

Happy to be unhappy

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By Chrystia Freeland

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Recent studies suggesting a growing “happiness gap” between men and women have captured the headlines. That’s no surprise: the battle of the sexes is at least as old as Adam and Eve.

But, if you read the fine print, you may agree with me that these familiar gender duels are the less interesting aspect of Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers’ September paper on “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness”. What caught my eye was the authors’ assertion that their findings “raise provocative questions...about the legitimacy of using subjective well-being to assess broad social changes”.

I liked the contrarian sound of that, particularly because these days “subjective well-being”, which you and I might prefer to term “happiness”, is no longer the exclusive province of poets, philosophers and the makers of pre-school children’s videos. It is starting to be claimed by public policymakers, especially those of a progressive bent.

The New York Times, for example, this month published an editorial comment arguing that “30 years from now, reducing unhappiness could become another target of policy, like cutting poverty”.

Now, I am as much in favour of happiness as the next person. But I’ve also lived in a society built, at least in part, on utopian dreams of making everyone happy through enlightened government action – it was called the Soviet Union and I think we can all agree it didn’t really work. So I called Prof Stevenson with high hopes of discovering a well-reasoned debunking of what its practitioners are calling the new “science” of happiness.

Honesty compels me to admit that I didn’t quite find one. What Prof Stevenson thinks her paper has revealed is how hard it is to compare the happiness of similar populations over time. Thus, she thinks we need to be cautious about assuming that women reported their own happiness in the same way 35 years ago as they do today. Maybe women haven’t become less happy, we just talk about our feelings in different ways.

Beyond that, I can’t claim Prof Stevenson as a thorough-going happiness sceptic. She reminded me of the research tying our self-reported levels of happiness to clinically measurable signs of well-being. And she believes “we could do a better job of helping people get more happiness out of their lives”.

One favourite example of the happiness camp is the trade-off between having a big house and a longer commute. We think a bigger house will make us happy, so we move to the suburbs. But in making that choice, most of us don’t take enough account of how swiftly our pleasure in our beautiful new home will be ground down by the twice daily misery of a longer commute. Helping us as individuals make these kinds of specific life choices seems like an eminently sensible use of happiness research.

But as a guiding principle for living our lives or shaping our societies, I think we could do worse than remember that the framers of the Constitution put the pursuit of happiness after life and liberty in their list of inalienable rights. And it is not just that life and liberty are more important than happiness, but that some very important life pursuits probably make us unhappy.

Take having children. As Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert points out in *Stumbling on Happiness*, “Every human culture tells its members that having children will make them happy.” The problem, Gilbert writes, is that studies show the opposite: “Marital satisfaction decreases dramatically after the birth of the first child and increases only when the last child leaves home.”

My children are too young to read the FT, so I can safely admit I don’t find Gilbert’s assertion too surprising. But I don’t find it to be very disturbing, either. Most things I am pleased to have done – being a mother, writing this column – involve a lot of minute-by-minute unhappiness. And some of the people I admire the most have chosen lives that involve a lot worse than that.

Consider Dmitry Muratov, the editor of Russia's Novaya Gazeta, who came to New York this week to collect an International Press Freedom award. He said his prize gave him no pleasure: one reason he got it was that three of his friends who reported for Novaya Gazeta have been killed. Muratov doesn't think he'll ever really be happy again.

Thanksgiving is my favourite American holiday and my favourite expression of it this week was the ritual at my two-year-old's nursery school of asking the children what they are thankful for. I'm thankful for my own personal happiness, of course – diminished though I now know it to be by my offspring – but I'm also thankful for people such as Muratov who are forgoing theirs.

Chrystia Freeland is the FT's US managing editor

chrystia.freeland@ft.com

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