

Happiness hinges on the lives of others

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(PhysOrg.com) -- People's happiness is significantly bound up with that of their "significant others", a new study into men and women's differing attitudes to well-being has found.

Sociologists at the University of Cambridge found that although men and women give different answers when asked about what affects their quality of life, many in fact associate personal happiness with the welfare of families and loved ones at a deeper level.

The study compiled the views of more than 10,000 people. Taken at face value, their responses appeared to confirm [gender stereotypes](#), with more men for example mentioning "finance" in connection with their well-being and women more commonly referring to their families.

Closer analysis, however, revealed that many respondents were linking their own happiness with that of the people closest to them, but phrasing that link in gender-specific terms.

Men, for instance, often connected [financial security](#) with well-being because they still see themselves as "breadwinners". Similarly, women were more likely to mention the family itself, because they still perceive themselves as the principal carers of children or elderly relatives.

The significance of others in determining well-being also appears to become more profound over time, as people take on new responsibilities, by entering into long-term relationships, or becoming parents or [grandparents](#).

The researchers argue that this fundamental concern with our nearest and dearest cuts across the traditional gender divide and should be a key issue for policy-makers and employers when addressing the question of people's work-life balance.

"Men and women may view happiness differently, but when you dig deeper and look at the nature of their perceptions, you find that in both cases their well-being is bound up with that of others," Professor Jacqueline Scott, who led the study, said.

"In a sense it's obvious, but it's also been completely ignored. Most policy-making on happiness has focused on improving conditions for individuals. Our research suggests that more should be done to support the actions of both men and women in caring for others, because that will have benefits for everybody's quality of life."

The study appears in a new book, *Gender Inequalities In The 21st Century*, which is co-edited by Professor Scott and will be launched in Cambridge on Thursday (April 15th, 2010).

It drew on data from the British Household Panel Survey, which periodically tracks the changing lives of 10,300 people from 5,500 sample households. In 1997 and 2002, the respondents were asked what they considered important for their own quality of life, and then encouraged to explain their answer.

The researchers compared these responses both in simple statistical terms and in a qualitative sense. By looking closely at the responses, they were able to ascertain not just how many people mentioned an individual influence, such as "family", or "finance", but what the importance of the influence was, and therefore what they perceived it to mean.

Three issues were raised by more than one third of the participants. These were health (53% of respondents, both years), family (40% in 1997 and 44% in 2002) and finance (38% in 1997 and 34% in 2002).

On the surface, this also revealed a clear gender divide, often across age groups. More women (57%) were concerned with health than men (50%), while more men (38%) associated finance with well-being than women (33%). The difference was particularly strong in the case of family, which was singled out by 49% of women, but only 38% of men.

The explanations respondents gave, however, revealed a more complex story. In particular, many appeared to link each of these ideas to the well-being of others. Although fewer men expressed an explicit concern with "family", for instance, many referred to finance because of the need to earn a decent wage so as to support their loved ones.

These patterns often became more dominant over time. Women who became parents between the two surveys, for example, went from linking [happiness](#) with their own health in 1997, to associating it with that of their children in 2002. Men who in their mid-20s had mentioned money because it enabled them to go out and enjoy themselves were, by

their early 30s, referring to the financial security of their families as integral to a happy life.

Dr. Anke Plagnol, one of the report's co-authors, added: "Men and women both seem to be linking their ideas about well-being to the lives of others, perhaps to a greater extent than we might have expected. That is something policy-makers should be taking into consideration, by ensuring that provision is made to enable both [men](#) and [women](#) to spend reasonable amounts of time with their families."

Gender Equality in the 21st century is published by Edward Elgar. The Cambridge study, which appears in the book, was carried out by Professor Jacqueline Scott, Dr. Anke Plagnol and Dr. Jane Nolan.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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