

July 15, 2011

## New Research Suggests Everybody's Less Satisfied

**A widely read 2009 study described a decline in self-reported well-being among American women. Newly published research finds this trend also holds true for men.**

By Tom Jacobs

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Few research papers hit a nerve like the 2009 report *The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness*. Over the past 35 years, “women’s happiness has declined both absolutely, and relative to men,” Betsy Stevenson and Justin Wolfers wrote in the *American Economic Journal*.

Some interpreted this as an indirect indictment of the feminist movement, which — the argument went — has given women more freedom but left them less content. While that was not the thesis of the paper’s authors, the notion was debated by newspaper columnists ranging from social conservative Ross Douthat to feminists such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Ellen Goodman.

Well, it turns out our deepening collective funk may not be gender-specific after all. A just-published paper by Chris Herbst of Arizona State University concludes that American men and women “experienced similar decreases in life satisfaction” between 1985 and 2005.

“Both sexes witnessed comparable slippages in self-confidence, growing regrets about the past, and declines in virtually every measure of self-reported physical and mental health,” he writes in the *Journal of Economic Psychology*. His data suggests this rising discontent holds true “regardless of gender, age, marital status and educational attainment.”

While this trend toward increased dissatisfaction has gradually become less severe, he reports it has leveled off more for females than for males. As a result, “men’s well-being in recent years has begun to fall more rapidly than that for women,” he writes.

These different results are largely a matter of using different data sets. Stevenson and Wolfers primarily used data from the General Social Survey, while Herbst uses the results of the annual DDB Needham Life Style Survey. This annual survey of approximately 3,500 Americans, which focuses on consumer habits, “also contains a large number of items on subjective well-being, ranging from life satisfaction and self-confidence to various measures of physical and mental health,” he notes.

Where the GSS survey asks participants their level of happiness, the Life Style Survey focuses on satisfaction. Specifically, participants responded to the statement “I am very satisfied with the way things are going in my life these days” on a scale of one (definitely disagree) to six (definitely agree).

“Women do not consistently report higher levels of subjective well-being than men,” Herbst writes. “It also appears that men and women experienced similar declines in well-being over the last two decades. Average life satisfaction levels for men and women are indistinguishable in both 1985 (male average 4.16 out of 6, female average 4.15) and 2005 (male and female average both 3.99).

“Interestingly, it appears that most of the slippage in life satisfaction occurred between 1985 and the early 1990s, followed by a considerable rebound that ended in the early 2000s,” he adds. “Such results suggest that macro-economic conditions play an important role in shaping



*The funk is gender neutral. A just-published paper concludes that American men and women “experienced similar decreases in life satisfaction” between the years 1985 and 2005. (Hemera/Thinkstock.com)*

subjective well-being.”

Herbst refined the data by looking at various subgroups, in such categories as age, race, marital status and employment status. He found consistent declines in life satisfaction for each such group, with one exception: black men, “who experienced a statistically significant increase in well-being between 1985 and 2005.”

Though he has no definitive answers, Herbst offers some possible reasons why the data from this survey differ from that used by the earlier researchers. He doubts that the different wording (“happiness” versus “satisfaction”) could account for the difference, but notes that the different way the data was collected — face-to-face for the GSS survey versus by mail for the Life Style Survey he used — may provide part of the answer.

Wolfers and Stevenson, the authors of the 2009 study, welcomed this new information. “Unfortunately, data on happiness are scarce,” they wrote in an email. “Thus we are all forced to draw inferences from whatever imperfect data are out there. We find it interesting that different surveys yield somewhat different findings.”

That said, they argued these new results “need to be considered alongside a broad array of existing evidence pointing to a relative decline in the measured well-being of women in both the U.S. and Europe.”

While their primary focus was the General Social Survey, “the standard for happiness research in the U.S.,” they also discovered “a similar relative decline in women’s well-being when analyzing satisfaction data from the Virginia Slims surveys,” Wolfers and Stevenson note. “We also find similar trends in nearly every European survey. And a large-scale survey of high school seniors yields similar patterns.”

So, depending upon the data you look at, either half or all of the population is increasingly discontented. Aside from the aforementioned economic factors, Herbst suggests the reasons may be found in the societal trends reported by Robert Putnam in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*.

“Americans over the past several decades became increasingly detached from friends and family, participated in fewer social and civic activities, and expressed greater mistrust over political institutions,” he writes. “There is indeed a large body of evidence indicating that social connectedness — what Putnam refers to as social capital — has a powerful influence on self-reported health and happiness.”

“Individuals who volunteer and participate in clubs, spend a lot of time visiting friends, and show interest in politics are substantially more satisfied with life,” Herbst writes. He adds that as people gradually move away from such communal activities in favor of more solitary pursuits, and economic insecurity rises, a drop in life satisfaction is hardly surprising.

“It is difficult to believe that changes of this magnitude could have influenced women’s well-being without also influencing men,” he adds. Perhaps when Mick Jagger moaned that he can’t get no satisfaction, he was speaking for us all.

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