



## Progress is more than economic

In my opinion | Third waves

By Grace Pettygrove | Columnist

Published: Thursday, October 29, 2009

Updated: Thursday, October 29, 2009

Try this. Take the most loaded, nebulous and generic emotional concept you can think of — let's say "happiness." Now measure it. Your results may be more confounding than useful, but they will make good blog fodder.

It may seem like an ambitious task, but this is exactly what Wharton School of Business professors Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers attempted to do in their recent study titled "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness."

The report, published in the American Economic Journal, relies on survey data from 1972 to 2006 to declare a certain contradiction: despite social progress, women are less happy now than they were 35 years ago.

"Even if women were made unambiguously better off throughout this period," say Stevenson and Wolfers, "a richer consideration of the psychology behind happiness might suggest that greater gender equality may lead to a fall in measured well-being."

Despite the daunting and inherently loaded nature of their task, Stevenson and Wolfers felt confident enough to use absolute terms; women are "unambiguously better off," they say, because of reproductive rights and the closing wage gap.

Though months have passed since the study's original publication, the blog fire reignited last week. In a column for the L.A. Times, author Barbara Ehrenreich took Stevenson and Wolfers to task for implying, with imprecise data, that feminism has made women unhappy.

Meanwhile, New York Times columnist Judith Warner defended Stevenson and Wolfers, who, to be fair, amply recognized the variety of possible conclusions offered by their study.

Still, Warner contradicted the "unambiguous" nature of women's progress over the last 35 years, instead arguing that unhappiness is a product of expected versus actual results.

Though some progress has been made on the work and home fronts, and women now expect more from society, they still make approximately 75 cents on the dollar of every man while paying more for health care and continuing to take primary responsibility for child-rearing.

These factors are "indicators of all the ways in which society has failed women," Warner said, "by failing to address the needs of working families."

The "paradox" presented by Stevenson and Wolfers measures happiness as a response to demands made by the women's movement in the 1970s and '80s, as though to say, "You got what you wanted. Now what?" The nuanced debate that ensues attempts to answer this question.

But many women who are defining their own happiness now — and meeting the specters of depression and anxiety along the way — weren't even alive when the original expectations of progress were set.

When young women today struggle with residual body image problems from their seventh grade locker room or memories of sexual violence from the freshman dorms, "at least now I can wear pants to work" isn't consolation; neither is the existing gender gap in corporate wages particularly overwhelming. There are plenty of burdens in the lives of American women that aren't related to basic economic progress.

Mood disorders often arise long before the big questions about workplace satisfaction and family life emerge; college students are at the front of America's mental health epidemic.

In 2006, the American College Health Association found that the rate of surveyed students reporting clinical depression increased 56 percent, from 11 to 16 percent between 2000 and 2005. The female college student demographic is especially hard hit by depression, though men are far more likely to commit suicide — a reminder that "reported" clinical depression suggests a more complex trend than a simple increase in depression.

The results of the Stevenson-Wolfers study are exactly as one might expect from an attempt to measure the intangible. Bloggers and columnists, feminists and social conservatives can take what meaning they want from the reported trend and its myriad implications. In the meantime, a population of anti-depressant-reliant masses is rising from our youth, and explanations that rely on historical context might not explain anything.

gpettygrove@dailymerald.com

**HOME**

[News](#)  
[Sports](#)  
[Scene](#)  
[Opinion](#)  
[Magazine](#)  
[Blogs](#)

**MULTIMEDIA**

[Blog RSS](#)  
[Twitter](#)  
[Facebook](#)

**ABOUT US**

[Staff contacts](#)  
[Jobs](#)  
[Pick up an Emerald](#)

**ADVERTISE**

[Media Kit](#)  
[Classifieds](#)

**SERVICES**

[Search/Archives](#)  
[RSS](#)  
[Register/Login](#)  
[Letter to the Editor](#)  
[Buy photo reprints](#)

**CONTACT US**

541.346.5511  
1222 University  
St. #300  
Eugene, OR  
97403

**BUSINESS  
HOURS**

Monday - Friday  
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.



OREGON DAILY EMERALD  
The independent student newspaper  
at the University of Oregon.  
Since 1900

Powered by  and 