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ECONOMIC SCENE

He's Happier, She's Less So

By [DAVID LEONHARDT](#)

Last year, a team of researchers added a novel twist to something known as a time-use survey. Instead of simply asking people what they had done over the course of their day, as pollsters have been doing since the 1960s, the researchers also asked how people felt during each activity. Were they happy? Interested? Tired? Stressed?

Not surprisingly, men and women often gave similar answers about what they liked to do (hanging out with friends) and didn't like (paying bills). But there were also a number of activities that produced very different reactions from the two sexes — and one of them really stands out: Men apparently enjoy being with their parents, while women find time with their mom and dad to be slightly less pleasant than doing laundry.

[Alan Krueger](#), a Princeton economist working with four psychologists on the time-use research team, figures that there is a simple explanation for the difference. For a woman, time with her parents often resembles work, whether it's helping them pay bills or plan a family gathering. "For men, it tends to be sitting on the sofa and watching football with their dad," said Mr. Krueger, who, when not crunching data, happens to enjoy watching the New York Giants with his father. This intriguing — if unsettling — finding is part of a larger story: there appears to be a growing happiness gap between men and women.

Two new research papers, using very different methods, have both come to this conclusion. [Betsey Stevenson](#) and [Justin Wolfers](#), economists at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) (and a couple), have looked at the traditional happiness data, in which people are simply asked how satisfied they are with their overall lives. In the early 1970s, women reported being slightly happier than men. Today, the two have [switched places](#).

Mr. Krueger, analyzing time-use studies over the last four decades, [has found](#) an even starker pattern. Since the 1960s, men have gradually cut back on activities they find unpleasant. They now work less and relax more.

Over the same span, women have replaced housework with paid work — and, as a result, are spending almost as much time doing things they don't enjoy as in the past. Forty years ago, a typical woman spent about 23 hours a week in an activity considered unpleasant, or 40 more minutes than a typical man. Today, with men working less, the gap is 90 minutes.

These trends are reminiscent of the idea of "[the second shift](#)," the name of a 1989 book by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, arguing that modern women effectively had to hold down two jobs. The first shift was at the office, and the second at home.

But researchers who have looked at time-use data say the second-shift theory misses an important detail.

Women are not actually working more than they were 30 or 40 years ago. They are instead doing different kinds of work. They're spending more time on paid work and less on cleaning and cooking.

What has changed — and what seems to be the most likely explanation for the happiness trends — is that women now have a much longer to-do list than they once did (including helping their aging parents). They can't possibly get it all done, and many end up feeling as if they are somehow falling short.

Mr. Krueger's data, for instance, shows that the average time devoted to dusting has fallen significantly in recent decades. There haven't been any dust-related technological breakthroughs, so houses are probably just dirtier than they used to be. I imagine that the new American dustiness affects women's happiness more than men's.

Ms. Stevenson was recently having drinks with a business school graduate who came up with a nice way of summarizing the problem. Her mother's goals in life, the student said, were to have a beautiful garden, a well-kept house and well-adjusted children who did well in school. "I sort of want all those things, too," the student said, as Ms. Stevenson recalled, "but I also want to have a great career and have an impact on the broader world."

It's telling that there is also a happiness gap between boys and girls in high school. As life has generally gotten better over the last generation — less crime, longer-living grandparents and much cooler gadgets — male high school seniors have gotten happier. About 25 percent say they are very satisfied with their lives, up from 16 percent in 1976. Roughly 22 percent of senior girls now give that answer, unchanged from the 1970s.

When Ms. Stevenson and I were talking last week about possible explanations, she mentioned her "hottie theory." It's based on an April [article](#) in this newspaper by Sara Rimer, about a group of incredibly impressive teenage girls in Newton, Mass. The girls were getting better grades than the boys, playing varsity sports, helping to run the student government and doing community service. Yet one girl who had gotten a perfect 2,400 on her S.A.T. noted that she and her friends still felt pressure to be "effortlessly hot."

As Ms. Stevenson, who's 36, said: "When I was in high school, it was clear being a hottie was the most important thing, and it's not that it's any less important today. It's that other things have become more important. And, frankly, people spent a lot of time trying to be a hottie when I was in high school. So I don't know where they find the time today."

The two new papers — Mr. Krueger's will be published in the [Brookings Papers on Economic Activity](#) and the Stevenson-Wolfers one is still in draft form — are part of a burst of happiness research in recent years. There is no question that the research has its limitations. Happiness, of course, is highly subjective.

A big reason that women reported being happier three decades ago — despite far more discrimination — is probably that they had narrower ambitions, Ms. Stevenson says. Many compared themselves only to other women, rather than to men as well. This doesn't mean they were better off back then than they are now.

But it does show just how incomplete the gender revolution has been. Although women have flooded into the work force, American society hasn't fully come to grips with the change. The United States still doesn't have universal preschool, and, unlike every other industrialized country in the world, there is no law guaranteeing

paid leave for new parents.

Government policy isn't the only problem, either. Inside of families, men still haven't figured out how to shoulder their fair share of the household burden. Instead, we're spending more time on the phone and in front of the television.

This weekend, I think I may volunteer to do a little dusting.

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