

Ethics @ Work: Is wisdom folly?

Jun. 1, 2009

ASHER MEIR, THE JERUSALEM POST

A recently published study by economists Betsey Stevenson and Jason Wolfers of the Wharton School has ignited a renewed public discussion of the assessment of the status of women. The paper, "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," shows that women's subjective assessment of their well-being has declined over the last few decades compared to that of men in the United States and Western Europe, based on a variety of measures.

This happened even though women have advanced compared to men on virtually all objective measures: the wage gap has narrowed considerably, the education gap now favors women, women have improved their relative position in the home (e.g. women do less housework than in the past and men do more) and so on.

Are women better off or worse off than in the past? If worse, should we attempt to roll back the clock?

The underlying statistical conclusion of the paper is as follows: In the 1970s, women in the US reported being significantly happier than men, based on survey questions regarding "happiness" or "life satisfaction." In the intervening 35 years, men's reported happiness has remained about the same, but that of women has declined markedly and is now similar to that of men.

In Europe, the relative situation is the same; women in the 1970s reported greater happiness than men. Since then, male happiness has risen and that of women has stagnated, again leading to a closing of the gap.

The authors then propose and test a variety of statistical explanations; for example, that the change is due to greater workforce participation, to greater rates of single motherhood and so on. But the trend seems to be so pervasive that none of these explanations seems to account for it.

At the end of the paper, Stevenson and Wolfers suggest a number of explanations that are mostly just variants of the "ignorance is bliss" hypothesis. They suggest that "the increased opportunities available to women may have increased what women require to declare themselves happy." Or "The increased opportunity to succeed in many dimensions may have led to an increased likelihood of believing that one's life is not measuring up. Similarly, women may now compare their lives to a broader group, including men, and find their lives more likely to come up short."

This explanation, which I subscribe to, begs the ultimate question: What do we make of this phenomenon? Social science can never provide the answer to this question.

In the 18th century, poet Thomas Gray wrote: "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." Based on Gray's criterion, we would say that the increased opportunities, and thus wisdom of women, have turned out in hindsight to be folly.

However, not everyone agrees with Gray. Perhaps the most caustic disagreement was voiced by the always-involved and often-depressed writer Dorothy Parker, who wrote: "See the happy moron, He doesn't give a damn. I wish I were a moron. My God! Perhaps I am!" (I apologize for the irreverence.) Parker's belief, expressed in her own life, was that wishing the bliss of ignorance is itself idiotic.

A contemporary value theorist who would take issue with Gray is Nobel Prize laureate in economics Amartya Sen. In defending freedom, Sen frequently emphasizes not that which we actually value, but rather freedoms or lives "that we have reason to value." My understanding of this cryptic phrase has always been that Sen means to delegitimize making people happy by limiting their aspirations rather than by increasing their ability to realize them.

Ultimately, I think the distinction is artificial. If any woman, or man, decides today that the lesson she or he would like to draw from Stevenson's and Wolfers's study is that she or he personally would be better off by carefully defining and delimiting her or his aspirations, this is itself a choice enabled by opportunity and empowered by knowledge, and not an imposition of individual or collective ignorance.

I think that Sen and even Parker would legitimize such a choice. I can state personally that this study has made me think twice about how I should attain and define my own happiness.

ethics-at-work@besr.org

Asher Meir is research director at the Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem, an independent institute in the Jerusalem Institute of Technology.

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1243346519954&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>
[[Back to the Article](#)]

Copyright 1995- 2009 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>