

Women end up less happy than men

July 29 2008

Less able to achieve their life goals, women end up unhappier than men later in life – even though they start out happier, reveals new research by Anke Plagnol of the University of Cambridge, and University of Southern California economist Richard Easterlin.

Plagnol and Easterlin's study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, is the first to use nationally representative data spanning several decades to examine the role of unfulfilled desires in a person's sense of well-being.

As the researchers explain, expectations of success may vary among those raised in different generations (i.e., an economic depression). Data sets from a range of time periods may also have different demographic compositions.

In their analysis, the researchers control for birth cohort and demographic characteristics such as race and education. They find that women are, on average, happier than men in early adulthood – but the glow wears off with time. Specifically, after the age of 48, men's overall happiness exceeds women's happiness.

These gender patterns of overall happiness correlate to patterns in two significant aspects of life satisfaction: family and finances.

As Plagnol explains: In later life it is "men [who] come closer to fulfilling their aspirations, are more satisfied with their family lives and financial situations, and are the happier of the two."

Women and men have fairly similar life goals when it comes to love, the study reveals. Nine out of 10 people of both genders reach adult life wanting a happy marriage.

"Differences between men and women in aspirations for marriage and children are fairly small," says Plagnol, who received her Ph.D. from USC in 2007. "Gender differences in satisfaction depend largely on attainment."

The saddest period of the average man's life – his 20s – is also the period when he is most likely to be single.

Young men are also more dissatisfied than young women with their financial situations, not because they are worse off, but because they want more and therefore experience a greater "shortfall," the researchers explain.

But age alters many things, including men's money woes and lackluster love lives.

After 34, men are more likely to be married than women, and the gap only widens with age, mirroring men's growing satisfaction with family life.

Men also become more satisfied with their financial situations over time, as reflected in their increased spending power. The researchers found that men tend to covet big-ticket items that might not be within reach until later in life, such as a car or vacation home.

(A notable exception: women want more "nice clothes" than men, the researchers found.)

These findings are consistent with an earlier study by Easterlin showing

that recent generations are less satisfied than previous generations, despite having more.

"Of course, one doesn't have to be married to be happy, but if that's something you really want – and it is for most people – then the failure to attain it can have an impact on your overall happiness," Plagnol says, adding that those in a relationship also tend to be in a stronger financial position than those who must depend solely on their own resources.

Some age milestones:

- 41: Age at which men's financial satisfaction exceeds women's financial satisfaction
- 48: Age at which men's overall happiness exceeds women's overall happiness
- 64: Age at which men's satisfaction with family life exceeds women's satisfaction

Citation: Plagnol, Anke C. and Richard A. Easterlin, "Aspirations, Attainments, and Satisfaction: Life Cycle Differences Between American Women and Men." *Journal of Happiness Studies*; DOI: 10.1007/s10902-008-9106-5.

Source: University of Southern California

Citation: Women end up less happy than men (2008, July 29) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-07-women-happy-men.html>

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