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The Happiness Gap: Readers Respond

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Last week's column on men, women and happiness generated almost 1,000 comments from readers. You can read many of them on this message board. Here are excerpts from some of the e-mails I received. -- David Leonhardt

My reaction: let's pay women as much as we pay men for the same job and maybe happiness will get close to equality between men and women.

-- Karina Falbo

Part of what makes this research so vexing is that the pay gap between men and women has closed enormously over the last 30 years, but women haven't gotten happier. Betsey Stevenson, one of the researchers I interviewed, offers a partial explanation. During the 1970s and '80s, women were making huge strides in closing the pay gap, but that progress has slowed significantly since the late 1990s. In fact, the main reason the gap continued to close at all is that women have continued to close the qualifications gap. They're getting more educated and more experienced, on average. But the gap between the pay of men and women with similar qualifications has all but stopped narrowing. Ms. Stevenson points out that it's harder for women to be optimistic about the future -- and happy about the present -- when they are no longer experiencing the same kind of economic progress that they once were. At best, it's a partial explanation of the happiness trends, but it rings true to me -- David

I almost always enjoy your articles, but I have to register a bit of complaint about "He's Happier, She's Less So." I know you were reprinting Alan Krueger's hypothesis, but the idea that men are happier during their time with their parents because they just "watch football with dad" while women help their parents pay bills and plan events is incredibly simplistic and as a man, offensive. The modern media seems happy to portray men as unthinking, football-watching ogres, but I think the reality is a good deal more complex and nuanced. I don't know exactly why women don't enjoy time with their parents as much as men do, but I sincerely doubt this hypothesis and wish that you would have voiced some concern about it.

-- Cory Fox

Thanks for the kind words and the critique. Maybe I should have been clearer and less simplistic. I do think that men's time with parents tends to be more social and women's tends to involve more work (planning, organizing health care and money, etc.). The data support this view. But you're certainly right that it's a matter of degree, not black and white. -- David

I believe the researchers misled us with conclusions that do not explain most of the data. While it is certainly true that women do much more work at home (or their parents' homes) than men and this must not be so pleasurable, women also reported a much higher percentage than men of time of unhappiness in time spent with friends. Women expect much more of relationships than men and are more easily upset by any problems. Probably, they gain more pleasure also. It is not clear which sex has a superior approach, but it is clear what is going on in this research.

-- Daniel Steinhard

I have a different view on the main reason that women find time with friends to be less enjoyable than men. In many cases, most of the burden of playing host still falls on women. So for them, having friends over can often be more of a combination of work and play than it is for men. But it's obviously impossible to know for sure. -- David

You wrote: "Since the 1960s, men have gradually cut back on activities they find unpleasant. They now work less and relax more." I wonder if this is one manifestation of a much broader phenomenon. As you may well know, there are now more women than men in higher education and certainly in many graduate programs. Although I haven't studied this matter closely, it seems to me this change from just a few decades ago may well be due to a change in men as well as to alterations in women's aspirations for themselves. On attending the Phi Beta Kappa inductions at my university a few months ago, my impression is that two-thirds of the inductees were women -- and I couldn't help but think this was due, in part at least, to many men's reduced interest in academic achievement as well as to a greater level of academic motivation in women.

Putting it briefly (and perhaps overly psychologically), I wonder if many men are now less willing to defer their immediate gratifications, unless there is a substantial and clear incentive to do so, than was the case, say, in the 1960s. In "relaxing more," they may well be more interested in maintaining the pleasures of the moment rather than in deferring these gratifications in the interest of pleasures that might be obtained in the future.

-- Leonard Berkowitz

I live in Sweden with all its heralded family leave policies and the right by law to work 75 percent at your job until your children are 8. And I can tell you that all those policies may ease the problem a little, but they don't solve it. No woman I know with young children here is not overworked, stressed, guilt-ridden over what she is not getting done.

-- Rebecca Popenoe

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I argued in the column that men weren't doing their fair share of family work, which helped explain the happiness gap. A number of readers countered that -- whether or not this was true -- men were better at not letting unfinished work bother them. Two such letters follow. -- David

You have hit on a question that I spend way too much thinking about instead of dusting. Is my fair share of cleaning half of the total amount I think the house should be cleaned, or half the total amount my wife thinks the house should be cleaned? I think vacuuming once every two weeks is fine, so I think my share is to vacuum once every four weeks. My wife thinks we need to vacuum every week, so she seems to end out vacuuming three out of every four weeks. But why is she right? There is no evidence that vacuuming any more will make our lives any better (except to lift the burden of thinking that the carpet should be vacuumed). On the other hand, I now agree we should clean the counter every day because the ants show up otherwise.

-- Andrew Schmidt

Do you think it's fair to say that men are more self-accepting and can see what they have accomplished? I think the key to happiness for women lies in seeing what has been done instead of what still must be done. Ideally, chores are shared equally. It would be interesting to see if the bar just got raised to a higher standard. For example. Rugs get vacuumed once a week. Each partner agrees to alternate. Do you think the female partner will sit down and indulge herself while he vacuums? Or ... Does she use the time to "accomplish" something else. How much is enough? I think there is a skill to relaxing and many of my women friends (including myself) are not good at it. This isn't to suggest men are the problem. It's worth considering that happiness is generated from within.

-- Barbara Droney

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A number of readers wanted to talk about dusting. Some agreed with my suggestion that dust around the house bothers women more than men (because a dirty house is often seen to be more of a reflection on a woman than a man). Others disagreed. Some people took issue with my suggestion that there haven't been any dust-related breakthroughs in recent years. And yet others hated my use of the word 'volunteer' in the last line. -- David

I couldn't believe your final line. You "think" you'll "volunteer to do a little" dusting this weekend? Do you not get the crux of this problem? It's very straightforward. Happiness is about achieving a fair balance in any aspect of life in life: work, home, relationships etc. Since you seem open to achieving a more harmonious balance in your household, maybe you should sit down with your wife and discuss your division of labor seriously, rather than making flip remarks about how you may try to help out around the house a little bit

more. I bet your house is done and dusted all the time, regardless of how much you choose to help out. Lucky you.

-- Christine Surette

You were doing O.K. until this last sentence! If there's dust, she dusts. If there's dust, you dust. Nobody "volunteers" to dust. It's your job to dust because you live there in that dusty place, just as it's her job to dust because she lives in that dusty place. Similarly, you don't "volunteer" to spend time with the children, to shop, to wash dishes. You just do it because it's there to be done.

-- Steve Weddle

What a great article. It's scary to think that what I'd somehow subliminally felt about all this stuff is actually the way all of us ladies feel. And you were right about the dusting. ...

-- Jane Fleck

Amazing -- because my older sister and I had just spoken about 'dusting' and how we just don't dust like we did when I was growing up. I am not joking! I was born in 1965 and my mother was a stay-at-home mom and at times did work full time up until I was round 11 years old. We dusted a lot. I felt like the article helped me understand so very much more about my current life and gave great wisdom into understanding my own emotions when visiting family and relatives.

-- Gena-Fae Fillingham

You're right -- in my experience, women are much more bothered by dust (and general household disarray) than men. My husband can walk right past the golf shoes he left in the doorway a week ago without feeling the slightest inclination to pick them up and put them away.

-- Sheila Perkins

I really like your article on happiness. But I have to wonder where you get the idea that women are more upset about dust than men! I don't mind dust. I think I dusted once over the course of the year and wouldn't have done it if my father hadn't been coming over to baby sit.

-- Julie Gold

I disagree with this sentence: "There haven't been any dust-related technological breakthroughs, so houses are probably just dirtier than they used to be." In fact, employing domestic help, which was a luxury in past eras, is commonplace today. The women interviewed may be doing less dusting, but illegal immigrant women are doing more.

-- Fred Bernstein

I want to point out an error (or perhaps oversight is a better word) in your article on men and women's differing degrees of happiness. In fact, there has been a technological breakthrough on dusting: it's called the Swiffer duster!

-- E. Coady

A small point - about dusting. I think if you take a look at the air pollution data over the relevant time period, you will find that less dusting is actually needed. Our air is cleaner, our windows are tighter, our HVAC systems have particulate filters. So while I enjoyed your article and think it raises some very interesting questions and presents some likely answers, you missed the boat in assuming the contemporary household is dustier today than 50 years ago.

-- Sam Bleicher

A response from Alan Krueger, an economist quoted in the column: "While ambient suspended particles are down (probably due in large part to regulation of power plants), I suspect that most dust in most homes is generated from inside the home." -- David

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