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The International Herald Tribune

July 29, 2008 Tuesday

Happy in America; Editorial observer

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SECTION: OPINION; Pg. 7

LENGTH: 573 words

DATELINE: NEW YORK

Sometimes, I wish America's founding fathers had included an instruction manual with the Declaration of Independence, like when it came to the pursuit of happiness.

Money is one way to go about it, of course. And it has generally been true that the rich are happier than the poor. But something else must be happening to Americans that is affecting their sense of well-being.

Despite the fact that income inequality - the chasm between rich and poor - has grown to levels rarely seen outside the third world, happiness inequality in the United States seems to have declined sharply over the past 35 years. And that is not because everyone is just that much more cheerful.

According to new research by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, the happiness gap between blacks and whites has fallen by two-thirds since the early 1970s. The gender gap (women used to be happier than men) has disappeared.

Most significant, the disparity in happiness within demographic groups has also shrunk: The unhappiest 25 percent of the population has gotten a lot happier. The happiest quarter is less cheerful.

It seems odd that happiness would become more egalitarian over a period in which the share of the nation's income sucked in by the richest 1 percent of Americans rose from 7 percent to 17 percent. In fact, the report does find a growing happiness gap between Americans with higher levels of education and those with less, which is roughly in line with the widening pay gap between the skilled and unskilled.

But other things have evidently been going on that are affecting Americans' contentment. The big decrease in the inequality of cheer occurred roughly between the early 1970s and 1990 - a time of vast social and legal change when new freedoms and protections made their way into different aspects of life and work. Together with new technologies, like the pill, they have given people more control over their lives.

It is difficult to interpret polling data about people's feelings. The research is based on a happiness question in the General Social Survey, a large poll conducted since 1972. I'm suspicious of people who say they know just how they feel, beyond certain well-defined itches. It's hard to say sometimes whether I'm happy about my career or merely grateful I'm still employed.

Still, it is not surprising that happiness among blacks rose in the years after the civil rights law outlawed segregation and discrimination on the basis of race. Wolfers speculates that the gay-straight happiness gap is also likely to have declined over the period, for similar reasons.

Changes in family life might also help. Married people are happier than unmarried people, on average. Still, later marriages and more divorces might have winnowed out the unhappiest marriages. And while the shift to two-earner families brings to mind the stressful rush from work to pick the kid up at day care, it also has empowered unhappy stay-at-home moms.

Despite its egalitarian feel, we shouldn't be overly pleased about the shift in the joy distribution. For all the changes in the mix, Americans are no happier, on average, than they were in the early 1970s and might be somewhat less so. The framers thought that Americans' right to chase happiness around was a self-evident truth.

We could do with some advice about how to pin it down.

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LOAD-DATE: August 3, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper