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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: Happiness research should be respected more

By Andrew Oswald

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From Prof Andrew Oswald.

Sir, Although Martin Wolf says sensible things in his article "Why progressive taxation is not the route to happiness" (June 6), at some points his argument is incomplete or wrong.

First, as Mr Wolf shows, reported happiness has run flat in the rich countries over the last few decades. That graph could usefully be pinned up in every prime minister's and president's office. Although not explained in the article, in some nations, such as Britain and the Netherlands, we know that formal measures of mental health have worsened over time.

Second, Mr Wolf mentions that he sees the philosophical and scientific underpinnings of this line of research as far from persuasive. He does not give his reasons. What we do know is that anonymous referees with enough PhD certificates to wallpaper every floor of the FT's London headquarters have checked the countless "happiness" articles that have appeared recently in economics, psychology and epidemiology journals. The outright rejection rate in these journals is about 90 per cent, and it is normal to take five years from beginning on a project to seeing it appear in a refereed journal. This does not mean the science is correct; academics often wander down paths that turn out to be muddle-headed. But it does mean that the science is the best we have in 2007, and perhaps that should be respected a little more.

Third, almost all researchers would agree with Mr Wolf that the happiness literature has not proved the case for progressive taxation. The best statement of exactly that was presented by David Weisbach last week in a conference at the University of Chicago; it can be read on the web. The same conference saw a remarkable paper by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, both of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, in which they document an apparent decline across western society in women's happiness relative to that of men. This fact is important and little-known.

Fourth, the happiness literature should not be treated as something to buttress prior political views. Researchers who see red and blue flashing from their computer screens are not likely to be ones we should trust.

Andrew Oswald,  
Professor of Economics,  
University of Warwick,  
Warwick CV4 7AL

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