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'Paradoxical' decline? Another look at the relative reduction in female happiness

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ABSTRACT

In a provocative paper, [Stevenson and Wolfers \(2009\)](#) provide evidence that women over the last several decades experienced an absolute and relative decline in happiness. The current paper draws upon novel data from the DDB Needham Life Style Survey to take another look at the evolution of women's subjective well-being. In contrast to [Stevenson and Wolfers](#), I find that men and women between 1985 and 2005 experienced similar decreases in life satisfaction. Furthermore, 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. The data also show that men's well-being in recent years has begun to fall more rapidly than that for women. In the final section of the paper, I present some initial evidence that the steady erosion in social and civic engagement, interpersonal trust, and financial security could be partially responsible for the widespread decline in subjective well-being over the past few decades.

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1. Introduction

In a provocative paper, [Stevenson and Wolfers \(2009\)](#) uncover evidence that women over the last three decades experienced an absolute and relative decline in happiness. Relying primarily on data from the General Social Survey (GSS), the authors (hereafter referred to as SW) find that men's self-reported happiness changed very little since the early-1970s, while women experienced a sharp downward trend in well-being. Indeed, SW report that women in 1972 were substantially more likely to be "very happy." By 2006, that happiness gap in favor of women turned into a deficit, with men reporting higher levels of well-being. The differential decline in female happiness is evident across multiple datasets spanning a large number of Western industrialized countries, and it pervades most demographic groups.¹

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¹ In addition to the GSS (observation period: 1972–2006), SW examine well-being trends using the Virginia Slims Survey of American Women (1972–2000), Monitoring the Future (1976–2005), and the Eurobarometer Trend File (1973–2002). The female trend in happiness/life satisfaction is estimated to be declining in all datasets except the Eurobarometer (for which it is increasing). The male trend in happiness/life satisfaction is estimated to be flat in the GSS, declining in the Virginia Slims survey, increasing in the Monitoring the Future survey, and increasing in the Eurobarometer survey. Results from all surveys point to a relative decline in women's subjective well-being.

This paper uses novel data from the DDB Needham Life Style Survey to provide another look at the evolution of women's subjective well-being over the last few decades. Data collection on the annual Life Style Survey began in the mid-1970s when the advertising agency DDB Needham commissioned the polling firm Market Facts to examine Americans' consumer habits and social activities. Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, the Life Style Survey 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. This survey offers numerous benefits for scholars looking to take a fresh look at changes in subjective well-being over the last few decades.

In contrast to SW's results, I find that men and women between 1985 and 2005 experienced very similar declines in life satisfaction. The parallel reduction in well-being is evident throughout the distribution of life satisfaction, and it holds across a large number of demographic groups defined by age, marital and fertility status, educational attainment, and income level. Men and women have also experienced comparable slippages in self-confidence, growing regrets about the past, and declines in virtually every measure of self-reported health. In a further departure from SW's results, I find that although the downward trend in life satisfaction became less severe for men and women over time, the slowdown occurred more aggressively among *women*. As a result, men's life satisfaction began to fall more precipitously than that for women beginning in the late-1980s.

To explain the differential decline in women's happiness, SW posit that women may have been influenced by broad social and economic changes in ways that differ from men. For example, it is plausible that the constellation of structural changes in the economy, the rise in income inequality, or the deterioration in social and political trust decreased women's happiness without affecting men's well-being. In this paper, I use the Life Style Survey to examine whether economic conditions as well as personal views on trust and public safety have differential impacts on life satisfaction across men and women. Not surprisingly, I find consistent evidence that each of these economic and social forces is strongly associated with life satisfaction. In most cases, however, these factors influence the well-being of men and women in a similar manner. Such results are consistent with the main finding that men and women experienced parallel trends in subjective well-being.

The final section of the paper pursues several explanations for the widespread decline in subjective well-being found in the Life Style Survey. The investigation builds on Putnam's (2000) influential book *Bowling Alone*, which documents the causes and consequences of the erosion in Americans' social connectedness over the past few decades. I begin by exploring the extent to which various indicators of social and civic engagement, social and political trust, and financial well-being are related to self-reported life satisfaction. I then analyze trends in each of these social and economic indicators over the period 1985–2005. Consistent with Putnam's argument, I find strong evidence that attachments to friends, family, and the community as well as interpersonal trust are important correlates of life satisfaction. In the economic domain, virtually all proxies for financial stability—from expressing optimism about finding a good job to reporting low levels of household debt—are also found to translate into higher levels of well-being. Over the past two decades, however, the US population became increasingly detached socially and politically and experienced a steady decline in economic security. As with the reduction in life satisfaction, the erosion in Americans' social and economic fabric pervades most demographic groups, including men and women. In fact, insofar as these dramatic changes are responsible for the reduction in life satisfaction, it is difficult to believe that they could have influenced women's well-being without also influencing men's.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on subjective well-being. First, I introduce a potentially useful dataset that may improve upon or augment analyses typically carried out using the GSS. The Life Style Survey's extensive time coverage, breadth and depth of available well-being measures, and large sample sizes make it an ideal data source for conducting research on Americans' quality-of-life. In addition, I provide new evidence on the evolution of life satisfaction for men and women. Results in this paper point to a population-wide decline in subjective well-being over the last 20 years. Americans—regardless of gender, age, marital status, and labor market outcomes—experienced deteriorating life satisfaction and self-confidence as well as increases in a range of physical and mental health problems. In contrast to SW's results, men have not been immune to the downward shift in subjective well-being. If anything, the evidence presented here suggests that men's well-being in recent years has declined more rapidly than that for women. Finally, this paper advances a plausible explanation for the observed deterioration in life satisfaction: the steady erosion in social and civic engagement and the rise in economic insecurity.

2. The growing literature on subjective well-being trends

Although the current study focuses primarily on SW's paper, it is important to situate this work within the rapidly expanding literature on subjective well-being trends. Indeed, gender differences in well-being have been studied for decades (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 1999), but it is only recently that researchers have begun to investigate how these differences evolved over time.

Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza (2003) produce an early contribution to the study of gender-specific trends in job satisfaction within the British population. The authors find that women's job satisfaction declined absolutely and relative to that of men throughout the period 1991–2000. To my knowledge, Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) provide the first evidence on gender-specific trends in overall happiness and life satisfaction. Their paper relies on the GSS between 1972 and 1998 to explore US happiness trends and the Eurobarometer Survey between 1975 and 1998 to report on British life satisfaction trends. Consistent with SW's results, Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) find that US and British women experienced relative reductions in well-being over the last several decades.

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