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The happiness gap

Are women less content than men because of long to-do lists or the pressure to be a hottie?

Carol Lloyd

Sep. 27, 2007 | As if it isn't dismaying enough to be reminded of the tenacious wage gap between women and men, Wednesday's New York Times [points at](#) new evidence that there's a growing gender happiness gap as well.

One study

by a couple of economists at the University of Pennsylvania looked at happiness data over the past few decades and found that while women in the 1970s reported being slightly happier than men, now the tables have turned and fewer women claim contentment. Another study by Princeton economist Alan Krueger and four psychologists found that over the past four decades, men have gradually increased activities that they enjoy and pared down those that they find unpleasant. Again, women report a different trajectory. Although most have replaced housework with more paid work, women now spend almost the same amount of time on tasks they deem unpleasant.

So what's behind this dispiriting news -- since, according to the researchers, by "objective standards" women's lives are better now? It's hard to say. But I found some of the explanatory theories more depressing than the facts themselves.

One of the explanations (it's not clear if this derived from the empirical research or the journalist's cogitation) concludes that long to-do lists -- both at home and at work -- are cursing many women to a life of frustration. Although women report working the same number of hours that they did four decades ago, they now do far less housework and less cooking, which the Times speculates, weirdly, might bother her more than him. Dust bunnies -- every women's nightmare! This would jibe well with another finding of Krueger's research group: that men enjoy being with their parents a good deal more than women do, perhaps because women are more likely to take care of aging parents rather than simply hanging out with them.

Although this explanation portrays women as long-suffering, germ-phobic workaholics, it's far better than what follows: the hottie theory.

Dubbed as such by one of the researchers, the phrase is borrowed from a recent New York Times story about a bunch of impressively academic and athletic high school girls who still feel the need to be "effortlessly hot." Sheesh. Talk about contemplating the globe through the lens of your New York Times trend-spotting navel! What about the 40-something who makes 20 percent less than the dude in the cubicle next to her? Is effortless hotness weighing on her mind? Or the 65-year-old widow who can't figure out when she'll ever retire now that her Social Security benefits have been slashed? Is she unhappy because she's no longer sizzlin'?

The article ends up conceding that larger issues than hotness may be bringing women down -- that working women still do most of the child rearing and housekeeping and that without government-sponsored daycare or maternal leave, women must risk their careers to have children. Here's a couple the article didn't mention: how about global warming, senseless war and, on a less altruistic front, the wage gap?

As the burgeoning [field](#)

of positive psychology has shown, studying happiness is a complex and sometimes contradictory matter. Some research has suggested that a relative sense of wealth (or lack of it) has a greater effect on happiness than absolute wealth. In other words, now that women are in the workplace in greater numbers, their awareness that they are making less is a drag on their psyches. Other happiness [research](#), also by Krueger, points to a very different interpretation. People are not happy or sad based on their income but on the quality of their daily lives. Thus, maybe women are becoming less happy relative to men because more are working in the same way men typically have: engaging in goal-oriented but unfulfilling labor in exchange for time.

Whatever the case, reading more column inches on women's dusting woes and hottie pressures put me in a foul mood. Or maybe I'm just another woman unhappy for a passel of mysterious reasons.

-- Carol Lloyd

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