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Blacks Are Getting Happier

Whites are not. Ask your mother why.



by [Julia Baird \(/authors/julia-baird.html\)](/authors/julia-baird.html) **August 27, 2010**

It's been an ugly time in race relations lately. Radio host Laura Schlessinger used the N word 11 times in five minutes; [Shirley Sherrod \(/tag/shirley-sherrod.html\)](/tag/shirley-sherrod.html), a black woman who preached redemption, was accused of hating whites; and professional provocateur Glenn Beck described himself and his fans as the real "inheritors and protectors of the civil-rights movement." Not like those, um, say, African-Americans who were denied actual rights? Last year he claimed President Obama secretly hated white people, fueling an anxiety about hidden agendas that is as palpable as it is irrational.

But as the spit, froth, and noise continue, one of the most profound cultural shifts in the past half century has gone unnoticed. That is, while whites have become less happy, African-Americans have grown a lot happier. Blacks are still not as happy, overall, as whites, but in seminal new research—which tracks the changes in happiness levels by race since the 1970s for the first time—economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers from the University of Pennsylvania found that the gap between black and white happiness has declined by about 40 percent. Wolfers said: "It is the largest and most important change in happiness for any population I have ever seen."

Why this is the case remains somewhat of a mystery. What is fascinating is that it can only be partly explained by the usual objective measures, like education, health, and income: there has been almost no improvement in earnings compared with whites since 1980, and little in education since 1990. In 1972 black family income was 58 percent that of whites; by 2004 it had inched up only to 64 percent. Black families are still three times as likely as white families to be living in poverty.

Yet there are three possible reasons this dramatic shift may have occurred. First, three decades ago the gap between black and white happiness was "astonishingly large"—life was miserable for African-Americans then.

Second, it is clear that what has changed most are things that we cannot measure, and which spring from rights, heightened status, and erosion of prejudice. Stevenson and Wolfers 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." It makes sense that respect and esteem can lift your spirits. It may also translate into an ongoing optimism: a Gallup poll taken this year found 63

percent of blacks thought their standard of living was getting better; 41 percent of whites did.

A third reason is that whites have grown less happy. Clearly, while Beck and his ilk might like to see it as a zero-sum game, where the equality of African-Americans comes at the expense of whites, this is patently false and misleading. In fact, the key to this trend is women—white women of all ages and incomes are substantially less happy, while, intriguingly, black women at the same time have become much happier. Yet in the 1970s white women were the happiest of any group. What happened? Why didn't feminism bring them the happiness civil rights brought blacks?

Of course, it's not that simple. Stephanie Coontz, a professor of history at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., believes it is about expectations: "Black women are where white women were in the 1960s—they can look back at just how bad their mothers and grandmothers had it. They are optimistic about how far they can go in comparison to the past. But the more gains you make, the higher your expectations are, and when progress stagnates, you feel frustration." But Donna Franklin, author of [Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African American Family](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0195100786/?tag=nwswk-20) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0195100786/?tag=nwswk-20>), thinks black women are happier because fewer are getting married today, and because of a "cultural comfort with single black women," are less likely to get depressed if they don't. Nor do black women fret about being working mothers: "As white women struggle with managing work and family life, for black women, it's a no-brainer. Our mothers have worked for the past 400 years."

Still, what must be weighing on the minds of these mothers is the hopes of their male children. The only group that did not report an improvement in happiness was young black men, one in three of whom are likely to be jailed in their lifetime. Are these men the only group that the civil-rights movement could not rescue? In the midst of cheerful news, it's a troubling thought.

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