated with

happiness (e.g., Nelson et al., 2014). Furthermore, despite changing trends in family structures, evidence does not suggest that parenting in the context of adoptive, blended, or same-sex partnerships is associated with detriments to parents' well-being.

Concluding Remarks

As some of the most important and significant aspects of people's lives, family relationships—particularly marriage and parenthood—have important implications for individuals' happiness. However, much remains to be learned about how and why marriage and parenthood are related to well-being. In this chapter, I suggested potential mechanisms linking marriage and parenthood to well-being, and provided suggestions for future research on these topics. In particular, studies aiming to understand how and why marriage is associated with happiness would be informative. Furthermore, an important direction for research on parenthood and well-being will be to consider parenthood as a dynamic process that unfolds over time, rather than a static identity. Finally, research considering strategies people can use to improve their marriages and relationships with their children, along with whether and how such strategies improve happiness, would be illuminating. Thus, nurturing one's family relationships may offer people opportunities to live happy and fulfilling lives.

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