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# Ties That Bind, Places That Matter: The Life-Satisfaction Gap Between Partnered and Single Individuals Varies Across Regions

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## Abstract

People in romantic relationships often report higher life satisfaction than single individuals. We propose that this life-satisfaction gap reflects, in part, alignment with the prevailing norm of being in a relationship. In a preregistered study with a large-scale data set ($N = 382{,}078$ adults across 379 regions in Great Britain), we replicated prior findings: partnered (vs. single) individuals reported higher life satisfaction. Notably, this life-satisfaction gap varied by region, being larger in regions with higher relationship rates and smaller in regions with lower relationship rates. This effect persisted after we controlled for various confounds; it passed robustness checks and replicated at a smaller scale across 218 London neighborhoods. Together, our findings emphasize the importance of situating relationship experiences within their geographic contexts, offering new insights into where and why differences in life satisfaction between partnered and single individuals emerge.

## Keywords

relationship, singlehood, life satisfaction, person–culture match, regions

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A large body of evidence shows that partnered individuals are psychologically better off than singles. Compared with single individuals, partnered or married individuals report higher life satisfaction (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015; Hoan & MacDonald, 2024; Stahnke & Cooley, 2021; Stern et al., 2024), better health outcomes (Dupre & Meadows, 2007; Hughes & Waite, 2009), increased longevity (Roelfs et al., 2011; Sbarra & Nietert, 2009), and greater satisfaction with their relationship status (Lehmann et al., 2015). Several explanations have been proposed for the differences between partnered and single individuals, including the positive emotions associated with romantic relationships (e.g., intimacy, love), the support associated with romantic relationships, and the disadvantages linked to singlehood (e.g., loneliness, stigma), as well as selection effects (i.e., happier people being more likely to enter and maintain romantic relationships; see Gonzalez Avilés, 2024, for an overview). Notably, these explanations share the underlying assumption that being in a romantic relationship is inherently tied to higher well-being. Although we do not dispute this perspective, we argue that it captures only part of the picture. Specifically, we propose that the experience of being partnered or single may depend on the geographic context in which these experiences are formed.

We know from extensive psychological theories and empirical evidence that people tend to experience better

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well-being when their individual characteristics align with those of the people living around them, an effect often labeled *person–culture match* (Fulmer et al., 2010). To provide some examples, previous research found that open-minded people report higher satisfaction when they live among other open-minded people (Jokela et al., 2015), religious people feel better when living in religious contexts (Stavrova et al., 2013), politically conservative people are happier in politically conservative contexts (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016), and individuals with obesity face fewer disadvantages where obesity is more common (Berkessel et al., 2024).

We argue that such person–culture match effects may also apply to relationship status: In regions where romantic relationships are more common, partnered individuals may experience even greater well-being and single individuals may experience lower well-being, resulting in a larger gap in well-being. This could be driven by multiple reasons, including regional differences in (a) norms and values, (b) social integration, and (c) legal and policy frameworks. Regarding norms and values, regions with higher relationship rates may reinforce the view that being partnered is the expected or ideal status (Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). This norm could be reinforced through daily social interactions, cultural narratives, media portrayals, and institutional structures that favor romantic relationships while overlooking or marginalizing singlehood (DePaulo, 2023). In high-relationship contexts, partnered individuals may feel more aligned with their relational goals, whereas single individuals may experience a mismatch (Heu, 2023). In addition, social integration and perceived support, which are key determinants of well-being (Diener et al., 2018), have been shown to partly explain the well-being advantage of partnered over single individuals (Adamczyk, 2016). In regions with higher relationship rates, partnered individuals may be more socially connected, taking part in shared activities within couples-oriented social circles and receiving support and advice from other partnered individuals (Stavrova et al., 2013). Single individuals, on the other hand, may be excluded from these social spaces and experience judgment or unsolicited advice from their partnered friends (DePaulo, 2023). Finally, legal and policy frameworks often favor partnered individuals through benefits related to taxes, health care, or housing (DePaulo, 2023). For example, single individuals face disadvantages in the rental market, because landlords frequently prefer couples as tenants (Morris et al., 2007). These structural differences may be more pronounced in regions where romantic relationships are more common.

Indeed, prior research has suggested that the link between marital status and life satisfaction varies across geographic contexts. Although married individuals generally report higher life satisfaction than their unmarried counterparts, the size of this gap was found to vary significantly across nations (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005; Verbakel, 2012) and U.S. states (Wadsworth, 2016). Moreover, marital status was found to be more strongly associated with life satisfaction in states where a higher proportion of residents was married (Wadsworth, 2016). Building on this literature, we aim to advance our understanding of person–culture match effects in the relationship domain. First, we focus on relationship status rather than marital status. This distinction is crucial, given that marital status is a legal category and not a reliable indicator of current romantic involvement (Compton & Kaufman, 2024). With declining marriage rates and more diverse relationship forms (Tillman et al., 2019), marital status has become an increasingly outdated proxy, masking significant variation in actual relationship experiences. Second, we examine geographic variation at much finer geographical scales (including both regions and neighborhoods) rather than focusing solely on cross-national differences. These smaller contexts are particularly relevant, because they constitute the settings in which people's daily lives primarily unfold (Elleman et al., 2020). Although people may not be consciously aware of regional relationship rates, they are likely attuned to social cues and relational norms through their everyday interactions with family, friends, neighbors, local institutions, and community events. These microlevel experiences can shape personal experiences, yet are often obscured when using large-scale geographic units. Third, recognizing that numerous factors beyond relationship status or regional relationship rates are relevant to well-being (e.g., personality traits that predict both relationship selection and well-being; Heller et al., 2004), we accounted for a wide range of individual and regional covariates. We also conducted several robustness checks to ensure that the observed associations are not attributable to alternative explanations.

The current study used a large-scale data set with 382,078 participants from 379 regions in Great Britain, who provided information on their relationship status and life satisfaction. In line with our theoretical and empirical reasoning, the study was guided by two preregistered hypotheses. First, we expected that there is a life-satisfaction gap within Great Britain, with partnered individuals reporting higher life satisfaction than their single counterparts (H1). Second, we predicted that the size of this gap varies across geographic contexts, being larger in regions with higher relationship rates and smaller in regions with lower rates (H2). Finally, in two nonpreregistered exploratory analyses, we examined whether the life-satisfaction gap shows similar patterns at an even smaller geographical scale across 218 neighborhoods in London, Great Britain's largest city, and whether individuals in regions with higher relationship rates generally place greater importance on having a romantic relationship.

## Research Transparency Statement

### *General disclosures*

**Conflicts of interest:** All authors declare no conflicts of interest. **Funding:** The authors have no support or funding to report. **Artificial intelligence:** No artificial-intelligence-assisted technologies were used in this research or the creation of this article. **Ethics:** This research received approval from the Psychology Research Ethic Committee of the University of Cambridge. **Open Science Framework (OSF):** To ensure long-term preservation, we registered all OSF files at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/P8QSF.

### *Study disclosures*

**Preregistration:** The hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan were preregistered (https://osf.io/x3d2j) after data collection, but before data access. Data were collected by J. Rentfrow and his research team between 2009 and 2011 and accessed only after January 9, 2024, by the other authors, following the upload of the preregistration. Three minor deviations from the preregistration occurred, as detailed in Table S1 in the Supplemental Material. **Materials:** The codebook describing all variables used in the analyses is publicly available (https://osf.io/swa7u). Other materials, including a copy of the original survey as well as details of procedures (e.g., participant instructions and consent forms), are not publicly available. Further information on how to access these materials is provided in the transparency form for third-party resources at https://osf.io/swa7u. **Data:** All primary data needed to reproduce the analyses are available to registered users of the UK Data Service (http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9576-1), contingent upon acceptance of the End User License Agreement. **Analysis scripts:** All analysis scripts are publicly available (https://osf.io/swa7u). **Computational reproducibility:** The computational reproducibility of the results in the main article (but not the Supplemental Material) has been independently confirmed by the journal's STAR team.

## Method

### *Participants*

We used data from an extensive online survey called the Big Personality Test (University of Cambridge. Department of Psychology & British Broadcasting Corporation, 2015). The study was reviewed and approved by the Psychology Research Ethic Committee of the University of Cambridge and broadly advertised and promoted through various BBC websites, radio programs, and television shows. The data were collected from November 2009 to April 2011 and included responses from 483,330 participants ($M_{age}$ = 35.44 years, $SD$ = 13.69, 63.8% female) on various aspects, including demographics, education, personal relationships, personality traits, well-being, health, and childhood experiences. After completing the survey, participants received customized personality feedback on the basis of their responses to the survey items. Beyond its large size and detailed geographic and relationship information, the BBC data offer additional unique advantages. Because of its broad promotion through the BBC, the sample was more diverse than typical online surveys (Rentfrow et al., 2015). Moreover, the data set encompasses a wide range of life domains, allowing us to account for relevant confounds that previous studies have often overlooked (e.g., personality traits that predict both selection into relationships and well-being; Heller et al., 2004).

We excluded participants with missing information on their life satisfaction ($n$ = 96,178) and their relationship status ($n$ = 3). In addition, we excluded participants who responded to the question on relationship status with "rather not say" ($n$ = 5,049). Finally, to ensure reliable regional relationship rates, we excluded participants from one region that had fewer than 50 respondents ($n$ = 22). The final sample included 382,078 participants ($M_{age}$ = 35.67 years, $SD$ = 13.51, 63.8% female).

### *Measures*

***Relationship status.*** Relationship status was assessed with the following question: "Are you currently in an intimate relationship?". Response options were 0 (*no*), 1 (*yes*), and 2 (*rather not say*). For the current study, only responses 0 and 1 were considered. The majority of participants ($n$ = 268,220; 70.2%) reported being in a romantic relationship.

***Regional relationship rates.*** Respondents provided the postal codes of their current residence. We used this postal code information to assign participants to one of Great Britain's 380 Local Authority Districts (LADs). LADs are administrative regions used for local government purposes (similar in size and function to counties in the United States). It should be noted that LADs are significantly smaller than geographic units used in previous research, such as nations or U.S. states. For example, the state of Texas alone is approximately three times larger than the entirety of Great Britain. To measure regional relationship rates, we calculated the share of individuals per LAD that reported currently being in an intimate relationship (sample sizes per district ranged from 107 in the Orkney Islands to 5,537 in Birmingham). Computing regional rates by aggregating individuals' responses is a

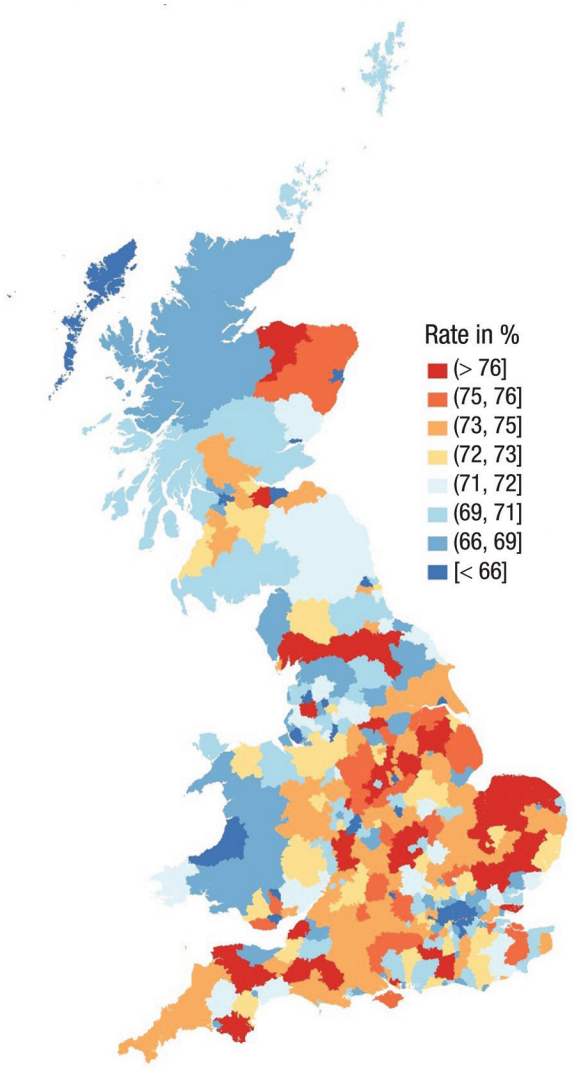



**Fig. 1.** Relationship rates across Local Authority Districts in Great Britain. Reddish colors indicate higher relationship rates, and blueish colors indicate lower relationship rates. The legend on the right side shows the cutoffs of the regional relationship rates (min, max).

common approach to operationalizing constructs at the regional level, as seen in prior work on personality traits (Jokela et al., 2015), religiosity (Stavrova et al., 2013), political values (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016), and obesity (Berkessel et al., 2024).

Deriving regional relationship rates from the individual-level data also ensures that the construct of relationship status is consistently operationalized at both the individual and regional level, which aligns with the theoretical reasoning from the person–culture match perspective (Fulmer et al., 2010). Regional indicators derived from our underlying data can be compared with official census records to address potential concerns about representativeness and generalizability. Rentfrow et al. (2015) previously demonstrated that regional demographics from our survey closely mirrored the 2011 United Kingdom Census, with strong correlations for median age ($r$ = .79) and ethnicity ($r$ = .84–.95), indicating good population representativeness. Extending this approach to the relationship domain, we find that regional marriage rates derived from our data closely aligned with 2011 Census marriage rates ($r$ = .88). Taken together, these results suggest that our survey-based estimates provide a close approximation of the actual (yet officially unknown) regional relationship rates. Nevertheless, to ensure that our results were not driven by bias in the underlying survey data, we also replicated our results using regional marriage and cohabitation rates as census-based relationship proxies (see the robustness checks section below).

Most important, we find that the rate of participants who reported being in a relationship varied greatly across regions, with regional relationship rates ranging from 54.8% in the London Borough of Brent to 80.2% in Bolsover. Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of relationship rates across LADs in Great Britain, indicating that relationship rates are generally higher in the eastern regions of Great Britain and lower in the western regions. In addition, major cities such as London, Liverpool, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen show lower relationship rates compared with their surrounding LADs.

***Life satisfaction.*** Five items assessed life satisfaction: "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal," "The conditions of my life are excellent," "I am satisfied with my life," "So far, I have got the important things I want in life," and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Participants indicated their agreement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .90. We used the average score derived from these five items.

***Individual-level covariates.*** To safeguard against potential confounds, we accounted for a wide array of covariates, including participants' demographics (age, gender), socioeconomic background (education, employment status, income), health, and Big Five personality traits. Each of these variables may have potential causal effects on relationship status and life satisfaction, and omitting them could bias estimates (Wysocki et al., 2022). Prior research shows that individuals who are younger (Rapp, 2018), female (Sassler, 2010), socioeconomically advantaged (Karney, 2021), and in better health (Clarke & McKay, 2014) are more likely to form romantic relationships. Life satisfaction, in turn, increases with age (Buecker et al., 2023), declines with unemployment (Lucas et al., 2004), and is generally higher among women (Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2020), people with higher socioeconomic status (Tan et al., 2020), and better health (Ngamaba et al., 2017). Regarding personality traits, individuals higher in

extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience, but lower in neuroticism, are more likely to enter new relationships (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024; Neyer & Lehnart, 2007; Stern et al., 2024). The same pattern, with the addition of higher agreeableness, was found to be associated with greater life satisfaction (Heller et al., 2004). Additional information on the operationalization of these measures can be found in the Supplemental Material available online (p. 6).

***Region-level covariates.*** In our preregistration, we initially planned to control for individual-level covariates only. However, recognizing that regions vary on numerous characteristics that may be associated with life satisfaction or overlap with regional norms surrounding relationships, or both, we decided to expand our control analyses. In addition to individual-level covariates, we controlled for six key region-level characteristics in an additional analysis: age structure (i.e., median age), fertility rates (i.e., birth rates), urbanity (i.e., population density), economic prosperity (i.e., median income), conservative political views (i.e., share of Brexit votes), and religiosity (i.e., share of people with religious affiliation). Prior research indicates that marriage rates are higher in regions with an older median age and higher fertility rates (Lesthaeghe, 2010), lower population density (Sng et al., 2017), higher GDP (Moro et al., 2017), and more conservative and religious views (Schultz Lee & Ono, 2012). Similarly, individuals report higher life satisfaction in regions with an older median age, lower fertility rates (Jokela et al., 2015), lower population density (Brown et al., 2016), higher median income (Jokela et al., 2015), and more conservative views (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016) and religious views (Jokela et al., 2015). Further details on how these measures were implemented can be found in the Supplemental Material (pp. 6–7). Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among all individual- and region-level variables can be found in Table S2 and Table S3, respectively.

### *Data analyses*

To account for the nested data structure (382,078 individuals nested in 379 LADs), we employed linear mixed-effect models allowing for both random intercepts and random slopes. Prior to our analyses, we *z*-standardized all continuous predictor variables to ensure that coefficients were comparable across the models. All models were estimated in R (R Core Team, 2025) using the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015). The significance threshold was set at $p \leq .05$. An a priori power analysis based on Monte Carlo simulation (1,000 simulations, .80% power, ICC = .10, $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed test) using the package *SIMR* (Green & MacLeod, 2016) in R (R Core Team, 2025) suggested that the sample size was sufficiently large ($N > 380{,}000$) to detect small ($b = 0.10$) Level 1 and Level 2 main effects as well as small ($b = 0.20$) cross-level interaction effects.

Our main analytical approach consisted of two steps. First, we tested whether partnered individuals reported higher life satisfaction than single individuals on average (H1). To do so, we analyzed the association between participants' relationship status and life satisfaction. Second, we investigated whether the association between relationship status and life satisfaction varied across regional relationship rates (H2). To do this, we extended the model by including a cross-level interaction between individual relationship status and regional relationship rates. For both hypotheses, we accounted for individual-level and region-level characteristics. Specifically, in both analytical steps, we first tested a model without covariates (Model 1) and then sequentially expanded the model by entering additional sets of individual and regional covariates (Models 2–6).

## Results

### *Life satisfaction between partnered and single individuals*

In a first set of analyses, we investigated the association between relationship status and life satisfaction across all LADs (H1). Table 1 presents the results of the multilevel models, which reveal significant differences in life satisfaction between partnered and single individuals. Specifically, partnered individuals reported higher life satisfaction compared with single individuals, with a moderate effect size. This association remained robust across various sets of individual-level and region-level covariates, with the strength of the association only slightly decreasing ($SD = 0.58$–$0.52$) as more covariates were included (Models 2 to 6). In sum, then, these results suggest an overall life-satisfaction gap in favor of partnered individuals in Great Britain, supporting H1.

### *Moderating effect of regional relationship rates*

In a second set of analyses, we examined whether the association between relationship status and life satisfaction varied as a function of regional relationship rates (H2). Table 2 presents the results of the extended multilevel models, which include the main effect of regional relationship rates and their interaction with individual relationship status. The findings showed that there was a small significant interaction effect between regional relationship rates and individual relationship status. This interaction effect remained robust across various sets

**Table 1.** Multilevel Models Predicting Life Satisfaction From Relationship Status (H1) and Covariates

| Model | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | | Model 6 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictors | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI |
| Intercept | −0.41*** | [−0.42, −0.39] | −0.36*** | [−0.37, −0.35] | −0.58*** | [−0.60, −0.57] | −0.46*** | [−0.47, −0.45] | −0.42*** | [−0.43, −0.41] | −0.41*** | [−0.42, −0.40] |
| Relationship status | **0.58**** | [0.57, 0.59] | **0.58**** | [0.57, 0.59] | **0.58**** | [0.57, 0.58] | **0.55**** | [0.54, 0.56] | **0.52**** | [0.51, 0.53] | **0.52**** | [0.51, 0.53] |
| Age | | | −0.02*** | [−0.02, −0.01] | −0.01*** | [−0.02, −0.01] | −0.00* | [−0.01, −0.00] | −0.05*** | [−0.05, −0.04] | −0.05*** | [−0.05, −0.05] |
| Gender | | | −0.13*** | [−0.14, −0.12] | −0.16*** | [−0.17, −0.15] | −0.18*** | [−0.18, −0.17] | −0.18*** | [−0.19, −0.17] | −0.18*** | [−0.18, −0.17] |
| Education | | | | | 0.15*** | [0.15, 0.16] | 0.10*** | [0.09, 0.11] | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.13] | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.13] |
| Employment status | | | | | −0.05*** | [−0.06, −0.05] | −0.09*** | [−0.10, −0.09] | −0.13*** | [−0.14, −0.12] | −0.13*** | [−0.14, −0.12] |
| Middle income | | | | | 0.26*** | [0.25, 0.26] | 0.21*** | [0.20, 0.22] | 0.18*** | [0.17, 0.19] | 0.18*** | [0.17, 0.19] |
| High income | | | | | 0.50*** | [0.49, 0.51] | 0.40*** | [0.38, 0.41] | 0.33*** | [0.32, 0.34] | 0.33*** | [0.32, 0.34] |
| Health | | | | | | | 0.32*** | [0.32, 0.32] | 0.21*** | [0.21, 0.21] | 0.21*** | [0.20, 0.21] |
| Extraversion | | | | | | | | | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.12] | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.12] |
| Neuroticism | | | | | | | | | −0.25*** | [−0.25, −0.24] | −0.25*** | [−0.25, −0.24] |
| Agreeableness | | | | | | | | | 0.06*** | [0.06, 0.07] | 0.06*** | [0.06, 0.07] |
| Conscientiousness | | | | | | | | | 0.09*** | [0.08, 0.09] | 0.08*** | [0.08, 0.09] |
| Openness | | | | | | | | | −0.04*** | [−0.05, −0.04] | −0.04*** | [−0.05, −0.04] |
| Median population age | | | | | | | | | | | 0.00 | [−0.01, 0.01] |
| Birth rates | | | | | | | | | | | −0.03*** | [−0.04, −0.02] |
| Population density | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01*** | [−0.02, −0.01] |
| Median income | | | | | | | | | | | 0.00 | [−0.01, 0.00] |
| Political view | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01* | [−0.01, −0.00] |
| Religious affiliation | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01*** | [−0.02, −0.01] |

Note: The effect of interest (H1) is highlighted in bold. Model 1: $N = 382{,}078$. Model 2: $N = 381{,}251$. Model 3: $N = 302{,}053$. Model 4: $N = 302{,}047$. Model 5: $N = 302{,}045$. Model 6: $N = 272{,}770$. Life satisfaction and continuous predictors were *z*-standardized.
*$p \leq .05$. ***$p \leq .001$.

**Table 2.** Multilevel Models Predicting Life Satisfaction From Regional Relationship Rates (H2) and Covariates

| Model | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | | Model 6 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictors | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI | *b* | 95% CI |
| Intercept | −0.41*** | [−0.42, −0.40] | −0.37*** | [−0.38, −0.36] | −0.59*** | [−0.61, −0.58] | −0.47*** | [−0.48, −0.46] | −0.43*** | [−0.44, −0.42] | −0.42*** | [−0.43, −0.41] |
| Relationship status | 0.58*** | [0.57, 0.58] | 0.58*** | [0.58, 0.59] | 0.58*** | [0.57, 0.59] | 0.55*** | [0.54, 0.56] | 0.52*** | [0.51, 0.53] | 0.52*** | [0.52, 0.53] |
| Regional relationship rate | 0.01 | [−0.00, 0.02] | 0.01 | [−0.00, 0.02] | 0.01** | [0.00, 0.02] | 0.01** | [0.00, 0.02] | 0.01** | [0.00, 0.02] | 0.00 | [−0.01, 0.01] |
| Relationship Status × Regional Relationship rate | **0.03*** ** | [0.02, 0.03] | **0.03*** ** | [0.02, 0.04] | **0.03*** ** | [0.02, 0.04] | **0.03*** ** | [0.02, 0.04] | **0.03*** ** | [0.02, 0.03] | **0.03*** ** | [0.02, 0.04] |
| Age | | | −0.02*** | [−0.02, −0.02] | −0.01*** | [−0.02, −0.01] | −0.01** | [−0.01, −0.00] | −0.05*** | [−0.05, −0.05] | −0.05*** | [−0.05, −0.05] |
| Gender | | | −0.13*** | [−0.14, −0.12] | −0.16*** | [−0.17, −0.15] | −0.18*** | [−0.18, −0.17] | −0.18*** | [−0.19, −0.17] | −0.18*** | [−0.18, −0.17] |
| Education | | | | | 0.16*** | [0.15, 0.17] | 0.10*** | [0.09, 0.11] | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.13] | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.13] |
| Employment status | | | | | −0.05*** | [−0.06, −0.05] | −0.09*** | [−0.10, −0.09] | −0.13*** | [−0.14, −0.12] | −0.13*** | [−0.14, −0.12] |
| Middle income | | | | | 0.26*** | [0.25, 0.26] | 0.21*** | [0.20, 0.22] | 0.18*** | [0.17, 0.19] | 0.18*** | [0.17, 0.19] |
| High income | | | | | 0.50*** | [0.49, 0.51] | 0.40*** | [0.38, 0.41] | 0.33*** | [0.32, 0.34] | 0.33*** | [0.32, 0.34] |
| Health | | | | | | | 0.32*** | [0.32, 0.32] | 0.21*** | [0.21, 0.21] | 0.21*** | [0.20, 0.21] |
| Extraversion | | | | | | | | | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.12] | 0.12*** | [0.11, 0.12] |
| Neuroticism | | | | | | | | | −0.25*** | [−0.25, −0.24] | −0.25*** | [−0.25, −0.24] |
| Agreeableness | | | | | | | | | 0.06*** | [0.06, 0.07] | 0.06*** | [0.06, 0.07] |
| Conscientiousness | | | | | | | | | 0.09*** | [0.08, 0.09] | 0.08*** | [0.08, 0.09] |
| Openness | | | | | | | | | −0.04*** | [−0.05, −0.04] | −0.04*** | [−0.05, −0.04] |
| Median population age | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01* | [−0.02, −0.00] |
| Birth rates | | | | | | | | | | | −0.04*** | [−0.04, −0.03] |
| Population density | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01* | [−0.01, −0.00] |
| Median income | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01* | [−0.01, − 0.00] |
| Political view | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01** | [−0.01, −0.00] |
| Religious affiliation | | | | | | | | | | | −0.01** | [−0.01, −0.00] |

Note: Life satisfaction and continuous predictors were *z*-standardized. The effect of interest (H2) is highlighted in bold font. Model 1: $N = 382{,}078$. Model 2: $N = 381{,}251$. Model 3: $N = 302{,}053$. Model 4: $N = 302{,}047$. Model 5: $N = 302{,}045$. Model 6: $N = 272{,}770$.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

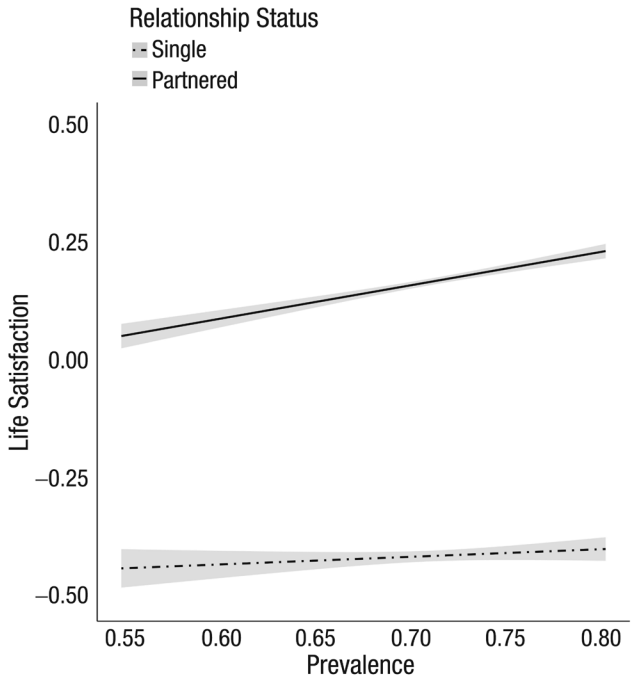



**Fig. 2.** Interaction effect between relationship status and regional relationship rates. Life satisfaction was *z*-standardized; shaded areas around the regression lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. $N$ = 382,078 participants ($n$ = 268,220; 70.2% partnered) from 379 Local Authority Districts.

of individual-level and region-level covariates, with the strength of the effect consistently remaining at 0.03 *SD* as more covariates were included (Models 2 to 6). Figure 2 illustrates the interaction effect, demonstrating that although partnered individuals consistently reported higher life satisfaction than single individuals, the gap was larger in regions with higher regional relationship rates. In regions with the lowest relationship rates, the gap (*d*) was 0.49, whereas in regions with the highest rates, it was 0.63, which reflects an increase of 28.6%. This widening of the gap primarily reflects differences among partnered individuals. Specifically, partnered individuals reported higher life satisfaction in regions with higher relationship rates (the slope for partnered individuals ranged from 0.03 to 0.04 *SD* across model conditions). In contrast, life satisfaction among single individuals was more or less independent of regional relationship rates (simple slopes ranged from 0.00 to 0.01 *SD* across model conditions). Together, these findings show that the life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals is more pronounced in regions where relationships are more prevalent, hence supporting H2.

## *Robustness checks*

To examine the robustness of the interaction effect between relationship status and regional relationship rates, we ran several nonpreregistered additional models (M2–14) and compared their interaction effects with those obtained from the original model (M1).

First, because our regional relationship rates were calculated directly from individuals' aggregated responses, we also tested our results using alternative regional relationship indicators. These indicators do not directly capture relationship rates but are based on official representative census information, namely regional marriage rates (M2) and regional cohabitation rates (M3). Second, to ensure that the observed interaction between relationship status and regional relationship rates was not confounded by unaccounted interactions with other regional-level indicators, we went beyond controlling for the association between regional characteristics and life satisfaction and additionally accounted for interactions between relationship status and regional-level covariates (M4–M9). Third, to ensure that the observed findings were not merely artifacts of broader cultural differences (e.g., higher relationship rates and overall well-being in certain regions of Great Britain), we included fixed effects at two levels: 11 regions (the nine broad regions of England plus Scotland and Wales; M10) and three larger cultural units (England, Scotland, and Wales; M11). Fourth, to improve the reliability of regional estimates, we raised the minimum threshold of LADs from at least 50 individuals to at least 250 (M12) and 500 (M13) individuals. Finally, as our data is correlational, it does not permit causal claims. One key threat to causality is geographical self-selection (e.g., happier partnered individuals relocating to regions with high relationship rates). To address this, we conducted an additional analysis including only individuals who still reside in the region where they grew up (this information was available in the data), effectively eliminating any migration-related biases (M14). All models controlled for individual-level covariates. More information about the methods of these additional models can be found in the Supplemental Material (pp. 10–11). Figure 3 summarizes these robustness tests (see Tables S4–S11 for further details) showing that the interaction between relationship status and regional relationship rates remained robust across all model specifications.

As part of these robustness tests (M4–M9), we found that the life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals varied not only across regional relationship rates, but also across other regional characteristics, such as median income, political views, and religious affiliation (see Table S6 for further details). As illustrated in Figure 4, the gap was larger in economically less prosperous regions (a) as well as in regions that were more politically conservative (b) and more religious (c). In lower-income regions, this pattern primarily reflected differences among partnered individuals, whose life satisfaction was higher in such regions (simple slope = −0.01

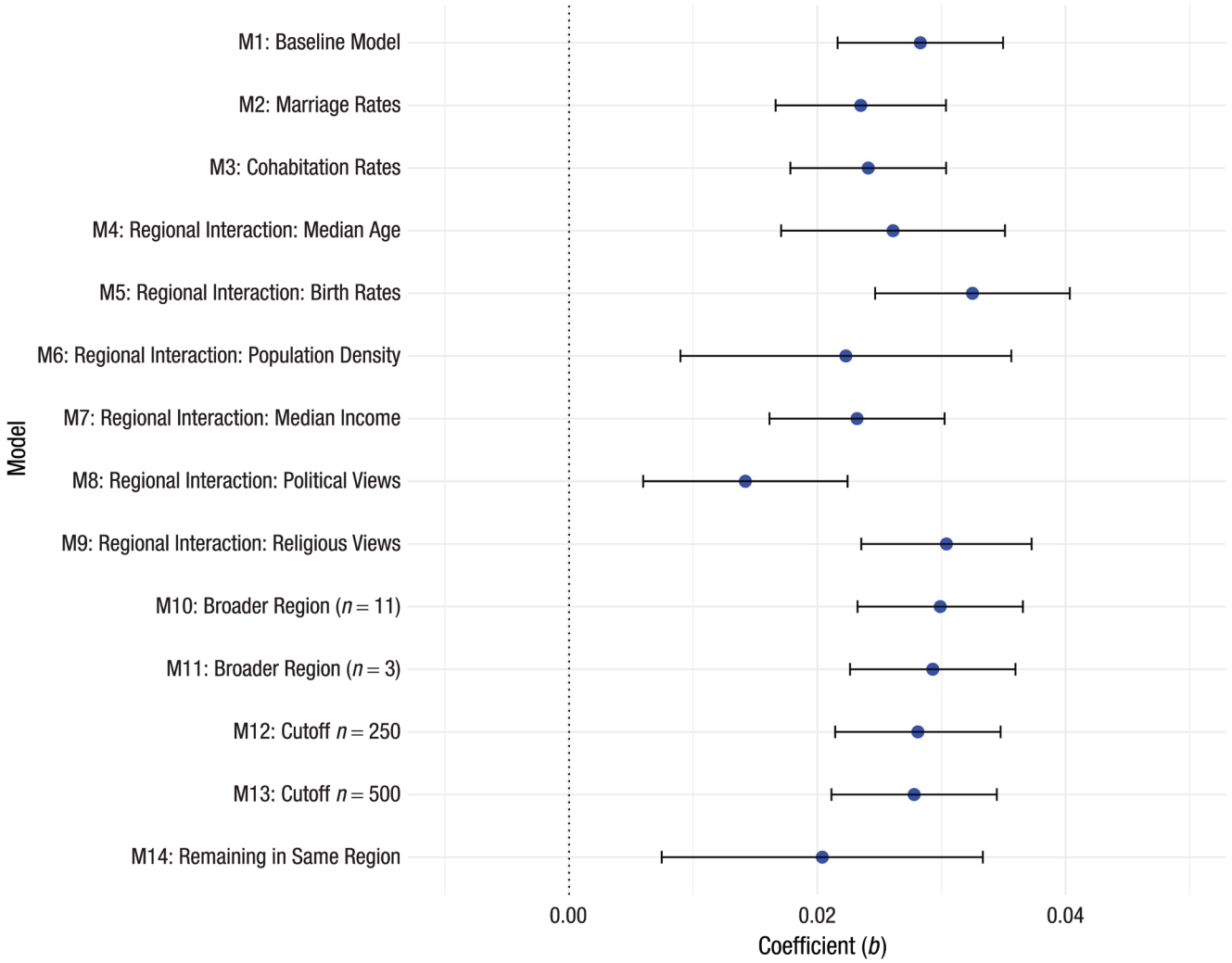



**Fig. 3.** Interaction effect between relationship status and regional relationship rates as a function of different model variations. We show interaction coefficients between relationship status and regional relationship rates with 95% confidence intervals for different models. All models controlled for individual-level covariates. M1 = original model; M2–M3 = models using census-based marriage and cohabitation rates; M4–M9 = models accounting for interactions with regional-level covariates; M10–M11 = models addressing broader cultural differences; M12–M13 = models with stricter inclusion criteria; and M14 = model controlling for migration-related biases. The dotted vertical line at $b = 0$ represents the null effect for reference.

*SD*). In contrast, in regions characterized by stronger conservative beliefs and higher religious affiliation, the widening of the gap mainly reflected differences among single individuals, whose life satisfaction was lower in these regions (simple slopes = −0.02 *SD*). To reiterate a key point for these present analyses, the hypothesized effect of regional relationship rates remained significant even when accounting for these additional regional characteristics. At the same time, these findings are also interesting in their own right, because they suggest that regional characteristics beyond relationship rates are relevant for the life-satisfaction gap. For example, partnered individuals may fare better in less prosperous regions because being in a romantic relationship can provide greater financial security through shared resources (e.g., dual incomes, shared housing costs; Karney, 2021). In contrast, single individuals may fare worse in more conservative and religious regions because of cultural or stigma-related processes (e.g., stronger normative pressures favoring partnership and greater social punishment for not conforming to these norms; Day et al., 2011). We note, however, that we did not formulate specific hypotheses for these effects. Consequently, these interpretations remain speculative, and a detailed examination of the underlying mechanisms lies beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, these results point to the systematic investigation of additional regional factors as a promising avenue for future research.

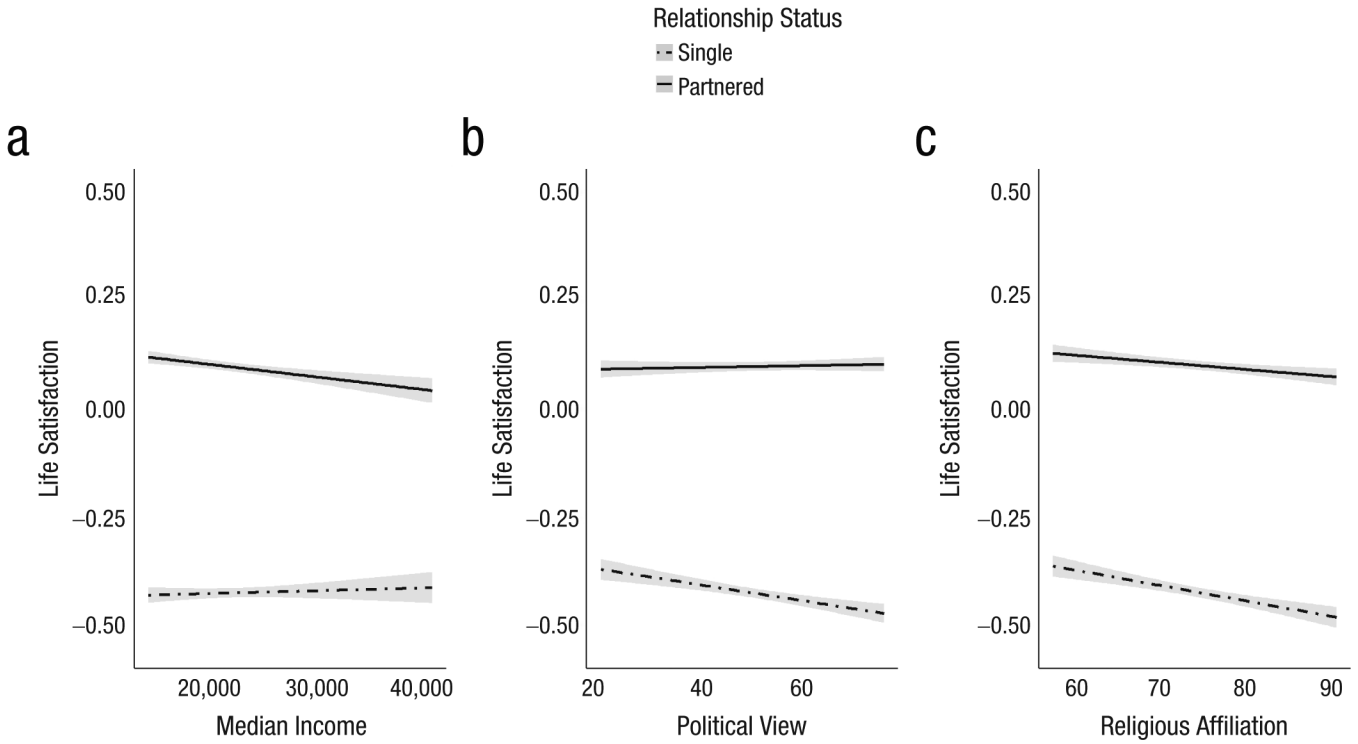



**Fig. 4.** Interaction between relationship status and regional characteristics (median income, political views, and religious affiliation). In (a) we show the interaction between relationship status and regional median income; in (b) we illustrate the interaction between relationship status and regional political views; (c) shows the interaction between relationship status and regional religious affiliation. Life satisfaction was *z*-standardized. Shaded areas around the regression lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. $N = 382{,}078$ participants ($n = 268{,}220$; 70.2% partnered) from 379 Local Authority Districts.

## *Follow-up analyses*

We conducted two nonpreregistered follow-up analyses to examine (a) whether the life-satisfaction gap shows similar patterns at an even smaller geographical scale across 218 neighborhoods in London and (b) whether individuals in regions with higher relationship rates place greater importance on having a romantic relationship.

***Within-city exploration.*** Our analysis of LADs within Great Britain is already more fine-grained compared with the broader geographical contexts used in previous research (i.e., entire nations or federal states). However, our data enabled us to examine geographical variation in the life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals on an even smaller local scale. Specifically, we zoomed into neighborhoods within the largest metropolitan region of Great Britain: London. We defined the city's boundaries according to the official Greater London definition (Office for National Statistics, 2021), which encompasses the entire metropolitan area governed by the Greater London Authority and is home to approximately 9 million people. Our data feature 52,836 participants living in London ($M_{age}$ = 33.05 years, $SD$ = 11.71, 63.4% female). We found that most of the London participants reported being in a romantic relationship ($n$ = 33,437; 63.3%).

Following previous research (Jokela et al., 2015), we aggregated individual information to the level of 218 London postcode districts (keeping only postal districts with 50 or more participants). As in our main analysis, we tested whether there was an overall life-satisfaction gap and whether this gap varied across neighborhood relationship rates. We again accounted for individual- and region-level characteristics in a stepwise manner. However, it is important to note that not all region-level characteristics are available at the neighborhood level. Specifically, we were able to obtain data for only three characteristics—median population age, population density, and religious affiliation—at the postal-district level. These characteristics were derived from the same secondary sources as those used for the LADs.

Figure 5a shows that relationship rates greatly varied across London neighborhoods. To illustrate, in Hayes only 42.9% of all participants were in a relationship, which is roughly half the rate of 82.3% in Westerham. Variation in relationship rates within London was even greater than across different LADs of Great Britain. We find that, overall, partnered individuals reported higher life satisfaction than single individuals, with effect sizes

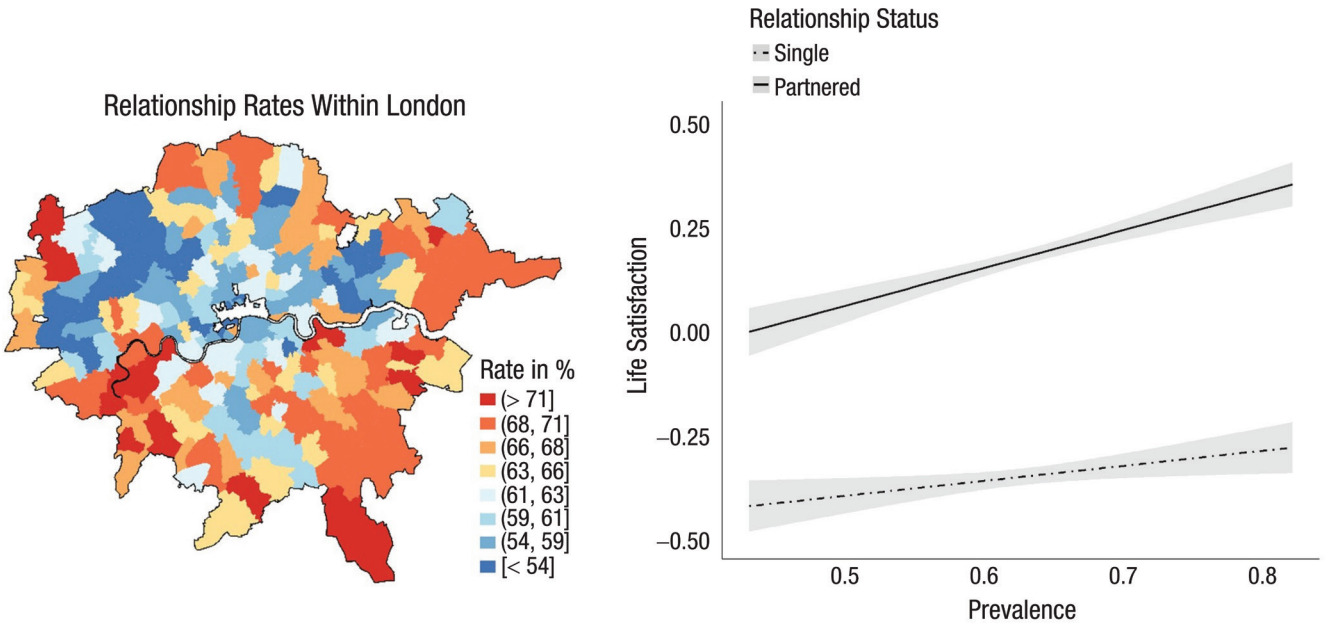



**Fig. 5.** Geographic variations in relationship rates across London and their interaction with relationship status. In (a) we show the geographic variation of relationship rates across districts; reddish colors indicate higher relationship rates and blueish colors indicate lower relationship rates. The legend on the right side shows the cutoffs of the regional relationship rates (min, max). In (b) is shown the interaction effect between relationship status and local relationship rates. Life satisfaction was *z*-standardized. Shaded areas around the regression lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. $N = 52{,}836$ participants ($n = 33{,}437$; 63.3% partnered) from 218 postal districts in London.

ranging from 0.46 to 0.54 standard deviations (see Table S12). Second, we find a significant positive interaction effect between relationship status and local relationship rates (0.03–0.04 *SD*: see Table S13). Figure 5b illustrates this effect, showing that the gap in life satisfaction between partnered and single individuals was larger in postal districts with a higher proportion of partnered individuals. In postal districts with the lowest relationship rates, the gap was $d = 0.41$, whereas in postal districts with the highest rates, the gap was $d = 0.62$, an increase of 51.22%. This widening of the life-satisfaction gap was again primarily observed for partnered individuals, who reported higher life satisfaction in neighborhoods with higher relationship rates (simple slopes ranging from 0.01–0.06 *SD* across model conditions). In contrast, no consistent association emerged for single individuals (simple slopes ranging from −0.02 to 0.02 *SD* across model conditions). In sum, the neighborhood-level analyses in London replicated the main findings observed at the LAD level.

***Regional differences in the goal of having a relationship.*** Several mechanisms may explain the larger life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals in regions with higher relationship rates, relying on our theoretical reasoning. Although our data allow us to establish an overall pattern of the life-satisfaction gap, they do not provide much opportunity for directly testing these proposed mechanisms. However, we identified one construct that could shed some light on one of these mechanisms: the importance to participants of having a satisfying marriage or relationship (reported on a scale ranging from 1, *unimportant*, to 5, *very important*). In regions with high relationship rates, prevailing norms and values may reinforce the view that being partnered is the expected or ideal status, potentially affecting how strongly individuals endorse the goal of being in a relationship themselves (Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). In such regions, partnered individuals may feel more aligned with their relational goals, whereas single individuals may experience a mismatch (Heu, 2023), potentially contributing to a larger life-satisfaction gap. Using the same analytic approach as for life satisfaction, we tested whether the importance placed on being in a relationship was higher among partnered and single individuals in LADs and postal districts with higher relationship rates.

Figures 6a (LADs) and 6b (postal districts; see Tables S14–S15 for details) summarize the results of this exploratory analysis. We found no evidence that either partnered or single individuals placed greater importance on being in a relationship in contexts with higher relationship rates. Partnered individuals consistently reported the high importance of having a satisfying relationship, with little variation across regions or postal districts (simple slopes ranging from 0.00 to 0.03 *SD* across model conditions). In contrast, single individuals placed even lower (not higher) importance on having a relationship in contexts with higher relationship rates (simple slopes ranging from −0.03 to −0.07 *SD* across model conditions). A

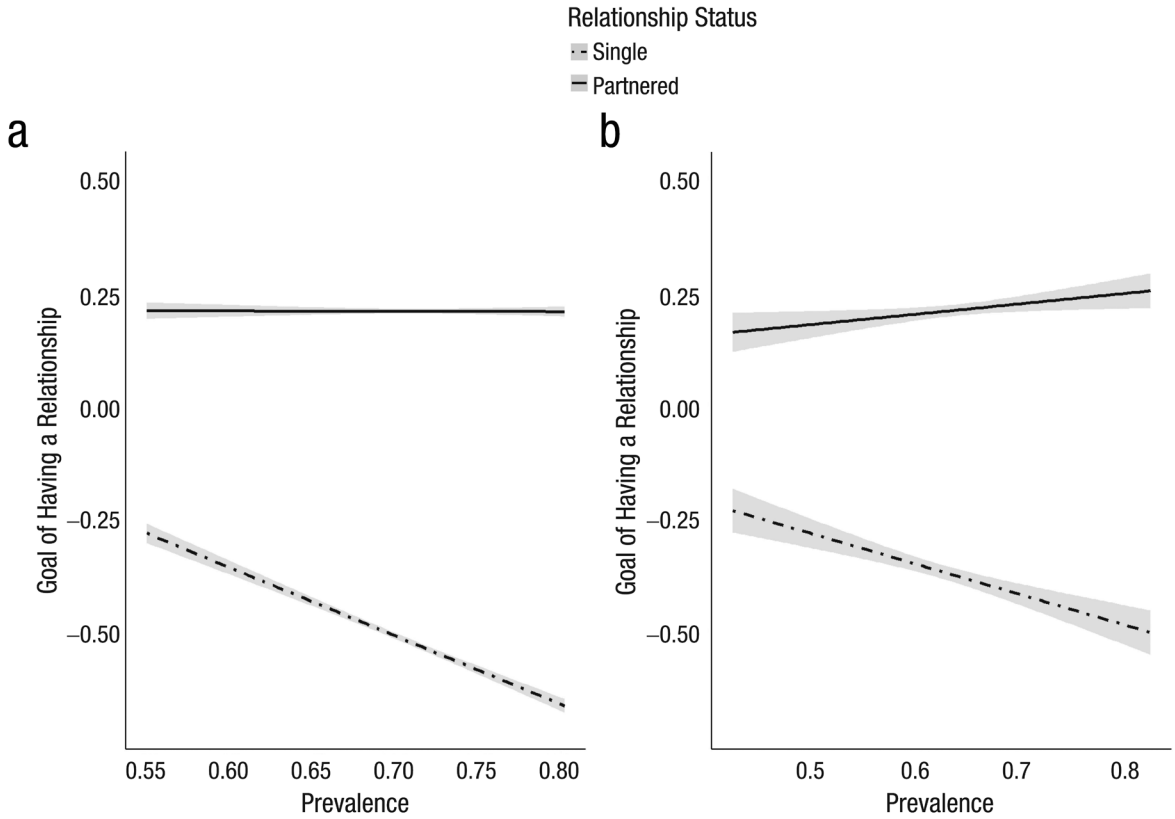



**Fig. 6.** Goal of having a romantic relationship varying across regional relationship rates. In (a) we show the results based on regional relationship rates across Local Authority Districts, or LADs ($N$ = 382,078 participants from 379 LADs). In (b) we show the results across postal districts in London ($N$ = 52,836 participants from 218 London postcode districts). The goal of having a relationship was $z$-standardized. Shaded areas around the regression lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

potential post hoc explanation could be that frequent exposure to partnered individuals leads single individuals to distance themselves from the goal of having a romantic relationship and shift their focus toward other life goals. We note, however, that these interpretations remain speculative and await testing in future research.

## Discussion

Using large-scale data from Great Britain, we replicated previous findings (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015; Hoan & MacDonald, 2024; Stahnke & Cooley, 2021; Stern et al., 2024), showing that partnered individuals, on average, report higher life satisfaction than their single counterparts. Extending this research, we have demonstrated that the size of this life-satisfaction gap is not uniform but instead varies systematically across geographic contexts. Specifically, we found that the gap was larger in regions with higher relationship rates and smaller in regions with lower relationship rates, a pattern consistent with the person–culture match perspective (Fulmer et al., 2010). Although modest in size, this effect was robust across numerous confounds and model specifications and replicated also at a finer geographic scale, across neighborhoods within London.

Why was the life-satisfaction gap larger in regions with higher relationship rates? Our findings suggest that the larger life-satisfaction gap in regions with higher relationship rates was mainly driven by higher satisfaction among partnered individuals, indicating that partnered individuals may benefit from living in regions where romantic relationships are more common. As outlined in the introduction, partnered individuals could experience greater satisfaction in these regions because they (a) feel more aligned with their relational goals (Heu, 2023), (b) experience higher social connection and support (Stavrova et al., 2013), and (c) receive more benefits related to taxes, health care, or housing (DePaulo, 2023). Although our follow-up analyses provided only limited support for the idea that partnered individuals place greater importance on being in a romantic relationship in regions with higher relationship rates, prevailing relationship rates may nevertheless shape everyday social and institutional experiences. In such contexts, partnered individuals may receive

greater social affirmation from family, friends, neighbors, local institutions, and community events, which in turn may contribute to their higher life satisfaction.

For single individuals, other regional characteristics, such as prevailing attitudes toward singlehood, may be more relevant for their life satisfaction than relationship rates per se. Specifically, our robustness checks showed that single individuals were less satisfied in regions characterized by stronger conservative beliefs and religious affiliation, contexts in which marriages and family formation are typically more strongly valued and institutionally supported (Day et al., 2011). In such regions, single individuals may be more likely to face social judgment and unsolicited advice within their social networks, as well as to encounter laws, policies, and institutional practices that make singlehood more challenging (DePaulo, 2023). Examining how prevailing regional attitudes toward singlehood and romantic relationships relate to the life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals therefore represents a promising direction for future research.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of our data restricts our ability to draw causal conclusions. Specifically, although the life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals may be larger in certain contexts because of higher relationship rates, it is also possible that individuals with certain personality traits or relationship orientations (e.g., stronger preference for romantic involvement) are more likely to move to such areas. Although our robustness checks provided no evidence for migration-related biases, future research could expand upon this work by employing longitudinal data to track individuals as they enter or exit romantic relationships and relocate to different regions. Experimental designs could also be used to manipulate perceived norms surrounding romantic relationships and test their effect on relationship motivations and life satisfaction to shed light on the direction of effects. Second, although we have discussed several potential mechanisms underlying the life-satisfaction gap, we were unable to empirically test them. Future studies should directly examine these mechanisms with a particular focus on differences in social experiences (e.g., availability of social support; Stavrova et al., 2013) and legal or institutional conditions (e.g., discrimination against singles; Morris et al., 2007) to better understand the factors driving geographic variation in the life-satisfaction gap. Third, life satisfaction is a rather broad indicator that is shaped by many individual and regional factors (Diener et al., 2018). Future research may benefit from examining more specific outcomes related to relationship status, such as satisfaction with one's relationship status (Lehmann et al., 2015). Fourth, although our study used data from a large and diverse sample, our analyses were limited to one country. We see no reason to believe our results to be specific to Great Britain, but we encourage future researchers to explore their generalizability to other countries.

Despite these limitations, our study makes several contributions to the literature on the well-being gap and person–culture match. In line with prior research, our findings reveal a consistent and meaningful life-satisfaction gap between partnered and single individuals, with differences of around half a standard deviation being far from trivial. This gap is comparable in magnitude to well-documented life-satisfaction differences associated with other major life circumstances, such as employment status or health (Dolan et al., 2008), underscoring the relevance of relationship status for individuals' overall quality of life. At the same time, we show that the magnitude of this gap is not fixed but instead varies substantially across geographic contexts, being larger in regions where romantic relationships are more common. This finding extends the person–culture match research by showing that its principles apply not only to personality traits, religious and political attitudes, and physical attributes (Berkessel et al., 2024; Jokela et al., 2015; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016; Stavrova et al., 2013), but also to relational attributes. Together, these findings emphasize the importance of situating relationship experiences within their geographic contexts and open new avenues for understanding where and why differences in well-being emerge between partnered and single individuals.

## Transparency

*Action Editor:* Julia Stern
*Editor:* Simine Vazire
*Author Contributions*

**Tita Gonzalez Avilés:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Visualization; Writing – original draft.

**Franz J. Neyer:** Conceptualization; Writing – review & editing.

**Peter J. Rentfrow:** Data curation; Investigation; Resources; Writing – review & editing.

**Tobias Ebert:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Methodology; Resources; Visualization; Writing – review & editing.

*Declaration of Conflicting Interests*

The authors declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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*Ethics*

This research received approval from the Psychology Research Ethic Committee of the University of Cambridge.

*Open Science Framework (OSF)*

To ensure long-term preservation, we registered all OSF files at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/P8QSF.

*Open Practices*

Open practices for this article are described in the Research Transparency Statement section, which appears at the end of the Introduction section in the main text.

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## Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information can be found at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/09567976261470394

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