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Gay marriage: the key to happiness?

A study finds that countries whose people enjoy more freedom tend to be happier.

by Gregory Rodriguez

Who knew? The legalization of gay marriage might make Californians happier. At least that's what a new study based on surveys of 350,000 people in nearly 100 countries suggests.

No, the authors aren't gay activists, nor do they seem to be peddling any particular political agenda. But in their search to discover which countries are happier than others and why, these scholars -- led by University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart -- have stumbled on one pretty fundamental conclusion about what people want out of life: freedom.

Yes, that's right, more or less the same thing you were celebrating Friday by scarfing down hamburgers next to the pool in your brother-in-law's backyard. How exactly, you ask, is gay marriage connected with "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"?

It's simple. According to surveys, in developed countries discrimination against women and minorities is actually waning and gays remain the least tolerated "outgroup" in society. They are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. In most developed countries, the relative level of their acceptance or rejection is a sensitive indicator of that society's overall tolerance toward minorities. And -- here's the takeaway -- social tolerance "broadens the range of choices available to people," thereby enhancing happiness for both the tolerant and the intolerant alike.

Sounds a little too touchy-feely, right? Are they saying that Armenians, who were next to last in the study's happiness ranking, should immediately allow gays to marry in order to be happier? Not exactly.

The researchers have found that freedom of choice is not only a universal aspiration but the single most important basis of human happiness. But to get to freedom of choice for Armenians, who live in poverty, social tolerance might not beat out economic development on the national "to-do" list. That's because first, you have to have enough food to eat. Of course, economic well-being doesn't just buy food, it also frees people from the lack

of life choices that deprivation imposes -- suddenly you're on your way up the happiness scale.

But money can only take you so far. The transition from a subsistence economy to moderate economic security has a profound effect on a nation's happiness. But once a nation gets past the level of, say, Portugal (No. 47), economic growth begins to produce diminishing returns. That's when, the study's authors theorize, humans can afford to try to maximize "free choice in all the realms of life." Here in the U.S., we know all about post-materialist politics and the emergence of "quality of life" issues.

At this stage, what does a society have to look like in order to create more free choice and more happiness? The study indicates that you need democratization and, most important of all, social tolerance.

"Yes, I know that all this sounds like I've been brainwashed by my third-grade teacher," lead researcher Inglehart told me, "but it turns out it's true. The empirical evidence is clear: Freedom is conducive to happiness."

For years, scholars were convinced that a nation's level of happiness was constant. Previous research indicated that neither sudden tragedy nor rising fortunes could alter a nation's long-term levels of satisfaction. Biological studies also have shown the degree to which happiness can be inherited. But the sheer size of the survey sample in this study, as well as the fact that it was longitudinal -- tracking results for most countries over nearly 20 years -- strongly suggest that the old studies were wrong. The happiness of a society fluctuates and usually is based on the relative freedom (including freedom from scarcity) of its population.

The researchers' theories can account for a lot about the rankings that emerged from their work, but not everything. After all, the big picture might be development, democracy and tolerance, but individual happiness is still pretty subjective, and there are other, more minor factors that determine life satisfaction.

Where did the U.S. come in? Sixteenth. Which country was No. 1? Denmark. One impressive showing came from Latin America, where many of the nations ranked higher than the researchers had expected. Colombia, for example, came in at No. 3; Puerto Rico at No. 2. In fact, for all the study's emphasis on development, democratization and tolerance, Latin America makes even the researchers wonder. They speculate that happiness in Latin America might have something to do with those societies' strong belief in God. Traditional religion, according to the researchers, is also conducive to happiness.

Which brings us to a modern-day quandary. Modernity is good because it

facilitates development, democracy and freedom of choice; but so is tradition because it gives us a sense of security, predictability and purpose in our lives. The study suggests that religious faith and social tolerance are a winning combination. Which leaves me wondering: Perhaps people in the U.S. would all be happier if more ministers, rabbis, imams and priests conducted more gay marriages.

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