

VIRGIL H. ADAMS III

A PARADOX IN AFRICAN AMERICAN QUALITY OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT. This study examines panel data from the National Survey of Black Americans with regard to the quality of life of African Americans between 1980 and 1992. Objective measures from current populations reports and census data (such as health, education, and income) indicate that the situation for African Americans has either stagnated or declined during this period. The present analyses show that African Americans' reports of general life satisfaction increased and there was a decline in happiness. There was no response bias that could account for the observed changes in well-being. Contrasts are drawn between these results and the existing well-being literature. Implications for further research are discussed.

Existing quality of life research involves two major approaches: normative or descriptive indicators, drawn from census data or current population reports, are used to analyze the quality of life for specific groups or subgroups as the basis of most reports on objective well-being. Satisfaction indicators (or subjective well-being) are used to understand how individuals assess their quality of life (QOL). These data are derived from studies utilizing the numerous scales and other measures which assess an individual's perception of well-being. More comprehensive reviews of each approach are available elsewhere (cf. Land, 1983; Schuessler and Fisher, 1985).

Between 1980 and 1992 an intriguing social psychological phenomenon occurred among African Americans. Indicators of objective well-being for African Americans such as health, education, and economic status either remained stagnant or deteriorated (Bennett, 1993). There have been some gains for African Americans, the emergence of a viable African American middle-class (Coner-Edwards and Spurlock, 1988), is certainly one indication that gains have been made, yet close examination points to the continued struggle among many African Americans to reach parity with their white counterparts. Several areas of objective well-being are examined.

Considering indicators of health, there are approximately twenty percent of African Americans who are not covered by private or government health insurance, while fourteen percent of white Americans do not have health insurance (Bennefield, 1997). The implication of not having health insurance is the increased difficulty in obtaining quality health care. African Americans have both higher incidence and mortality rates of cancer than whites, and the gap is widening (Clayton and Byrd, 1993). In 1980, 42% of African Americans and 53% of white Americans were murdered or died as a result of non-negligent manslaughter. By 1991, African Americans constituted 47% and whites constituted 50% of these victims (Maguire, 1992).

Turning to measures of education attainment, there has been a closing of the gap in terms of high school completion. In 1980, 70% of white Americans and 51% of African Americans age 25 and over had completed 4 or more years of high school; by 1992, 80% of white Americans and 67% of African Americans had completed 4 or more years of high school. In terms of college completion however, things have not gone nearly as well for African Americans. In 1980, 8% of African Americans and 18% of white Americans over age 25 had completed at least 4 years of college, in 1992 these figures had increased to 12% and 22% (for African American and white American respectively) (US Bureau of the Census, 1995).

During the decade of the eighties, there was a 30% drop in African American households composed of married couples (48% in 1992) and 28% gain in households headed by single females (46% in 1992). This shift is especially relevant to the paradox because 64% of African American single female headed households were below the national poverty level (Bennett, 1993). Further, only African American married couples with dual wage earners residing outside of the southern states have reached economic parity with their white counterparts (Billingsley, 1992). Adding to the deleterious situation is the continued higher unemployment rates among African Americans of all educational levels, particularly among African American males (US Bureau of Census, 1992).

Yet, during this same period, data from the University of Michigan's National Panel Survey of Black Americans (NPSBA), a subset of the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), showed