

Blame Angelina Jolie

Her entire Oscar-winning, serial-adopting, Brad Pitt-snagging, plane-piloting, unattainably hot-looking existence makes women around the world feel hopelessly inadequate and therefore unhappy.

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Women, it seems, are bummed out these days.

A study released last month from the National Bureau of Economic Research and the University of Pennsylvania showed that even though men's and women's happiness levels have both gone down over the last few decades, women's "subjective well-being" has declined "both absolutely and relatively to men." The data came from a cross-section of ethnic and socioeconomic groups in several industrialized countries, and appeared to be big news primarily for one reason: When the same research was conducted in the 1970s, women reported higher levels of happiness than they do today.

Is that because feminism turned out to be a total dud? Or were women in the '70s hypnotized into serenity by those yellow smiley faces? No one seems quite sure.

The research paper, which was presented by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers and will appear in a forthcoming issue of *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, is rife with hypotheses but resists drawing conclusions. But that doesn't mean the commentariat didn't immediately weigh in. People went a little nuts over this study, most notably *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, who offered up a handful of theories as to why women weren't as cheery as they'd apparently been in the days of avocado-green appliances.

"The achievements of the feminist era may have delivered women to greater unhappiness," Douthat wrote. He also pointed out that the steady advance and de-stigmatization of single motherhood "threatens the interests and happiness of women." Furthermore, in a display of rhetorical showmanship that I appreciated for its boldness if not its conclusion, he wondered if women, who "prefer egalitarian, low-risk societies," were made anxious by "the cowboy capitalism of the Reagan era."

In fairness, Douthat allowed that "all this ambiguity lends itself to broad-brush readings." He wasn't saying the study proved any of his musings. He was just, you know, *saying*.

And shortly thereafter, a lot of other people joined the chorus: other columnists, bloggers and, presumably, the women at book club meetings who would much rather discuss this sort of thing than discuss the book they're reading. Many of them took umbrage at Douthat's column, but more seemed intent on finding the source of this newly discovered malcontent. Was it over-scheduling? Over-parenting? A cultural obsession with physical appearance? Perhaps only Betty Friedan could know for sure.

The researchers, for their part, seem to have anticipated the avalanche of armchair analysis. In the paper, they address a handful of the more predictable assumptions and explanations, giving reasons as to why they're best kept within the realm of the theoretical.

Take, for example, two of the most common versus the actual wording of their paper.

Theory 1: The women's movement sold women a bill of goods. All it did was make them feel inadequate for not "having it all."

Stevenson/Wolfers: "If the women's movement raised women's expectations faster than society was able to meet them, they would be more likely to be disappointed by their actual experienced lives. As women's expectations move into alignment with their experiences, this decline in happiness may reverse."

Translation: "Having it all" is going out of fashion. When women stop trying to live up to that edict, they will be happier.

Theory 2: The demands on working mothers, particularly single mothers, are overwhelming and contribute to unhappiness.

Stevenson/Wolfers: "[When] we disaggregate the fertility results to consider trends in happiness separately among single parents and married parents ... we see similar trends in happiness ... casting doubt on the hypothesis that trends in marriage and divorce, single parenthood or work/family balance are at the root of the happiness declines among women."

Translation: Don't blame your kids, your job or your partner.

In other words, the upshot of the increase in female unhappiness seems to be that there's no upshot.

As a pusher of far-flung theories myself, I know how tedious it can be when the raw data don't line up with the stuff I yak about with my friends in wine bars. Like Douthat et al, when I first heard about the study, I immediately had a scapegoat too: Angelina Jolie. Her entire Oscar-winning, serial-adopting, Brad Pitt-snagging, plane-piloting, unattainably hot-looking existence makes women around the world feel hopelessly inadequate and therefore unhappy. I mean, duh.

But like all of these explanations, that's a little bit too easy even if, to some, it also seems a little bit right. And as many have pointed out, "happiness" is ultimately an abstraction (not to mention in the eye of the beholder) and may simply defy quantitative measurement.

So why is it so hard to resist making a sport of figuring out why we are or aren't happy? Maybe because it's just that, a sport. Maybe because, as most women in book clubs know, talking about what's wrong with your life can be rollicking fun. We may not be happy, but we know how to have a good time. And that includes blaming Angelina.

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