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The Happiness Quotient

Do high expectations and a plethora of choices make modern women miserable?

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Exactly what does it take to make a woman happy?

One of the first to record her answer to that conundrum was the Marquise du Chatelet, whom history has recollected as the jilted mistress of Voltaire. That is short shrift: The brilliant marquise was a mother, a shopaholic, a passionate lover - and most significantly, a revolutionary scientist and mathematician who suspended wooden spheres from the rafters of her country estate to test Newton's theories, and who scribbled her insights until the candles burned to nothingness, plunging her hands into ice water to jolt herself awake. Her intellectual feverishness prompted the philosopher Immanuel Kant to sneer that such a woman "might as well have a beard," and Voltaire himself, having received solo title-page credit for a book he privately admitted she practically dictated to him, declared that the marquise was a great man whose only shortcoming was having been born female.

Thus duly boxed in by the gender conventions of 18th century France - and by an unplanned pregnancy at age 43 that she presciently regarded as a death sentence - the Marquise du Chatelet brought a unique perspective to a treatise she titled "Discourse on Happiness."

To be truly happy, she ruefully concluded, "one must be susceptible to illusions, for it is to illusions that we owe the majority of our pleasures. Unhappy is the one who has lost them."

So where are we nearly three centuries later? Recalibrate for feminism, which aimed to liberate women from the constricting corsets of sexist roles. Factor in an unprecedented level of education, greater earning power, more economic independence, more reproductive control and access to virtually any career, from CEO to soldier to leader of the free world. In theory, at least, a woman's prospects for happiness have never looked brighter.

Yet the paradox: Two recent studies reveal that a majority of American women are finding the holy grail of happiness more elusive. Researchers were startled to find that women now report less happiness than in the early 1970s; and where they once indicated greater levels of happiness and life satisfaction than men, that's now reversed.

"Aha!" opposing sides in the culture wars declared, glomming onto the findings to bolster their own takes on gender conflict. But this newly identified "happiness gap" is hardly a prima facie indictment of feminism for having worsened the lot of women, given that most women adamantly oppose to a return to rigid gender roles. Nor could it be attributable mainly to the notion that men are slacking while women work a

second shift - full time in the workforce and a second full-time job at home. The results show that women are spending the same number of hours working now, on average, as in the 1970s, although a greater percentage is outside work. As for housework, men have picked up a greater, though still minority, share. Much of the cooking and cleaning is "hired out" or simply goes undone (Americans now spend $26 billion more each year on restaurants than grocery stores.)

Even so, men today report spending less time on activities they regard as stressful and unpleasant than a few decades ago. Women still spend about 23 hours a week in the unpleasant-activity zone - which was about 40 minutes more than men four decades ago, and now amounts to 90 minutes more than men.

And feeling guiltier in the process.

On a recent morning, one such woman is Lisa Boucher.

A 46-year-old Brisbane resident, she dashes around the kitchen serving breakfast to her 2 1/2-year-old daughter with the phone tucked into her ear as she resolves an urgent snafu on her job as a project manager for a high-end residential construction company. There isn't a minute to spare: She must whisk her daughter to preschool, make a meeting in San Francisco, use her lunch hour to retrieve her daughter and a nanny and deposit them at home, then return to work until almost dark, whipsaw back home, throw together a quick dinner, hang out to play with her daughter, tuck her into bed, then crash - and, with luck, get sufficient sleep to do it all over again when her alarm rings the next morning.

She feels guilty that it's the nanny who gets to spend so much fun time with her daughter. She feels guilty that she no longer has time for writing or any other artistic expression. She feels guilty when her mother, who she says uses the words "you should" a lot, suggests they are too social, even though they usually take their daughter with them when they go out. She feels guilty about how infrequently the house gets vacuumed, telling her husband, "Yes, the yard looks great, but we live on the inside - the raccoons live on the outside." Truth be told, she even feels guilty about not spending more "quality time" with the primary catalyst for all that vacuuming: her husband's shedding golden retriever.

"I want to preface this by saying that you're catching me on a really crazed week. I know I'm lucky to have a beautiful, happy kid; a great job; a great husband who pitches in," she acknowledges. "But here's where I am right at this moment: Last night I just turned to him and said, 'You know what, I'm not happy in my life.

" 'I've lost my joy.' "

Having watched her own parents divorce when she was 13, forcing her homemaker mother to get a job, Boucher vowed that she would never be felled by a similar fate. "I swore that I would never depend on any man, that I would establish my own successful career, that I wouldn't let anybody into my life that much," she says. "But now I have somebody to share my life with, and what I really want most is to be able to stay home and spend time with my daughter.

"So we women broke out of the little boxes that defined us, and now it seems like everybody's trying to get back in there. I'm trying to get back in."

Boucher isn't advocating an abdication of the women's movement. What she craves is a simpler life and more time at home, even if that means selling their house and moving somewhere cheaper. But the real estate market is slipping, and she and her husband must pay down debt incurred from the purchase of his company a few years ago.

"I know I don't really want to go back into a box. I just want the time to enjoy the moments, you know? Choice is a wonderful thing, but it's such a double-edged sword. The good news is we have all these choices ... but the bad news is we've got all these choices."

Measuring human happiness is tricky science: There is no "happy thermometer" to tuck under one's tongue. So while happiness research is booming, researchers wrestle with how to measure it, and account for data dependent on self-reporting of debatable reliability (although scientists find that people who describe themselves as happier also show outward signs validating that description - for example, they smile more). In recent years, they have puzzled over why 45 percent of Republicans say they're "very happy" when only 30 percent of Democrats do, or why married people report more happiness than singles, or why an index claimed the "happiest Zip code" belongs to Branson, Mo.

But a gender-based "happiness gap" is particularly complicated, given that men tend to see "Are you happy?" as a yes-or-no proposition. For women, it's an essay question.

In one recent study, two economists at the University of Pennsylvania analyzed 35 years of data from the widely regarded General Social Survey and other assessments, including the Virginia Slims American Women's Poll and the Monitoring the Future survey of teenagers.

Since 1972, women's self-described levels of happiness have fallen a few percentage points and now rest below that of men, on average, in every age category. It is particularly pronounced in those ages 30 to 44 - not coincidentally, women dealing with child rearing and aging parents, while reaching a critical point in their careers.

This drop in female happiness is pervasive - it also holds true regardless of marital status, education and employment. The only exception researchers were able to tease out was among African Americans. No one's certain why African American women report higher levels of happinness than they did in the '70s, but it's an intriguing aberration that merits follow-up.

While the gap is not huge, research co-author Betsey Stevenson said it was stunning given that by objective measures, the status of women's lives has improved in recent decades. "We would have expected their happiness to shoot up, not fall," she said.

Meanwhile, at Princeton University, another economist and a team of psychologists simultaneously stumbled across a gender "happiness gap" while analyzing dour decades worth of data on what Americans do with their time and how they feel when they're doing it.

Working-age women, for example, increasingly spend more time on paid work, caring for adults and watching TV - and less time cooking, ironing, dusting, entertaining and reading - than in the 1960s. But the data also reveals that men are spending less time on paid work and relaxing more - including watching more TV. In essence, men have gotten the knack of spending less time doing things they consider

unpleasant.

Women, on the other hand, spend more time with family and friends but find it more stressful than men do. (Of course, such time often involves child or elder care, or hostessing, and could rightfully be categorized as work as well.)

Lead author Alan Krueger can only speculate on why, for example, men enjoy being with their parents while women find it more unpleasant than laundry. He told the New York Times that women typically spend time helping helping parents pay bills or plan a holiday, while "for men, it tends to be sitting on the sofa and watching football with their dad."

Both research papers raised more questions than they answered about the emotional well-being of men and, especially, of women.

Perhaps the most persuasive explanation for the happiness gap echoes Lisa Boucher's observation: Having choices means that women actually must choose. Or, as Bob Seger would put it, what to leave in, what to leave out. Acknowledge the axiom of the time-space continuum: A woman can only be in one place at a time, and any given day cannot contain more than 24 hours.

"My grandmother used to say too many choices make you sick," said Mary Nolan, taking in the view from her Financial District office. "I get this from my business bent, but I do believe we're too afraid to be wrong. We're afraid that if we make a wrong choice, we can't turn around and change it. Which is really unfortunate, because courage often comes from recognizing the wrong choice and reversing direction."

In her 30s and 40s, Nolan focused on building a successful career in insurance underwriting. "I liked my life the way it was, and I was not ready to commit to someone else and consider their needs on a 24-7 basis," she says. "When it got to the point where I couldn't have children, I no longer felt a need to be married. But then I started to really miss having a partner in my life." She found one on eHarmony.com, adding, "Waiting until I was 50 gave me a better understanding of what it means to be married."

Still, some choices are irreversible. "If I had it to do over again, I would have [had] kids," she says. "That's the only real regret I have in my whole life." But Nolan also is determined not to let "what ifs" corrode her happiness. To the contrary, she says she's the happiest she's ever been.

Sipping her morning java at a Petaluma coffee shop, Shannon Stearns says her secret to happiness also depends on making peace with what to let go of - particularly given what she calls the "totally crazed state" of her life. It's a skill she still struggles to master at age 36, as a marketing professional for CamelBak and the mother to sons Wally, 5, and Murphy, 2 1/2.

"In 1972, women were expected to contribute to the PTA bake sale and keep a clean house," she says. "Today I'm expected to help run the school auction, sell wrapping paper, catch up on all my work e-mails for two hours after my kids are in bed - the list goes on and on and on. And the scale is bigger.

"The only way I survive with a tiny fraction of sanity is that I'm getting better about saying no.

"I don't have time for friends, fitness or fashion. I'll go two weeks without checking my voice mail at work because it's a time-suck. I've given up several career opportunities because, dammit, I won't work on

Fridays, and yes, three out of four of those Fridays are haircuts and doctors appointments - but the fourth Friday is taking Wally and Murphy to the park and playing safari with them. And I won't give that up for anything."

Nonetheless, Stearns admits she sometimes is haunted by remorse over what she must neglect. "My college roommate called me for my birthday in March, and I still haven't called her back. I need to at least say, 'I'm not the horrible friend that you think I am...' "

Of course, choice is relative: The spectrum narrows for poor women living paycheck to paycheck. But for the first time in history, women confront a wider array of life alternatives than men, who rarely contemplate, for example, putting their careers on hold to care for children or aging parents. We're still adjusting to this shift in the cultural paradigm.

When researchers ask teenage girls what is important to them - finding a successful job, staying close to their friends, having a family, looking good and so on - they discovered that their answer was "everything." They ranked nothing as less important than it had been in the past.

The unquestioned modern mantra is that freedom comes through maximizing choice. Swarthmore psychology Professor Barry Schwartz says that's why supermarkets stock 75 salad dressings, why a single electronics store's product line allows buyers to construct more than 6 million stereo systems. And it's why someone, somewhere is busy creating a combo MP3 player/nose hair trimmer/crème brulee torch.

"More choices are better, but more and more choices are not. Too much choice produces not liberation but paralysis," says Schwartz, the author of "The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less." He cites studies demonstrating that consumers are less likely to buy products - from jams to mutual funds - if they are given too many options.

The same principle applies to women's life choices.

"Even if you overcome paralysis and make a choice, you end up less satisfied than if you had fewer options," Schwartz contends. "Whatever salad dressing you choose, it won't be perfect, and you end up thinking about the ones you didn't buy. And the imagined alternative induces you to regret the decision you made. Not only that, but when you have no choice and things aren't perfect, you can blame the world.

"But when you have all these choices and you still feel regretful and unsatisfied, you end up blaming yourself. Hence, guilt."

The alchemy of female content may be to make bold decisions and then refuse to be tormented by the seductive lure of the untaken path.

"The reason things seemed better back when they were worse," Schwartz says, "is because people with few choices and lowered expectations could expect to be pleasantly surprised." That also might explain why the World Values Survey of 65 countries found the happiest people in Nigeria, a country lacerated with instability and poverty, while the United States lagged in 16th place.

The dark underbelly of lofty expectations is very real, says Stearns' mother, Sharon Morgan. An educational consultant and reformed former "stress cadet" who worked three jobs while raising her family -

her daughter distinctly remembers going to sleep to the staccato of her mom's typewriter - she has scaled back on work to spend more time with her grandsons.

"As the ERA woke women up, I remember that initial thrill of empowerment sweeping over us," she said. "But Shannon's generation has had to face all the implications we didn't fully anticipate, and I see how incredibly hard it can be. I don't know anybody who would want to go back to the way it was, but I think those high expectations are taking a toll on women's happiness."

For one thing, progress plateaued short of true gender equity: Women still earn 77 cents for every dollar men earn. A study this spring by the American Association of University Women found that a year after college graduation, women earn 20 percent less than their male counterparts - an inequity that within a decade will stretch to 31 percent. Even after adjusting for parenthood, choice of field, hours worked and the like, a quarter of the gap remained. That's unlikely to enhance women's feelings of well-being.

Many women also set stratospheric expectations for themselves, and for each other - reinforced by the cult of Martha Stewart, a slew of self-improvement books, the prevalence of plastic surgery. We've come to regard our work lives, our home lives and our private lives as projects to be endlessly tweaked in pursuit of perfection.

Even those conscious of the trap still fall for it. Stevenson, one of the University of Pennsylvania researchers, cops to recently loading the dishwasher because the plumber was coming. Her life partner and fellow researcher, Justin Wolfers, said, "What do you care, it's just the plumber. Do you think he'll be telling people what a dirty house we have?"

"Women need to learn not to be motivated so much by what people expect or say or think of us," she acknowledges. "The key is picking what it is we want to do well - and then not hearing the judgment of other people about the other domains."

Another factor behind the happiness differential may be that women are more prone to take their emotional temperature.

"I think a lot of women are just naturally more reflective, that they check in with themselves more than men," said Christina Whittenburg, 30, a first-grade teacher from Oakland. "Women are feelers. Men tend to be thinkers, more tied to the practical. It takes more of a shock or jolt to make them look inward. We're more likely to ask ourselves if we're happy."

And that could create its own problems, contends Darrin McMahon, a history professor at Florida State and author of the book "Happiness: A History."

For millennia, humans didn't expect to be happy in this life - that was what awaited them in the hereafter. Not until the Enlightenment did people believe they had the right to pursue happiness - today further interpreted as the right to be happy. But as John Stuart Mill cautioned, "Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.... Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness."

McMahon, whose critique is not gender specific, argues that we live in a society where we feel pressure to

be happy. "When we're not, we feel like failures," he says. "What we get is the unhappiness of not being happy."

And women aren't just more self-aware - they also tend to feel more responsible for everyone else.

"Women still bear the brunt of the emotional work within the family because men just are not as alert to all the emotional cues," says Cornelia Busse, a psychotherapist in Sonoma. "They're not mining experiences with kids and relatives and friends the way women do, or worrying about them or feeling as responsible for everybody else. This is our territory, but frankly it places a huge burden on us. I think it leads us to be less happy."

While wishing men would take on more "emotional work," Busse also encourages women to stop being helicopter parents and obsessing over every personal conflict. "Ask yourself, 'What happens if I let it go and stop taking the emotional temperature of everyone in the room?' The answer probably is 'not much.' "

If nothing else, the declaration of a happiness gender gap is generating provocative conversation. The researchers themselves note that because men traditionally were less happy, perhaps women's happiness has diminished as they've entered into their world and are now bedeviled by the same woes that have long depressed men.

Or maybe the happiness gap isn't actually new at all. "Freakonomics" author and economist Steven Levitt suggests "there was enormous social pressure on women in the old days to pretend they were happy even if they weren't."

Like the Marquise du Chatelet, perhaps now we're abandoning our illusions and simply being more honest.

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