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Study: Blacks' happiness has increased

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Betsy Stevenson

Wolfers, something seems to be going on here that's about more than money. The new study suggest that African Americans are happier today than they were in the 1970s, while whites are pretty much just as happy now as they were then.



Justin Wolfers

happy, while interestingly, Black women have become much happier. Considering that in the 1970s white women were the happiest of any group in American society.

"Women are just exhausted," said Debbie Mandel, radio host and author of the book Addicted to Stress. "What I have found is that women can accomplish on many fronts and they work outside the home, so the housework is still the same, so they haven't replaced housework with paid work.

"They have found themselves, particularly white women, having to do more. As result women are not sleeping well and they're feeling negative because they didn't feel they didn't get to do it all. This is a relatively new phenomenon for white women, whereas this has been a part of the Black woman's life forever. They saw their grandmothers and mothers do the same thing that they are doing now, at a much higher level, mind you, and it's really no big deal for them, as Blacks continue to make enormous gains."

By contrast, the happiness gains for Black women have been a bit bigger than for Black men, who are still more satisfied than they were in the 1970s, but less so than a decade ago.

Stevenson and Wolfers, point out that self-reported measures of happiness usually shift at a glacial pace. The share of whites, for example, telling pollsters in recent years that they are "not too happy" — as opposed to "pretty happy" or "very happy" — has been about 10 percent. It was also 10 percent in the 1970s.

Yet the share of Blacks saying they are not too happy has dropped noticeably, to about 20 percent in surveys over the last decade, from 24 percent in the 1970s. The new study found that people are discovering that money isn't everything.

Naturally, money has a big effect on the mind, just as it has a big effect on health, education and almost everything else. The rich report being happier than the middle class on average, and the middle class report being happier than the poor. The income and wealth gaps between whites and Blacks, in turn, explain a big part of the happiness gap.

But the discrepancies don't explain all of it. Among whites and Blacks making the same amount of money, whites tend to be happier. This unexplained gap, however, has shrunk.

In the 1970s, a relatively affluent Black person — one in a household making more than nine out of 10 other Black households, or at the 90th percentile of the Black income spectrum — was earning the same amount as someone at the 75th percentile of the white spectrum. That's another way of saying Blacks were making less than whites.

But Blacks were far less satisfied with their lives than could be explained by the income difference. People at the 90th percentile of the

'Quality of life' not closely linked to money, economists suggest

As the country has moved forward, Blacks can no longer pin their hopes on civil rights or faith. To broaden their appeal to an increasingly diverse America, Blacks have had to reiterate themselves as a people based steep in faith, hard work, stability and trust. What Blacks have found is it can be a tricky balancing act, as they, along with the general public; try to find happiness.

Although there have been many success stories for Blacks the last 40 years — president, secretary of state, CEO of a Fortune 500 company and attorney general quickly come to mind — the last three decades have not been great ones for progress. Considering, the Black unemployment rate is now nearly twice as high as the white rate, just as in 1975.

Despite the grim findings, and according to a study authored by University of Pennsylvania economists Betsy Stevenson and Justin

"It is the largest and most important change in happiness for any population I have ever seen," said Wolfers to Newsweek. Wolfers and Stevenson write: "Our study illustrates that the fruits of the Civil Rights Movement may lay in other, more difficult to document, improvements in the quality of life."

A Gallup poll taken this year found 63 percent of Blacks thought their standard of living was getting better, while 41 percent of whites did. What they found in this study is that the single most important finding relating to Black and white happiness is the plight of white women.

This interesting postscript to the new study is different from an earlier Stevenson-Wolfers paper about women and men. It found that women have become less happy over the last few decades, in spite of big economic, educational and social progress.

Stevenson argues that the combined job and family expectations for women today may have left many less than fully satisfied.

Today, white women of all ages and incomes are considerably less

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Black income spectrum were as happy on average as people just below the 10th percentile of the white income spectrum, amazingly enough.

Today, people at the 90th percentile of the Black income spectrum are still making about as much as those at the 75th percentile of the white spectrum — but are now as happy on average as people in the dead middle, or the 50th percentile, of the white income spectrum. The income gap hasn't shrunk much, but the happiness gap has.

In the paper, which is awaiting peer review, the two economists acknowledge that they cannot be sure what is causing the change. But it is consistent with patterns that other happiness researchers have noticed, and there are some plausible explanations. The most obvious is the decrease — though certainly not the elimination — in day-to-day racism.

"The decline in prejudice has been astounding," said Kerwin Charles, a University of Chicago economist who has studied discrimination, to The New York Times. "Well into the 1970s, Blacks faced "a vast array of personal indignities that led to unhappiness."

Today, those indignities are unacceptable in many areas of American life. For example, in the early 1970s, 39 percent of Americans said they favored laws against marriage between the two races, according to one long-running poll. When the question was last asked, earlier this decade, the share had fallen below 10 percent.

The number saying they are unwilling to vote for a Black presidential candidate has also plummeted. That shift is a reminder that jobs once closed to Blacks — no longer are. Clearly the decline in discrimination has improved the life of Black people, above and beyond their pay.

And the decline in discrimination may even be lifting Black wages, despite the meager gains in the overall statistics.

Jonathan Guryan, a Northwestern University economist, points out that the last three decades have brought a wave of forces that could have led to a widening of the Black-white pay gap.

Union membership has dropped, and Black workers are more likely to be unionized. Income inequality has risen, and Black households are more likely to be middle class or poor. The economic returns of a college degree have soared, and the college graduation gap between whites and Blacks has grown. Nonetheless, the Black-white pay gap has shrunk slightly.

Research has shown that racial discrimination remains a part of daily life, albeit a reduced one. To take just one example, an experiment found that résumés with typically Black names lead to fewer job interviews than similar résumés with different names. Combine the discrimination with the toll of bad schools and broken families, and the country ends up with huge lingering Black-white gaps.

"African Americans, particularly women, see themselves on the way up," said Elizabeth Wilson, the Executive Director of The Company of Women, Inc., and author of the book When Life Gives You Lemons Open a Lemonade Stand. "I think in spite of the economy, in spite of the wars, we see (ourselves) in a very positive light, with a very positive future."

— The New York Times Contributed to this report.

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