

# Educational Discrepancy and Its Impact on Couples' Subjective Well-being in China

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage provides individuals with many benefits that may make individuals happier, and many researchers have reported that married respondents, particularly men, usually report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than unmarried respondents. This study focuses on why married people have higher levels of subjective well-being, specifically whether education differences between spouses have an effect on subjective well-being. Drawing on data from the CGSS2015, binary logistic models were used to examine gender asymmetry in educational discrepancy among first married people. Compared with those who had same education level with their spouse, people who had an education gap with their partner appeared to be happier. Both males and females reported greater subjective well-being when their wives had more education than they did. However, females reported greater subjective well-being when their husbands had more education than they did. The educational discrepancies have different effects on subjective well-being among men and women. This may be related to the traditional Chinese culture and the maximum benefits in marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Educational Discrepancy, Subjective Well-Being, Gender, China

Being married is generally associated with positive effects in physical and mental health, economic outcomes, and the process of raising children [1]. In detail, there are three primary benefits of marriage. Firstly, marriage can increase economic resources due to economies of scale and the possibility to pool income, and these economic resources enhance well-being [2,3]. Marriage also implies social support in terms of direct help by spouse or access to the spouse's network [4]. Compared with people who live alone, married people have lower odds of social isolation, which may harm one's sense of belonging and security [3]. The last benefit is emotional support from spouse. People need affection and having a spouse makes individual feels cared about, being esteemed, loved, and valued as a person [2].

As a broad category of phenomena, subjective well-being includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction [2]. Many previous studies have indicated how much marriage contributes to people's subjective well-being compared to other living arrangements [5,

6]. Diener and colleagues observe that married persons report being happier and more satisfied with their lives than unmarried persons. This effect extends to cohabitation, with research showing that married individuals are happier and more satisfied than cohabiting individuals [7,8]. It is noteworthy that this effect is greater for men than for women and that there has been a decrease in the magnitude of the effect over the past decades [9,10]. The relationship between happiness and marriage may be explained by status exchange theory. According to this economic model, individuals make rational marriage decisions and marry only if the utility of marriage exceeds the utility of remaining single [11]. Thus, those who are married are those who think they can gain more from marriage, so their happiness may be higher than that of single people.

Researchers have examined what factors within a marriage affect well-being and have found that that partner's age and education have an influence on an individual's health and life satisfaction [12]. In addition, the spouse's support is important. The well-being gap between persons with and without a partner may depend on the amount of support that can be expected from one's environment. One reason why people without a partner,

that is divorced, widowed, and single persons, presumably have lower levels of well-being than persons with a partner is that they cannot benefit from support by a partner [13]. Based on interviews with married people, Waite and Gallagher report that happiness or life satisfaction of married individuals is higher because spouses provide emotional support and a sense of a greater purpose or meaning to life. The marriage partnership also allows for economic and emotional specialization and provides access to an available sexual partner.

The second research perspective examines factors within the marriage, such as the number of children, marital duration, family annual income and so on [14]. For example, most studies report that the presence of children either has a negative effect or no effect on subjective well-being [15, 16]. Research also indicates that marital quality declines with time, particularly in the first few years of marriage. However the impact of marital quality on personal well-being is moderated by both gender and length of marriage, such that males' well-being is more tied to the marriage and the link between marital quality and personal well-being declines somewhat over time [17].

Additionally, several studies address the effects of marital patterns on individuals' well-being. Individuals have preferences for spouses but face constrained opportunities in the marriage markets [11]. Before people enter the marriage market, they set a minimum acceptable level to decrease the costs of searching a spouse. Those who fall below or outside this area of acceptability will usually not be considered [11]. There are many matching criteria such as the physical appearance, religion, and socioeconomic background. Therefore, several different marriage matching patterns are formed. Because education is multifaceted, reflecting cultural resources such as values, beliefs, and lifestyles as well as earning potential, some researchers have identified education as the standard for dividing the different patterns. Weiss and Wills report that couples with similar educational attainment at the time of marriage were less likely to divorce and individuals have a strong tendency to marry those who share similar levels of education. Further, Groot and Van Den Brink found that women were more satisfied when the education gap is smaller. More recently, Latif reported that a spousal education difference, whether positive or negative, has no significant impact on males' and females' life satisfaction. This may be related to the fact that, in most Western countries, the education gap within marriages has decreased as female educational attainment has increased, and educational assortative mating reversed from a tendency for women to marry up to a tendency for women to marry down in education [18, 19]. However, in China, a different trend has been identified that people increasingly marry those with a similar level of education in China [20]. So, the education gap may have a different effect on marriage in China.

Women married to men with less education than themselves are often thought to challenge the traditional, male-dominant status in marriage, potentially leading to great stress [21,22]. However, Schwartz and Han found that this was not actually true. In fact, women married to men whose education levels are equal to or lower than their own do not necessarily challenge the traditional, male-dominant status in marriage. Further, as females' employment and labor force attachment increase, women are increasingly evaluated as potential spouses on

the basis of their socioeconomic traits. Thus, more and more men begin to compete for highly educated women, leading to marriages in which the wife has more education than the husband becoming increasingly common [11,23]. For men, then, a wife with more education may provide material resources while also maintaining the traditional roles as home, providing two different but important benefits in the marriage.

The same issues may impact women in China differently. Chen distinguishes between women's lives in two spheres. Women's happiness is related to both their own professional achievements and their marital relationship. However, their own personal achievements are somewhat less important to their well-being than their husbands' socioeconomic status. Although women value their careers, they continue to embrace traditional gender roles in the marriage [24]. Indeed, Qian and Qian (2014) report that, even in more modern urban areas, traditional gender roles in marriages remain entrenched. Thus, although Chinese women value professional success and educational achievement, they will likely continue to prefer educational hypergamy.

Given this, the present study examined the effect of educational discrepancy in marriage on subjective well-being among Chinese. It was hypothesized that (1) Compared with those who have the same education level as their spouse, people with an education gap with the partner (both positive and negative) will be happier; (2) Males will report greater happiness when they have less education than their wives (hypogamy); (3) Females will report greater happiness when they have less education than their husbands (hypergamy).

## Method

### Participants

Data for analysis are taken from the 2015 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). The CGSS is the earliest national representative cross-sectional survey on social trends and quality of life in China. It has been conducted annually on more than 10,000 families in various provinces of mainland China since 2003 except for 2008 and 2010. In 2008 and 2010, the project team did two biennial surveys. As in other years, the 2015 CGSS survey used a multistage stratified random sampling method, surveying 10,968 respondents aged 18 or above. This survey contains information on family, health status, labor market, social attitude, political participation, etc. The family module provided rich information on the respondent's spouse, making it an ideal data source for this investigation.

The marital status was assessed by seven categories: single, cohabitation, first-married, remarried, married but separated, divorced, and widowed. For the analysis of the effects of educational discrepancy within marriage on subjective well-being, we only include in our sample people who are married. Because the effect of remarriage on individual's subjective well-being may be different from that of first marriage, only those respondents who were in first marriages were selected into our sample leaving 8,289 observations for this analysis[4].

The survey was anonymous and informed consent was obtained from each of the participants. The participants were informed that this survey was totally voluntary and they had the right to refuse or quit whenever they wanted.

## Measurements

Subjective well-being. The dependent variable was the subjective well-being. This variable was measured through the question “In general, do you think your life is happy?” The response options included “1= very unhappy,” “2= unhappy,” “3= average,” “4= happy,” and “5= very happy.” The Chinese participants gave responses more toward the midpoint of the scale compared with Western people [25]. Because the Chinese response style was more conservative, the choices of 1, 2, and 3 were coded to 0=unhappy and those of 4 and 5 were coded to 1=happy.

Control variables were largely divided into two dimensions: characteristics of individual and spouse, and family characteristics. Characteristics of individual and spouse included samples and their partners’ ages, education levels, and registered residence (rural or urban). Family characteristics included the duration of marriage and family annual income. Respondents’ and their partners’ education were assessed by 13 categories: 1= no education, 2= literacy class, 3= elementary school, 4= middle school, 5= vocational senior high school, 6= general high school, 7= specialized secondary school, 8= technical school, 9= specialty (for adults), 10= specialty (formal), 11= undergraduate college (for adults), 12= undergraduate college (formal), and 13= postgraduate or above. Registered residence was coded as 0= agricultural Hukou, and non-agricultural Hukou = 1. Duration of marriage referred to the number of married years until 2015. Finally, family annual income was also included.

Educational discrepancy. Educational discrepancy was obtained through the husband’s education level minus his wife’s education level. If the result was equal to zero, it was coded as homogamy = 0 (wife’s education level was equal to husband’s). If the result was less than zero, it was coded as hypogamy = 1 (wife’s education level was higher than husband’s), and if the result

was a positive number, we coded it as hypergamy = 2 (wife’s education level was lower than husband’s). Thus, homogamy was defined as marrying somebody who was a relative equal in education level, hypogamy was defined as marrying a man who had less education, and hypergamy was defined as marrying a man who had more education.

## Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were carried out using STATA13.0. Missing values were not analyzed in this study. The bivariate analyses were examined through one-way ANOVAs and Chi-Square tests. Binary logistic regression was used to assess the model for predicting subjective well-being.

## Results

Descriptive results in Table 1 showed the significant differences across homogamy, hypogamy, and hypergamy were found for individual’s gender, education level, and registered residence. Females greatly outnumbered males in three educational matching patterns. In the homogamy and hypergamy patterns, people were more likely come from rural areas. However, people in the hypogamy group were more likely to come from a non-agricultural Hukou, and these people were younger and had higher education level. Secondly, there were also significant differences in spouse’s age, education level, and registered residence. If a person was in the hypogamy group, his/her spouse was more likely to be younger, more educated, and from a non-agricultural Hukou than the other two groups. Finally, the significant differences in duration of marriage and family annual income showed that these three educational discrepancy patterns had different family characteristics. People in the hypogamy group were more recently married and had a higher family annual income.

**Table 1: Comparisons of individual and couple’s characteristics by educational discrepancy group (N=7,555)**

Variables	Homogamy (N=3,313)	Hypogamy (N=1,232)	Hypergamy (N=3,010)	$\chi^2/F$	p
	n (%) / M $\pm$ SD	n (%) / M $\pm$ SD	n (%) / M $\pm$ SD		
Subjective Well-being					
Unhappy	734 (22.16)	212 (17.21)	576 (19.14)	16.83	<0.001
Happy	2,579 (77.84)	1,020 (82.79)	2,434 (80.86)		
Gender					
Male	1,519 (45.85)	557 (45.21)	1,481 (49.20)	9.18	0.010
Female	1,794 (54.15)	675 (54.79)	1,529 (50.80)		
Age	49.93 $\pm$ 14.59	48.51 $\pm$ 14.76	52.88 $\pm$ 14.08	52.61	<0.001
Registered residence					
Agricultural Hukou	2,028 (61.21)	577 (46.83)	1,805 (59.97)	81.65	<0.001
Non-agricultural Hukou	1,285 (38.79)	655 (53.17)	1,205 (40.03)		
Education level	4.47 $\pm$ 2.74	5.62 $\pm$ 2.98	4.62 $\pm$ 2.91	76.23	<0.001
Partner’s age	49.90 $\pm$ 14.58	48.60 $\pm$ 14.75	52.81 $\pm$ 14.06	49.97	<0.001
Partner’s residence					
Agricultural Hukou	2,018 (60.91)	575 (46.67)	1,800 (59.80)	80.45	<0.001
Non-agricultural Hukou	1,295 (39.09)	657 (53.33)	1,210 (40.20)		
Partner’s education level	4.47 $\pm$ 2.74	5.39 $\pm$ 2.96	4.67 $\pm$ 3.00	46.76	<0.001
Duration of marriage	26.69 $\pm$ 14.97	24.23 $\pm$ 15.02	29.51 $\pm$ 14.78	61.87	<0.001
Family annual income (N=7,131)	10.55 $\pm$ 1.12	10.77 $\pm$ 1.04	10.52 $\pm$ 1.11	22.54	<0.001

Table 2 provides the results of logistic regressions. Individual's and spouse's characteristic variables were included in Model 1, and family characteristic variables were included in Model 2. Finally, we added educational discrepancy in Model 3. Additionally, we conducted the logistic regression for male and female samples to find the different effects of educational gap on men and women in Model 4 and 5.

**Table 2: Logistic regressions of influence factors on Subjective well-being (OR and 95% CI) (N=7,555)**

Variables	Model 1 (n=7,555)	Model 2 (n=7,131)	Model 3 (n=7,131)	Model 4 (n=3,750)	Model 5 (n=3,381)
Gender (ref.=female)	0.974 (0.853, 1.113)	0.977 (0.850, 1.122)	0.923 (0.807, 1.057)		
Age	1.018 (1.002, 1.033) *	0.998 (0.980, 1.016)	0.997 (0.979, 1.016)	1.013 (0.985, 1.041)	0.983 (0.959,1.007)
Registered residence (ref.=agricultural Hukou)	0.899 (0.716, 1.129)	0.815 (0.641, 1.035)	0.805 (0.633, 1.024)	0.861 (0.611, 1.213)	0.757 (0.539, 1.063)
Education level	1.080 (1.045, 1.117) ***	1.065 (1.029, 1.103) ***	1.097 (1.065, 1.131) ***	1.101 (1.051, 1.153) ***	1.129 (1.076 1.183) ***
Partner's age	0.990 (0.976, 1.005)	0.983 (0.966, 0.100) *	0.983 (0.967, 1.000) *	0.965 (0.943, 0.987) **	1.006 (0.980, 1.032)
Partner's registered residence (ref.=agricultural Hukou)	1.096 (0.872, 1.379)	1.028 (0.807, 1.308)	1.119 (0.882, 1.421)	1.159 (0.828, 1.621)	0.979 (0.692, 1.032)
Partner's education level	1.081 (1.045, 1.118) ***	1.067 (1.030, 1.105) ***			
Duration of marriage		1.032 (1.016, 1.049) ***	1.031 (1.014, 1.047) ***	1.033 (1.008,1.058) **	1.026 (1.004, 1.049) *
Log of family annual income		1.326(1.244, 1.412) ***	1.345 (1.263, 1.432) ***	1.303 (1.196, 1.420) ***	1.369 (1.247, 1.502) ***
Educational discrepancy (ref.=Homogamy)					
Hypogamy			1.217 (1.017, 1.456) *	1.102 (0.858, 1.415)	1.408 (1.074, 1.845) *
Hypergamy			1.191 (1.046, 1.357) **	1.343 (1.117, 1.614) **	1.009 (0.824, 1.235)
Cons	1.359 (1.002, 1.843) *	0.145 (0.066, 0.322) ***	0.143 (0.064, 0.316) ***	0.211 (0.070, 0.637) **	0.083 (0.026, 1.235) ***
LR chi2	145.58	221.65	217.11	119.01	113.88
Prob > chi2	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001

\*p<0.05

\*\*p< .01

\*\*\*p<.001

Model 1, the baseline model, identifies significant relationships between individual's age, education level, partner's education level and subjective well-being. People who are older, more educated, and whose partner had a high educational level are more likely to be happy. Model 2 illustrates that the longer duration of marriage is related to greater individual happiness (OR=1.032). A similar relationship is found between family annual income and subjective well-being (OR=1.326).

All independent variables were included in the Model 3. The results show that people whose spouse is more educated, who have a higher educational level themselves, a longer duration of marriage, and higher family annual income are more likely to be happy. People

with the educational hypogamy pattern in which the wife is more educated than the husband are 21.7% more likely to be happy than people with the educational homogamy pattern in which the wife and husband had same education level (p<0.05). And compared with educational homogamy, people in the educational hypergamy group in which the wife is less educated than the husband are 19.1% more likely to be happy (p<0.01). These findings supported the first hypothesis: Compared with those who have the same education level as their spouse, people who have an education gap with their partner (both positive and negative) appear to be happier.

The results of Model 4 (Females only) and 5 (Males only) show that there are different effects of educational discrepancy on

subjective well-being among men and women. The major factors predicting females' happiness are education level, partner age, duration of marriage, family annual income, and the hypergamy pattern, whereas the major factors of males' happiness are education level, duration of marriage, family annual income, and the hypogamy pattern. Women are more affected by duration of marriage, while men are more affected by education level and family annual income. There is a negative relationship between partner's age and females' subjective well-being. However, this variable has no significant relationship to males' subjective well-being. What's more, compared with people in the homogamy group, women in the hypergamy group and men in the hypogamy are more likely to be happy. These results supported the second and third hypotheses: For male, compared with no gaps, a negative education gap between husband and wife is related to higher levels of well-being; And the positive educational discrepancy is related to female's subjective well-being.

### Discussion

This study examined the effect of educational discrepancy in marriage on subjective well-being among Chinese men and women. And results showed that some demographic factors and family characteristics had significant influence on individual subjective well-being. Compared with those who had the same education level as their spouse, people who had an education gap (both positive and negative) appeared to be happier. For males, the negative educational discrepancy was related to increased subjective well-being. However, a positive educational discrepancy was related to increased subjective well-being among females.

In this study, we found that a spouse's education is related to an individual's subjective well-being. Overall, people whose spouse has a high education level are more likely to be happy. This finding is similar to previous studies [12]. People who have a higher education level may have a higher level of health literacy, extended social networks, or a greater ability to gather useful information for their partners [26]. Thus, individuals may get greater resources from spouses with higher education levels. This would suggest that both men and women would achieve more happiness in a marriage matching model in which spouse is more educated than themselves. However, women are more likely to be happy in educational hypergamy model, but men are more likely to be happy in educational hypogamy model. This suggests that something beyond resource provision impacts this relationship. It is also possible that attitudes toward female hypogamy may be changing gender equality advances.

Previous studies suggest that educational homogamy in marriage can increase people's happiness or decrease the risk of divorce [22,27]. However, in this study, we found that compared with the homogamy pattern, the hypergamy pattern is related to increased female subjective well-being and the hypogamy pattern is related to increased male subjective well-being. For females, one possible reason is the traditional culture. In traditional China, model women were supposed to be those who obey men, do all housework to support husband's career [28]. They spent much time and energy on housework, and were not allowed to participate in socially productive activities like men [29]. As a result, women were often in a passive and attached position with no claim in important decisions because their

husbands had absolute authority. Therefore, females were more likely to marry the wealthy, powerful, or educated men in the past. Today, influenced by traditional culture, many women may select partners who have the ability and resource to provide for her and any children. Thus, it is possible women whose partners have more education than they do may report greater well-being because of financial security and because their family structure is in keeping with traditional values.

In contrast, for males, the association between educational discrepancy and subjective well-being was not traditional. That is, men reported greater subjective well-being when their spouse had a higher level of education. One possible explanation for this comes from the perspective of maximum profit. A couple marries because they can gain more by marrying [11]. With the expansion of female labor market, the benefits of marrying a woman with high education level are greater than marrying a woman with low education level for men. A highly educated spouse, then, may provide men with more material resources. In addition, Schwartz and Han (2014) found that women married to men whose education levels are equal to or lower than their own do not necessarily challenge the traditional, male-dominant status in marriage. Thus, as more women are highly educated but still follow traditional roles in the home, men who choose wives with more education have the benefit of both material resources and traditional gender roles in the home.

Despite the association between male well-being and hypogamy, this remains a less common pattern than homogamy or hypergamy. In this study, hypogamy is associated with being younger, more educated, living in a non-agricultural Hukou, and having a higher family annual income. All of these are markers of modernity and, thus, hypogamy may be related to the trend towards gender equality. With the development of gender egalitarianism and the reduction of gender differences in education, more and more young people are accepting the hypogamy pattern, which was seen as a challenge to traditional male dominance in the past. Therefore, the proportion of women "marrying down" has been rising in recent years in some regions [30]. This change is concentrated in urban areas. In rural China, people are more influenced by traditional Confucian culture.

This study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the educational discrepancy was only divided into three categories; it is possible that the magnitude of educational discrepancy may influence the subjective well-being. This should be examined in future research. In addition, this study only analyzed individuals who were already married. Further work should compare the different characteristics of subjective well-being between singles and married people. Finally, due to changes in policy in across time, different birth cohorts may have different characteristics on educational discrepancy. Educational discrepancies in every period may have unique effects on subjective well-being. In future studies, we should consider the influence of macro social policies and environment.

The current work explores the effects of educational discrepancy on individual subjective well-being. The results show that compared with those who had same education level with his/her spouse, people who had an education gap with the partner (both positive and negative) appeared to be happier. Further,

the findings in this study illustrate the differential effects of educational discrepancy on subjective well-being by gender. The difference between men and women may be attributed to traditional Chinese culture and the benefits in marriage. Future research should continue to explore the impacts of educational discrepancy in different magnitudes on subjective well-being.

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