

A Meta-Analytic Review of Sex Differences  
in Subjective Well-Being

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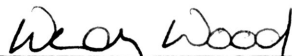
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### Abstract

A meta-analytic review was conducted on 97 studies to determine the magnitude of sex differences in subjective well-being. Overall, no sex differences were found in the cognitive component of subjective well-being known as life satisfaction. For the affective component, happiness, it was found that women report significantly greater happiness than men. Since the sex difference was found only in one component, it appeared plausible that this effect is due to women reporting more extreme emotional experiences than men. In addition, males' life satisfaction proved to be higher than females' for elderly but not younger respondents. The experiences of marriage and employment appeared to increase women's life satisfaction relative to men's. The experience of employment also raised women's happiness.

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Not until recent years did psychologists begin to research subjective well-being. Now a large and rapidly growing body of literature on the subject exists, ranging from theoretical explanations of the structure of subjective well-being to studies of demographic correlates of subjective well-being, including gender.

An important issue in this research is the definition of subjective well-being. Several observations of subjective well-being are found in the literature. Researchers point out that it is subjective; it lies within the experience of the individual (Andrews & Withey, 1976). It has been noted that, unlike most mental health indicators, which measure only the absence of negative factors, subjective well-being includes positive measures. Also, subjective well-being usually includes a global assessment of all aspects of a person's life, which is sometimes supplemented with judgments of well-being in specific areas of life (Diener, 1984).

Subjective well-being has two components, one being affective and the other, cognitive. The affective component is explored with emotional judgments of happiness, morale, and positive affect. The cognitive component is known as life satisfaction, which is a person's assessment of his or her quality of life according to his or her own chosen criteria. The two components are widely considered to be closely related

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This paper will follow Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in format and style.

because of high intercorrelations and parallel results for measures of these components (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Larson, 1978; Lohmann, 1977).

It is significant to have an indication of the relationship between gender and subjective well-being as the roles of men and women in society are undergoing such rapid change. It is also important to understand the relation between gender and subjective well-being since such an understanding would complement the numerous studies of gender differences in mental health which measure the prevalence of psychological disorders among men and women. The research on mental health has been commonly interpreted as indicating that women have higher rates of mental illness than men (Gove & Tudor, 1973; Phillips & Segal, 1969). In view of this, one would expect men to have greater subjective well-being than women.

However, most reviews have concluded that there are little or no differences in men's and women's levels of life satisfaction and happiness (Diener, 1984; Larson, 1978). These reviews have had comparatively limited samples and have not explored some of the important determinants of sex differences, such as roles.

Many researchers of sex differences in psychological well-being have explained findings of sex differences in terms of roles. One of the most important roles a person can occupy is that of spouse. There is considerable controversy over what relationship marriage has to sex differences in well-being. Several studies have shown that married women are more likely than any other group to have psychological disorders (Collette, 1984; Gove, 1972; Gove, 1978; Gove & Tudor, 1973).

Other researchers, approaching the issue from a feminist standpoint, reached the same conclusion (Bernard, 1972; Chesler, 1971). Basically, it is argued that married women have lower psychological well-being because (1) the work of a housewife is dull and unsatisfying, (2) women who work are usually still responsible for most of the household chores, so they actually work more hours than their husbands (Gove & Tudor, 1973), and (3) as part of their nurturant role in the household, women face incessant demands and suffer from a lack of privacy (Gove & Geerken, 1977).

There is also controversy about whether these factors inhibiting women's happiness in fact lower their experienced well-being relative to men. Jessie Bernard (1972) argued that, despite the problems outlined above, women are likely to report levels of subjective well-being that are equal to or greater than men's. This is because women have been socialized to think that marriage equals happiness. Consequently they based their judgments of well-being on the presence or absence of marriage and disregard the difficulties associated with the married role.

In contrast, other researchers have found that marriage is beneficial to both sexes (Bradburn, 1969; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Glenn, 1975; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). Glenn (1975) acknowledged Bernard's argument that marriage is stressful for women but hypothesized that, in view of existing data, women receive enough psychological benefits from marriage to overcome the stressful effects unique to women that it also produces.

Even more complex relations between gender, marriage, and subjective well-being have been proposed. Recently it has been argued that marital



status enhances well-being for both men and women, but that this holds true only for people who are happy in their marriages (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983). Alternately, whether men and women are in their first marriage or are remarried may make a difference. Remarried men have been found to report greater happiness than men still in first marriages. Remarried women, however, have been found to report less happiness than women in first marriages (White, 1979).

Another role that has been proposed as a mediator of the relationship between gender and subjective well-being is that of employee. Most of the research shows that employment in the work force has a positive effect on the subjective well-being of men (Bradburn, 1969; Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981) and of women (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Feree, 1976; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). Most research would also suggest that the higher status the occupation, the more related it is to increased subjective well-being for men and women (Scanzoni, 1978; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981).

In contrast, evidence from seven national surveys suggests that women who work and housewives have comparable levels of life satisfaction (Wright, 1978). Equivalent satisfaction could result from the roles having different benefits and drawbacks that balance out to produce a symmetrical pattern in the life satisfaction of the two groups of women. For example, the housewife may derive less gratification from her work than the woman who works outside the home, but her life may also be less hectic than the working woman's.

In addition to gender, age is an important demographic variable that has been investigated as a potential correlate of subjective well-being.

However, most studies have found virtually no relationship between age and subjective well-being (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Cameron, 1975; Stock, Okun, Haring, & Witter, 1983). Some research has indicated that age may interact with gender to affect subjective well-being. Older men have been found to have greater subjective well-being than older women while younger men are found to have lower subjective well-being than younger women (Medley, 1980; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1974; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981).

### The Present Research

This research was intended to clarify the relationship between gender and subjective well-being. We conducted an exhaustive survey of the published literature on subjective well-being. Instead of following traditional methods of reviewing, which simply tally the number of findings supporting a particular hypothesis, we employed the recently developed techniques of meta-analysis to evaluate study findings. A meta-analysis is a statistical procedure in which the outcomes of independent studies investigating the same issue are combined, so that one can see the magnitude of the effect over the entire body of literature (Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981). By using meta-analytic methods, it was possible to estimate the overall magnitude of sex differences in the two components of subjective well-being which appeared in our sample, happiness and life satisfaction.

In addition, the review utilizes recently developed procedures for model fitting to study outcomes (Hedges, 1982a; 1982b; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982a). Such analyses evaluate how adequately the identified predictors

of sex differences in subjective well-being (e.g., marital status, employment status, and age) can account for the obtained gender effects. This relatively precise method of hypothesis testing in meta-analysis has proven effective in identifying the determinants of sex differences in different areas of social behavior (e.g., Eagly & Crowley, in press; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982b; Thomas & French, 1985).

The present review is likely to provide a relatively valid estimate of the magnitude of sex differences in subjective well-being. It is, of course, possible that published research would over-estimate the occurrence of significant sex differences. Yet, sex differences have rarely been the primary variable of interest in the subjective well-being research. Thus, tests for sex differences have not been systematically reported and in fact have frequently been relegated to parenthetical remarks or footnotes. It is unlikely, then, that decisions concerning publication of the original studies depended on the significance of any gender differences obtained. Further, researchers have become increasingly aware of the importance of demonstrating that their findings obtain for both men and women, and they may be increasingly likely to report findings of no sex differences.

## Method

### Description of Data Set

This meta-analysis used every published study in English that could be located which reported a measure of subjective well-being for males and females. The final sample of 97 studies was drawn from Diener and Griffin's extensive (1984) bibliography of subjective well-being, a previous, more limited review of sex differences in subjective well-being (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984), and computerized searches of the Psychological Abstracts from 1967 to 1985 and the Sociological Abstracts from 1963 to 1985 using the key words life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being.

### Variables Utilized for Each Study

The following variables were examined for every study in the sample:<sup>1</sup> (a) categorized age of subjects, (b) number of male subjects, (c) number of female subjects, (d) total number of subjects, (e) whether measure(s) used were life satisfaction, happiness/morale, or both, (f) percentage of total sample married, (g) percentage of total sample employed, and (h) the direction of the sex difference.

If the exact value of a statistic resulting from a test for the sex difference was known or could be calculated, the effect size (d) was added. This statistic represents the magnitude of an effect and is calculated from the difference between the means of the male and female groups divided by the within group standard deviation assumed to be common to the two populations (Hedges & Olkin, 1985). Effect sizes

associated with greater male subjective well-being were given a positive sign and those associated with greater female subjective well-being, a negative sign.

## Results

### Sample as a Whole

From the 97 studies in the review, enough information about the sex difference effect was provided to calculate 37 effect sizes for happiness and 32 effect sizes for life satisfaction. These effect size findings are displayed in Table 1. The mean effect size<sup>2</sup> for the entire sample, including all age categories, for happiness is  $-0.06$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that women report significantly greater happiness than men. The mean effect size for the entire sample for life satisfaction is  $0.02$ , ns, indicating that there is no difference in males' and females' levels of life satisfaction.

### Comparison Between Ages

Table 2 displays the results of the analyses of male and female happiness and life satisfaction as a function of the age of the respondents. The two age groups, middle-aged and younger and elderly, were formed because a large proportion of studies had samples comprised entirely of elderly respondents. Studies including respondents with a broad range of ages were excluded from these analyses, hence the discrepancy between the number of findings used for these analyses and the number used for the analyses for the sample as a whole.

For happiness of the middle-aged and younger group, the analysis is based on 5 effect size findings and for the elderly group, 11 effect size findings. The test statistic ( $H_g$ ) for the comparison between ages is  $0.15$ , indicating that the relationship between sex and happiness is the

Table 1  
 Mean Effect Sizes for Male vs. Female Well-Being

Effect size for Happiness	Number of findings	95% Confidence interval Lower limit	Upper limit	Effect size for Life Satisfaction	Number of findings	95% Confidence interval Lower limit	Upper limit
-0.06*	37	-0.08	-0.04	0.02	32	0.00	0.04

Note. Effect sizes are the standardized mean difference between male and female well-being, calculated as  $\frac{M_{\text{Males}} - M_{\text{Females}}}{\text{Common SD}}$ . Effect sizes were given a positive sign for differences in the male direction and a negative sign for differences in the female direction.

\*  $p < .05$

Table 2

Mean Effect Sizes for Male vs. Female Well-Being as a Function of Respondent Age

	Comparison between ages ( $H_B$ )	Number of findings	Effect size	95% Confidence interval		Homogeneity within class ( $H_W$ )
				Lower limit	Upper limit	
Happiness	0.15					
Middle-aged and younger		5	-0.12	-0.25	0.01	10.87*
Elderly		11	-0.09	-0.12	0.06	300.82***
Life satisfaction	12.02**					
Middle-aged and younger		4	-0.14	-0.28	0.00	5.10
Elderly		15	0.13	0.09	0.17	67.29***

Note. Effect sizes are the standardized mean difference between male and female well-being, calculated as  $\frac{M_{\text{Males}} - M_{\text{Females}}}{\text{Common SD}}$ . Effect sizes were given a positive sign for differences in the male direction and a negative sign for differences in the female direction.

\*  $p < .05$ \*\*  $p < .01$ \*\*\*  $p < .001$



same for both age groups. The effect size for the middle-aged and younger group is  $-0.12$  and for the elderly group,  $-0.09$ . Although the confidence interval revealed that both of these effect sizes are not significantly different from 0, the direction of the mean effect sizes are consistent with the finding that, for the sample as a whole, females report greater happiness than males. The significant homogeneity tests ( $H_W$ ) reveal that the effect sizes in these categories are not all drawn from the same population. Consequently, just considering participants' age is not adequate to explain the variability in effect sizes.

For life satisfaction, the mean effect size for the middle-aged and younger group is based on 4 findings. For the elderly group the mean effect size is based on 15 findings. The test statistic ( $H_B$ ) for this comparison is 12.02,  $p < .01$ , indicating that the relationship between sex and life satisfaction does vary with respondents' ages. The mean effect size for the middle-ages and younger group,  $-0.14$ , was not significantly different from 0. The mean effect size for the elderly group,  $0.13$ , indicates that elderly men have higher levels of life satisfaction than elderly women. Although the significant homogeneity test ( $H_W$ ) for the elderly group indicated that considering just age was not sufficient to explain effect sizes, the statistic for the younger group was not significant and indicated that for this sample the model was sufficient.

#### Effects of Participants' Roles

To examine whether the percent of male and female respondents in marriage and employment roles affected well-being, least squares regres-

sions were conducted (Hedges, 1982b; Hedges & Olkin, 1985). Each analysis yields a test of the significance of each predictor of subjective well being in addition to evaluating whether the predictor is adequate to explain the variation across studies in subjective well-being.

As shown in Table 3, two continuous variables are significantly related to the sex differences. The first variable, percentage of sample married, related negatively to the sex difference for life satisfaction, showing that the higher the percentage of the sample that is married, the greater the life satisfaction of women, ( $\underline{b} = -0.0049$ ,  $\underline{p} < .001$ ). The test of model specification showed that just considering the percentage of the sample married is not enough to account for the variation in effect sizes,  $Q_E = 39.05$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ . For happiness, this factor was not a significant predictor of sex differences in subjective well-being.

The second variable, percentage of sample employed, also related negatively to the sex difference in life satisfaction, ( $\underline{b} = -0.0029$ ,  $\underline{p} < .001$ ). The greater the percentage of the sample employed, the greater is the life satisfaction of women. Again, this model is not adequate to account for all the variance in the effect sizes,  $Q_E = 26.07$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ . Percent of the sample employed was also related negatively to the sex difference in happiness ( $\underline{b} = -0.0037$ ,  $\underline{p} < .001$ ). Again, this model is not sufficient,  $Q_E = 314.44$ ,  $\underline{p} < .001$ .

Table 3  
Effects of Participants' Roles on Reports of Well-Being

Predictor	Life Satisfaction		Happiness	
	Number of findings	$\underline{b}$ (b*)	Number of findings	$\underline{b}$ (b*)
Percent of sample married	19	-0.0049** (-0.579)		
Percent of sample employed	11	-0.0029* (-0.501)	13	-0.0037** (-0.247)

Note. Models are least squares regressions calculated with weight equal to reciprocal of variance for each effect. Unstandardized regression coefficients (b) are followed by standardized regression coefficients (b\*). Sex differences in the positive direction indicate greater well-being of males is associated with a higher percent of respondents filling a particular role.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the studies included in the present review obtained very different findings concerning men's and women's reports of happiness and life satisfaction. Concerning life satisfaction, we obtained strong evidence indicating there are no sex differences in life satisfaction.

However, the relation between gender and life satisfaction did vary with respondents' ages. The finding that younger women have equal or slightly higher levels of life satisfaction than younger men and that older men have higher levels of life satisfaction is consistent with previous results (Medley, 1980; Spreitzer and Snyder, 1974). It is interesting to speculate as to why this might be the case. Among the middle-aged and younger subjects, it may be that the men, based upon societal expectations and pressures to be successful, have set unrealistically high goals for themselves and, upon finding that they have not met these goals, feel dissatisfied with their lives. Women, on the other hand, are not under such high pressure to achieve and may set goals that are more easily attained.

That elderly women have lower levels of life satisfaction than elderly men may be explained by the fact that more of these women are widowed than the men and, as a result of the ensuing loneliness, may evaluate their lives less positively. This hypothesis is supported by our finding that the higher the percentage of the sample married, the greater the life satisfaction of women.

We also found that the difference between males' and females' life satisfaction varied with employment and marital roles in that both roles

appeared to enhance women's life satisfaction more than men's life satisfaction. The finding that marriage enhances women's life satisfaction more than men's is consistent with Jessie Bernard's (1972) theory that marriage in itself is a major goal for most women, whereas men have been socialized to view it as a necessary evil. That employment enhances women's life satisfaction more than men's is understandable when one considers that there is an element of choice for women who work as opposed to men, who still feel that they are obligated to work.

This review also demonstrated that women report significantly greater happiness than men. Although this finding is surprising when one considers previous reviews reporting no sex differences in subjective well-being, it may be explained by the fact that reviewers failed to differentiate between the cognitive and affective components of subjective well-being. These two components may be sufficiently interrelated to be considered together when researching most aspects of subjective well-being, but the fact that women are more likely than men to report affect (Cameron, 1975; Gurin, Veroff, and Field, 1960) seems to differentiate the two components enough in terms of sex differences that significant differences between men and women in happiness emerge where no differences are found in the life satisfaction of men and women.

This reporting bias may have masked age effects, since in both age groups women reported levels of happiness slightly higher than or equal to men's. Concerning the role of marriage, no significant effect on happiness was found. Again, this may be because women's strong tendency to report happiness masks the effect. Employment, though, was found to have the same effect on happiness that it did on life satisfaction; it

enhanced women's happiness relative to men's. Again, this may be because many working women, unlike most men, work purely by choice and not out of necessity.

## ENDNOTES

1. The following variables were also examined for every study in the sample, but the results to which they pertain are not included in this report: (a) date of publication, (b) sex of first author, (c) percentage of authors who are female, (d) average age of subjects, (e) whether subjects are from the U.S.A., Britain, or Canada or from elsewhere, (f) type of subjective well-being measure, (g) number of items in subjective well-being scale, (h) percentage of female subjects married, (i) percentage of male subjects married, (j) percentage of female subjects employed, (k) percentage of male subjects employed, (l) percentage of female subjects with children, (m) percentage of male subjects with children, (n) percentage of total sample with children, and (o) whether subjects were institutionalized.
2. The effect sizes are weighted by the inverse of the variance for each estimate (Hedges and Olkin, 1985). This gives greater weight to those findings measured more precisely.

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