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Ellen Goodman: In pursuit of ‘self-reported subjective well-being’

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BOSTON — Not long ago a group of writers decided to publish a book of essays we called: “Feminism Made Me Happy.” It was an in-your-face title, a deliberate attempt to counter the narrative we all knew by heart. The one that kept describing how the women’s movement had left us stressed out, discontented, wrenched from home, hearth and motherhood to struggle and fail at doing it all.

Life and writers being what they are, we never did the book — excuse me, we haven’t yet done the book! — but we have had some terrific lunches. Now I think we are due for another one because we are in the midst of another dust-up over research published under the (too) provocative headline: “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness.”

Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, partners in marriage and research, dove into the data and came up with numbers suggesting a decline in women’s happiness or, to be more precise, in their “self-reported subjective well-being.” In 1972, women were four points more likely than men to describe themselves as “very happy.” Today they are one point less likely than men to check that box.

This is hardly proof of a mass depression, but the story fueled the predictable debates on Web sites and talk shows. The controversy pitted those who blame declining happiness on too much change against those who blame it on too little change. And those, of course, who just blame the messengers.

Stevenson and Wolfers should have known they were walking into this propeller when they linked the women’s movement and happiness together. The paradox, as this pair framed it, was that despite all the improvement in women’s lives over the last 35 years, despite barriers that went down and opportunities that went up, women weren’t “self-reporting” greater happiness.

Our lunch group could have warned the researchers against one sentence that truly raised hackles. “As women’s expectations move into alignment with their experiences,” they speculate, “this decline in happiness may reverse.” Oh goodie, lower your expectations and get happy, gals?

In fairness, the researchers didn’t pin the decline in happiness — oops, “self-reported subjective well-being” — on any specific ideology or social change. After all, it affected married and single, parents and nonparents, working and stay-at-home mothers alike.

Indeed Stevenson, a new mom, says she was surprised by the paradox. “I look back and think, ‘Oh my God I have to be happier than my mother. I have so many more choices.’” She and her husband pulled many strings to unravel the happiness conundrum. Have we doubled the areas in which women are expected to perform brilliantly? Was 1972 a blip of hope on the radar screen? Are women now given more permission to express rather than repress unhappiness?

Or, for that matter, is a subjective assessment of well-being, ye ol’ happiness, a pretty useless way to assess social change?

One thing we can say for sure is that women aren’t nostalgic for the old days. If anyone is, just watch a few episodes of “Mad Men” as an antidote with its suffocated Mad Wife Betty Draper and its slapped-down Working Woman Peggy Olsen. If you prefer nonfiction, leaf through the early chapters of Gail Collins’ history of “When Everything Changed” to those magical yesteryears when a flight attendant was weighed, measured and hired to be a flying geisha.

Going forward to the past won’t bring a grin to our lips — excuse me, a self-reported sense of well-being to our database. Happiness is a pretty elusive state and an even more elusive research subject. We are, as they say, happy as our least happy child, worried as the idea of Iran with a nuclear weapon, and insecure as our retirement fund. As for linking happiness and social history, today’s flight attendant isn’t going to wake up every morning and assess her own well-being in comparison to her 1970s predecessor any more than I wake up grateful not to walk four miles in the snow to school. It doesn’t work that way.

Feminism made me happy? Not, I assure you in a permanent state of good cheer. It opened doors. It opened our eyes — to everything, including what still needs to be done. The women’s movement never promised us a rose garden or a warm bath of contentment. It offered a new way to understand the world, a lens on injustice and a tool to use in the pursuit of happiness. It’s a work in progress.

That’s happiness? Close enough.

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