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Black-White Differences in Happiness, 1972-2014*

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the black-white gap in happiness—an important indicator of subjective well-being—has narrowed over the 1972 to 2014 period. Analyzing data from the General Social Survey, we find that the difference in levels of happiness between whites and blacks is substantial, but declined over time. Results from a decomposition analysis shed new light on the sources of change. We find that observable differences in characteristics of whites and blacks explain a significant and growing proportion of the happiness gap. The two most important characteristics are income and marital status, as both are strongly associated with race and happiness, and the proportion of the difference in the gap that they explain has generally increased over time. Overall, the declining gap in happiness is consistent with the moderate narrowing of substantial racial disparities in other realms, such as life expectancy, residential segregation, and neighborhood conditions, suggesting small steps toward equality in some realms, even as high levels of inequality persist in others.

Keywords

racial and ethnic inequality; happiness; subjective well-being; General Social Survey

Racial and ethnic inequality continues to be among the most significant social issues in the United States today. This is evidenced by the attention it receives in the media, political discussions, as well as in academic work. Among these racial and ethnic divisions, the black-white color line may be the starkest. Nevertheless, by many measures, levels of black-white inequality have declined, especially when measured over a long period of time. For example, there has been some narrowing of the gap in educational attainment, poverty, life expectancy, and residential segregation and neighborhood economic conditions since the 1960s (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a, 2016b; CDC 2016; Logan and Stults 2011; Firebaugh and Farell 2016; Iceland 2017). Some black-white disparities, however, have not narrowed, including median family income and wealth (U.S. Census Bureau 1986, 1990, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2013, 2016c).

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In this study we examine disparities in levels of happiness (or the “happiness gap”), a measure of well-being that many would consider to be of intrinsic importance. That is, while income is thought to be important for things that it can be used to purchase—such as food, shelter, better health care, consumer goods, and the like—happiness is an end that many people strive for in their everyday life. There are a number of reasons to believe why we might observe racial disparities in happiness. For one, blacks and whites differ in various socio-demographic characteristics that have been shown to be associated with happiness, including income, education, labor force status, and family living arrangements. In addition, blacks might differ from whites in other ways that are more difficult to capture in conventional surveys, such as exposure to racism and discrimination and stress that might accompany such exposure (Gernoimus et al 2006; Massey 2004; Williams 1999).

Racial disparities in levels of happiness have been documented in a number of previous studies (e.g., Barger 2009; Thomas and Hughes 1986; Hughes and Thomas 1998; Yang 2008). Some of the earlier studies that examined black-white disparities from the 1970s into the 1990s found that blacks were less likely to say that they were very happy than whites, and that there was little change in the gap over time (Thomas and Hughes 1986; Hughes and Thomas 1998). More recent research that has not focused solely on race has found some evidence of a small narrowing of the gap (Yang 2008; Coverdill, López, and Petrie 2011). We build on these studies not only by using more recent data (2014) to study additional change over time, but we also examine individual and family-level characteristics that both contribute to and mitigate the gap, and, via a decomposition analysis, how the effect of those characteristics have changed over time. There is reason to think, for example, that the association between marriage and happiness among blacks and whites may have changed over the 1972 to 2014 period as marriage patterns widened (Raley, Sweeney, and Wandra 2015).

Our analysis is guided by the following specific questions:

1. How large is the gap in happiness between blacks and whites?
2. To what extent do socio-demographic characteristics affect the size of this gap?
3. How has black-white inequality in happiness changed over time?
4. To what extent do group characteristics and their effects on happiness help explain this change?

We answer these questions using data from the 1972 to 2014 General Social Survey (GSS), one of the longest-running surveys that collects data on happiness. Our analysis provides greater insight on trends in the racial differential in happiness, and some of the factors that have contributed to this changing gap over time.

Background

Racial and ethnic inequality persists in many areas of American life, ranging from income and education differentials to health disparities, residential circumstances, and occupational attainment, to name but a few. Given these differences, we would expect to see differentials in reports of subjective well-being, such as indicators of happiness. The empirical research

by-and-large confirms these differentials. Nevertheless, given that there has been a narrowing in many—though not all—socioeconomic and health differentials between blacks and whites when measured over a long period of time, we might likewise expect a narrowing in these subjective measures of well-being. The principal goal of this study is to delve into this issue to arrive at a better understanding of patterns and trends in the black-white happiness gap. This section begins with a more detailed theoretical discussion of why we might see racial differences in happiness. This is followed by a review of empirical studies on this issue, a summary of the contributions of our study to this literature, and some hypotheses about the patterns and trends we expect to see.

Why We Would Expect to Observe Racial Differentials in Happiness

We see significant racial disparities across a number of indicators of well-being. Black-white inequality in particular remains pervasive. Nevertheless, by some measures at least, there has been a decline in such inequality, though among some others, there has been little change. Among those where we have seen some narrowing of the gap is educational attainment. For example, in 1970 about 57 percent of whites and 34 percent of blacks had completed high school, meaning that whites were 1.70 times more likely to complete high school than blacks. By 2014, about 89 percent of whites and 86 percent of blacks had completed high school, representing a ratio of 1.03 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a). Even if we take into account that these figures modestly over-represent black high school completion due to the fact that the data come from household surveys that do not include the institutionalized population (Pettit 2012), the narrowing of the gap is considerable (Iceland 2017). Poverty differentials are substantial, but they also narrowed somewhat over time. In 1959, 55.1 percent of African Americans were poor, compared to 18.1 percent of whites. Poverty declined for both groups over time, but more so among African Americans, such that by 2014, 26.2 percent of blacks lived in poverty, compared to 10.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2016b). We likewise have seen declines in residential segregation and a narrowing of neighborhood poverty rates where blacks and whites live (Logan and Stults 2011; Firebaugh and Farell 2016). Of note, a differential in life expectancy remains, but it has also declined. In 2013, life expectancy at birth among whites and blacks were 79 and 76, respectively, compared to 72 years and 64 years in 1970 (CDC 2016).

On the other hand, some black-white differentials have not budged. Median family incomes among whites and blacks remain large, and have not narrowed over time. The ratio of white to black median household income was 1.70 in 2014, virtually unchanged from 1.72 in 1967 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016c). Wealth differentials are huge and may have even increased over time. For example, the black-white wealth ratio was 14.2 in 2011, up from 11.5 in 1984 (the first year of the time series) (U.S. Census Bureau 1986, 2013). Specifically, the median net worth of non-Hispanic white families was \$110,500 in 2011, compared to just \$6,314 among black families (a significant proportion of whom reported zero wealth).

Because black-white differentials are correlated and indeed found across nearly all measures of socioeconomic status, we would expect to see these differentials to extend to happiness. Happiness is a common measure of subjective well-being. The measure of happiness used in

our analysis is a reliable and a valid indicator of substantive feelings of well-being (Diener 1984). Many studies show high correlations between self-reports of subjective wellbeing and other measures of well-being, such as reports of acquaintances, respondents' recollections of good and bad events in their lives, physiological measures such as neural activity, heart rate and hormone levels, and how often people smile (Ball and Chernova 2008; Eckman, Davidson, and Friesen 1990; Sandvik, Diener, and Seidlitz 1993; Seidlitz, Wyer, and Diener 1997).

In addition to expecting to see black-white differences in happiness, we would expect that some, or perhaps much, of the difference can be explained by individual and family characteristics that are associated with both race and happiness. In particular, gaps in happiness by socioeconomic status have been widely documented, with those with higher levels of income and education more likely to report that they are happy than people with lower levels of income and education (Easterlin 2001; Ball and Chernova 2008; Firebaugh and Schroeder 2009; Yang 2008). Income, for example, can be used to purchase goods and services—ranging from basic needs to luxury amenity items—that increase satisfaction or reduce stress, and people may also derive satisfaction from the higher status that accompanies a higher income (Clark et al. 2008; Davis 1984; Hagerty 2000). Thus, some of the black-white gap in happiness might be due to socioeconomic differentials.

In addition, people who are married tend to be happier than those who are never married, divorced, separated, or widowed (Blanchard and Oswald 2004; Gove, Hughes, and Style 1983; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). Family relationships, including marriage, are often a primary source of satisfaction and social and economic support that affect psychological and physical well-being, and the effects do not appear to simply be a function of who selects into relationships and marriage (Adous and Ganey 1999; Frey and Stutzer 2005; Kamp Dush and Amato 2005; Stack and Eshleman 1998; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Blacks are much less likely to marry than whites, and more likely to divorce when they do. These differences have also widened over time (Isen and Stevenson 2010; Raley, Sweeney, and Wandra 2015), which means that these trends could play an increasingly important role in explaining the racial happiness gap.

Among other sociodemographic factors that are correlated with happiness, older people tend to be happier than younger people, and women are more likely to say they are happy than men (Rodgers 1982; Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan 1989; Yang 2008). Religious belief and church attendance may be positively associated with happiness, as they may provide people a framework to make sense of everyday events and negative trauma and embed them in a like-minded community that provides social support (Ellison 1991). Happiness likewise varies by labor force attachment and number of children (Easterlin 2003; Kohler, Behrman, and Skytthe 2005; Yang 2008). The extent to which blacks and whites differ across these characteristics varies, and so our analysis will focus on the extent to which they might help explain (or not) the black-white gap in happiness.

Nevertheless, we might expect that African Americans would be less likely to report that they are happy even after controlling for other characteristics associated with happiness, such as income, education, and marital status, because of other, unobserved, factors. Among

these could be their sense of racial inequality in society at large. Racial inequality can result in psychological distress and a reduced sense of personal control (Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Hughes and Demo 1989). Individuals may also feel stress by being a member of a minority group and being seen as different (Kanazawa and Li 2015). Perceived discrimination can likewise reduce life satisfaction (Williams et al 1997; Thomas and Hughes 1986). As Campbell (1981: 233) states: “Black people lack what income alone won’t give them, equal social and political status.”

Empirical Research

Empirical studies have found that blacks have lower life satisfaction, less trust in people, less general happiness, less marital happiness, more anomie, and lower self-rated physical health than whites (Thomas and Hughes 1986; Barger, Donoho, and Wayment 2008). Studies have also found that differences persist even when controlling for socioeconomic and demographic factors, such as gender, income, education, marital status, employment status, and health (Clemente and Sauer 1976; Hughes and Thomas 1998; Thomas and Hughes 1986; Barger, Donoho, and Wayment 2009). For example, Beatty and Tuch (1997) report that even when confining their analysis to middle class respondents, blacks express lower levels of satisfaction with several aspects of their lives than whites. They conclude that race continues to exert a significant impact on subjective well-being.

It is important to note that in these studies, the effect of race represents a set of unexplained factors. Discrimination could be a prominent unobserved factor explaining the race gap, though other unobserved factors might play a role, such as differences in wealth, housing and neighborhood conditions, and social capital, to name a few. Of course, many of these factors are themselves influenced by racial inequality and discrimination.

A few recent studies have suggested some decline in the black-white happiness gap over time as blacks have become more likely to report greater happiness (Blanchflower and Oswald 2004; Yang 2008; Coverdill, López, and Petrie 2011; Stevenson and Wolfers 2012). For example, Coverdill, López, and Petrie (2011) find that a higher proportion of blacks responded that they are “very happy” over the 1972 to 2008 period. That study did not contain an in-depth analysis of the extent to which socio-demographic characteristics reduce or augment the black- white gap. Yang (2008), however, finds that some of the convergence is due to the more similar age structure of blacks and whites in more recent years—the black population used to be younger—and age is positively associated with happiness. Yang did not explicitly explore the role of a range of covariates in reducing or ameliorating the gap. Furthermore, we examine the change in the extent to which different characteristics explain the black-white happiness gap over time. For example, if race differentials in income, marriage, church attendance, and childbearing changed, then these can affect the happiness gap.

In short, our study builds on existing studies on the black-white gap in happiness by examining change over three decades, including the extent to which the gap has narrowed, the effect that group characteristics have had on this gap, as well as changes in the effect of these characteristics over time for both blacks and whites. In doing so, we aim to gain a

greater understanding of changing patterns of racial inequality in happiness, an important indicator of subjective well-being.

Based on the theoretical literature and the empirical work on this issue, we offer the following hypotheses:

1. Given persisting racial inequality, we expect to observe a black-white gap in happiness.
2. Tracking trends in many (though not all) gaps in well-being, we expect that the black- white gap in happiness declined over the 1972 to 2014 period.
3. Many observable characteristics that are correlated with race will help explain the gap (e.g., socioeconomic status, marital status).
4. A racial gap will remain even after controlling for these factors due to other unobserved factors, such as discrimination.
5. The contribution of various factors to the black-white gap in happiness may change over time as black-white disparities in those factors change.

Data and Methods

We use data from the 1972-2014 panels of the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a nationally representative survey of non-institutionalized adults aged 18 years and older conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (Smith et al., 2016). The survey also collects information on the demographic composition, behaviors, attitudes, and conditions in the household. The GSS is one of the most widely used sources of happiness data in the United States. It was administered every year from 1972 to 1994 (except for 1979, 1981, and 1992), and then biannually thereafter. Our main dependent variable is happiness of the householder. This comes from the following question on the GSS: “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days--would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Thus, our dependent variable has three response categories.

Our main independent variable is race. The only responses that are available over the entire period are white, black, and other. Our analysis includes only white and black respondents.¹ We also include a range of independent variables that have been shown to be associated with happiness. These are: family income, age, gender, labor force status, educational attainment, marital status, presence of children, religious attendance, and region. Family income is a categorical variable in the GSS, and we assign each family to the closest year-specific income quintile as calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census 2016d). We also ran additional analyses using the income categories in the GSS, and this approach yielded the same conclusions as those shown below. Age is measured as a continuous variable. Labor force status variable has three categories: employed, unemployed, and not in the labor force.

¹We do not include the “other” category in the analysis because it is very heterogeneous, and increasingly so over time. For example, it includes a growing number of Hispanics and Asians, each which have a very different socioeconomic profile. Nevertheless, we conducted some additional analyses that included people who are not black or white, and find that the responses to the happiness question for this group lies between those of blacks and whites, and the gap between this group and whites narrowed over time.

Educational attainment is measured with respondents' highest educational degree, with the categories less than a high school degree, high school degree, some college, Bachelors degree, and graduate degree. Marital status has three categories: married, never married, and all other statuses (including widowed, divorced, and separated). The presence of children is measured dichotomously for having any children at all versus not having children. We group religious attendance into five different categories on how often respondents attend religious services: never, seldom (i.e. attending once a year or less than once a year), sometimes (i.e. attending several times a year or once a month), often (i.e. attending two to three times per month, nearly every week, or every week), and very often (i.e. attending more than once a week). And finally, our region variable distinguishes between the four census regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. We do not have strong predictions about the association between region and happiness, though some previous studies have suggested that, generally speaking, happiness might vary across areas (Dutta and Foster 2013; Povey 2013; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). In addition, other studies have described how residential segregation between blacks and whites varies across regions (with highest levels in the Northeast and Midwest), and segregation has been associated with health and well-being (Iceland, Timberlake, and Sharp 2013; Williams 1998). Our sample consists of all black and white respondents over the period without missing data, which produces a final sample of 45,881. We use sampling weights in all of our analyses to ensure that our estimates are nationally representative, and we drop the 1982 and 1987 black oversamples to ensure they remain so (see: Stevenson and Wolfers 2008).

Our analysis proceeds as follows. We begin with descriptive statistics of our GSS sample from 1972 to 2014, including how reports of happiness vary by race and over time. We group observations into eight 5-year categories, plus a final 3-year category (1972-76, 1977-1981, 1982-1986, 1987-1991, 1992-1996, 1997-2001, 2002-2006, 2007-2011, and 2012-2014) to smooth out year-to-year fluctuations in happiness. This is followed by multinomial logistic regressions where happiness, with three response categories (very happy, pretty happy, and not too happy), is the dependent variable (pretty happy is the reference group). To correct for heteroscedasticity, we compute robust standard errors for all our logistic regressions. Our first model includes all of the first-order independent variables described above, and the second model then includes an interaction term between the black dummy variable and year to see if the effect of race has changed over time.

Finally, we conduct a decomposition analysis to estimate the relative contribution of our independent variables to changes in the black-white difference in happiness over time using a variant of the well-known Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition for linear regression (Blinder 1973; Oaxaca 1973). While the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition was designed for use with continuous dependent variables, we use an extension of this approach developed by Bauer and Sinning (2008) and Fairlie (2005) for nonlinear regression models. This decomposition method allows us to estimate the role of group characteristics (i.e., income, family structure) in explaining difference in happiness between whites and blacks. These kinds of decompositions have been used frequently in studies examining racial gaps in a number of outcomes (e.g., Gradín 2012; Sen 2014). We conduct this decomposition for the period as a whole, as well as the first and last time period to see the extent to which the role of group characteristics have changed over time. The decomposition can be written as:

$$\bar{Y}_A - \bar{Y}_B = \left[E_{\beta_A}(Y_{iA}|X_{iA}) - E_{\beta_A}(Y_{iB}|X_{iB}) \right] + \left[E_{\beta_A}(Y_{iB}|X_{iB}) - E_{\beta_B}(Y_{iB}|X_{iB}) \right] \quad 1$$

where $\bar{Y}_A - \bar{Y}_B$ is the difference in the average probability of the outcome between groups A and B, $E_{\beta_A}(Y_{iA}|X_{iA})$ refers to the conditional expectation of Y_{iA} (happiness outcome for individual i of group A) as a function of a vector of variables X evaluated at the parameter vector β_A , and $E_{\beta_A}(Y_{iB}|X_{iB})$ to the conditional expectation of Y_{iB} for individual i of group B as a function of the of a vector of variables X evaluated at the parameter vector β_A (Bauer and Sinning 2006). Essentially, the first two terms on the right-hand side of the equation provide an estimate of the impact of differences in the endowments (characteristics) of groups A and B on differences in the outcomes, while the last two terms reveal the effect of differences in coefficients on differences in the outcomes, which we treat as the portion of the difference in happiness that is essentially unexplained. We use the Fairlie command in STATA, which provides information on the contribution of specific endowments (variables) to the differences in happiness (Fairlie 2005; Fairlie and Robb 2007). We also structure the decomposition models in a manner that is consistent with our multinomial logistic regressions described above by analyzing, in two models, racial differences in the likelihood of reporting being very happy versus pretty happy, and not too happy versus pretty happy.²

These decomposition approaches share the same potential issue of the original Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition in that results might be sensitive to the choice of the reference group. In the equation above, for example, we apply Group A coefficients to Group B means in the first two terms, and we use Group B means in the second two terms, but one can very well apply Group B coefficients to Group A means and use Group A means in the latter two terms. A third approach described by Neumark (1988), Oaxaca and Ransom (1994), Fairlie and Robb (2007), among others, is to use pooled regression coefficients and apply them to means of both groups. We use this approach in our analysis, but also discuss findings produced by using different reference groups, and we include tables using different reference groups in an appendix. The bottom line is that while using different reference groups affects the magnitude of the effect of endowments, it does not change the overall story of the decline in the white-black happiness gap and the increasing role of endowments over time.

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of our sample. Whites are considerably more likely to report that they are “very happy” (35 percent) than blacks (24 percent) when respondents are pooled over the entire 1972 to 2014 period. Whites are also half as likely to say they are “not too happy” (10 percent) than blacks (20 percent). However, the differences in happiness have narrowed over time. For example, the “very happy” gap was 6 percentage points in the 2012-2014 period, down from 15 percentage points in the 1972-1976 period. Likewise, the “not too happy” gap fell from 16 percentage points to 7 percentage points over the period.

²We also ran additional models where we decomposed racial differences in the reports of “very happy” versus all other responses and “not too happy” versus all other responses. The results from these are very similar to what is

The descriptive statistics for other variables are largely as expected. Whites are older, tend to have higher levels of education and income, are more likely to be employed, and married than blacks. Among both groups, educational attainment has increased over the time period, though marriage rates and religious attendance have declined.

Figures 1-3 provide more detail on reported trends in happiness over time for blacks and whites. While trends in happiness show some volatility, and more so for blacks than whites (likely in part due to relative sample sizes), there appears to be some narrowing of the gap in the very happy and not too happy responses over time.

We further investigate the relationship between race and happiness over time with multinomial logistic regressions and pooled cross-sectional samples. The dependent variable is the three-category happiness variable, with pretty happy as the omitted reference category. Results shown in Table 2 indicate that blacks are less likely to report being very happy and more likely to say they are not too happy (relative to pretty happy) than whites, even when controlling for a number of other characteristics, such as age, gender, labor force participation, education, family status, church attendance, and region. However, we see that there is a statistically significant interaction between race and year in the very happy model, and a negative but statistically nonsignificant interaction effect in the not too happy model. Confirming our descriptive statistics, they indicate that blacks are more likely to report they are very happy in later years than in earlier ones, and likewise less likely to report that they are not too happy in later years than in earlier ones, though this change is not statistically significant, relative to whites.³ Our decomposition below examines some of the contributors to the changing gap between blacks and whites in more detail.

Results for the control variables in the models are generally consistent with findings in previous studies (e.g., Rodgers 1982; Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan 1989; Yang 2008; Ellison 1991; Easterlin 2003). We see that happiness is positively correlated with income, age, and education. Men are less likely to say they are happy and more likely to say they are not too happy than women. People who are not in the labor force are happier than those who are unemployed. Happiness is positively correlated with marriage and negatively correlated with divorce and presence of children. Church attendance has a positive association with happiness. Finally, there are some regional differences as well, with people outside of the Northeast generally more likely to report being happy than those within that region. We cannot definitively say why there are regional differences in happiness, though the observed differences are consistent with the fact that the Northeast (and Midwest) have been losing population to the South and West in recent decades in large part due to deindustrialization and economic restructuring (Frey 2005).

Figures 4-6 show predicted probabilities of reports of being very happy, pretty happy, and not too happy for blacks and whites over time, based on the multinomial logistic regression results in Table 2 and using mean sample characteristics for all other variables. The decline

³We also ran models with year dummy variables, as these do not constrain the interaction effects with year to be linear. We generally find that the decline in the black-white gap in happiness occurred in the more recent time periods—especially in the 2000s—rather than in the 1970s and 1980s. This finding is consistent with other research that did not find much of decline in the black-white happiness gap until more recent years (Blanchflower and Oswald 2004; Yang 2008; Coverdill, López, and Petrie 2011).

in the happiness gaps are mainly a function of blacks being more likely to say they are very happy over time. The probability for whites to say that they were very happy and not too happy did not change much over the period, holding other factors constant.

Finally, Table 3 shows the results of our decomposition. As described earlier, the goal of this analysis is to shed light on to what extent differences in characteristics (or “endowments”) contribute to the happiness gap by race, versus the returns to these characteristics (or “coefficients”). We show results for the pooled sample, and then the sample in the first (1972-1976) and last (2012-2014) time periods. First, consistent with previous results, the first couple of rows of each panel of the table show that the predicted percentage of whites who were very happy was higher than the predicted percentage of blacks, and, conversely, the predicted percentage of whites who were not too happy was lower. We also see that the predicted happiness gap narrowed over time.

Second, the decomposition shows that differences in the characteristics between blacks and whites explain 38 percent of the very happy gap and 34 percent of the not too happy gap, when considered over the entire time period. That leaves 62 to 66 percent essentially unexplained. Third, we see that observable characteristics play a larger role in explaining the happiness gaps in the last time period than in the first time period. For example, endowments explain over half of the happiness gaps in 2012-2014, compared to just a quarter to a third of these gaps in 1972-1976. The fact that observed differences in endowments between blacks and whites explain a larger portion of the black-white gap in happiness necessarily indicates that unobserved factors explain a smaller portion. These unobserved factors could include many things not in our models that can affect happiness, such as discrimination, differences in neighborhood conditions, or wealth, to name just a few.

As described in the Data and Methods section, in our decomposition model we apply pooled coefficients to black and white characteristics in estimating the decomposition. The magnitude of the endowment effect varies somewhat with our choice of reference group, though the overall trends are similar. More specifically, when looking at results over the entire time period (1972-2014), endowments explain between 16 and 34 percent of the very happy gap and 24 and 31 percent of not too happy gap, depending on the choice of reference group (see Appendix Tables A1 and A2). Endowments consistently explain a larger portion of the gap in the later time period than the earlier one, regardless of the reference group. More specifically, in the first time period, endowments explain –19 percent to 25 percent of the very happy gap and 22 to 32 percent of the not too happy gap; in contrast, endowments explain 36 to 75 percent of the very happy gap and 38 to 68 percent of the not too happy gap in the later time period. Differences in the results by reference group reflect the fact that the association between various characteristics and happiness varies by race. For example, income quintile has a stronger positive association with happiness among whites than blacks. Thus, if we apply coefficients in the white models in the decomposition, generally speaking, the proportion of the happiness gap explained by income quintile would be larger than if we were to use the coefficient from the model with blacks. Conversely, marital status has a stronger positive association with happiness among blacks than whites, especially in the more recent time period. Thus, if we apply coefficients in the black models in the decomposition, generally speaking, the proportion of the happiness gap explained by

marital status would be larger than if we were to use the coefficient from the model with whites. As described earlier, there is no “right” decision on which reference group to use, though it is important to note that the size of the endowment effect does vary moderately by the group that is chosen, though trends over time are similar.

Table 3 also shows the contribution of particular endowments to the black-white happiness gap. The most important factor explaining the gap is marital status. It explains two thirds of the very happy gap and about a quarter of the not too happy gap in 2012-2014. Notably, this represents a substantial increase from 15 percent and 12 percent, respectively, in 1972-1976. This finding is consistent with: 1) the large association between marriage and happiness shown in Table 2; and 2) large differences in the likelihood of being married between whites and blacks, and the growth in this difference between the 1972-1976 period and the 2012-2014 period, as shown in Table 1—which is also consistent with the findings in the literature (Raley, Sweeney, Wondra 2015).

Among other variables, we find that income consistently displays a large effect, explaining 15 to 20 percent of the happiness gap when considered over the entire 1972 to 2014 period. The magnitude of the effect grew a bit over time; differences in income between blacks and whites explain 40 percent of the gap in being very happy and 17 percent of the gap in not too happy in 2012-2014, up from 16 percent and 13 percent, respectively, in 1972-1976.

We also see that differences in church attendance generally serve to reduce the black- white happiness gap (depending on the model). That is, blacks are more likely to attend church, and church attendance is positively associated with happiness, so the black-white happiness gap would be even larger if the groups were identical in patterns of church attendance. The effects of other variables are smaller (e.g., education and labor force status), and generally in the expected direction given black-white differences in these characteristics and their association with happiness.⁴

Conclusion

While many racial disparities have narrowed over time, some have not. The goal of our analysis has been to examine the extent to which the gap in happiness—a widely-used measure of subjective well-being—changed over the 1972 to 2014 period. We analyze these patterns and trends using data from the General Social Survey, a cross-sectional survey that includes data on happiness, race, and other household characteristics over a relatively long time frame. We further investigate, with a decomposition analysis, whether differences in happiness can be explained by other characteristics associated with race, such as income, education, family composition, as well as the extent to which these characteristics explain the happiness gap over time.

⁴The patterns for individual endowments are generally consistent regardless of the reference group chosen, though the magnitude of the contribution of each endowment varies somewhat. For example, regardless of the reference group, income quintile, marital status, and church attendance tend to be the most important endowments (though not statistically significant in all of the decompositions). The effect of specific endowments is not always stronger when using one reference group vs. the other—it depends on time period and happiness outcome under consideration. These results are in Appendix Tables A1 and A2.

We find that the gap in happiness between whites and blacks is substantial, with whites more likely to report being very happy and less likely to report being not too happy, but the gap has declined over time. For example, the “very happy” gap was 6 percentage points in the 2012-2014 period, compared with 15 percentage points in the 1972-1976 period. Similarly, the “not too happy” gap fell from 16 percentage points to 7 percentage points over time. Our multivariate analysis indicates that the happiness gap persists even when we control for a number of variables. Results from our decomposition analysis—the first that we are aware of in the literature—indicate that these endowments explain roughly 34 to 38 percent of the gap when we use a pooled sample of all GSS respondents over the time period. Notably, the endowments explain a larger proportion of the happiness gap in the last time period (about 55 percent) than in the earlier time period (about a quarter to a third of the gap). The magnitude of these decomposition estimates is somewhat sensitive to the reference group chosen in the models, though the general temporal trends are very consistent.

Among the specific characteristics that contribute most to the gap are marital status and income. People who are married and who live in households with higher incomes are more likely to report being happier, and these attributes are more common among whites than blacks. Notably, the role that these play in explaining the happiness gap increased over time. Church attendance generally also has a strong positive association with happiness, but in this case this attribute is more common among blacks than whites, such that if whites and blacks had similar church attendance patterns, the black-white happiness gap would be even larger.

Overall, these results indicate that the black-white gap in subjective well-being is tracking the declining gap since the 1970s in many other indicators, such as educational attainment, poverty, life expectancy, and residential segregation and neighborhood economic conditions (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a, 2016b; CDC 2016; Logan and Stults 2011; Firebaugh and Farrell 2016; Iceland 2017), even as other gaps, such as in median income and wealth, remain stubbornly high (U.S. Census Bureau 1986, 1990, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2013, 2016c). The relative improvement in the quality of life across many (though not all) indicators thus seems to have a salutary effect on subjective well-being among African Americans.

We also see an increase in the extent to which observable factors help explain the black-white gap in happiness. Research on racial disparities often attributes unexplained differences across groups to unobservable factors such as discrimination (Pager and Shepherd 2008). Our finding is thus consistent with the notion that discrimination against African Americans, while obviously still present and virulent, has declined over the years, such as in housing and lending markets (Turner et al. 2012; Turner et al. 2002). The experience of discrimination can be a source of considerable stress and anomie (Gernonimus et al 2006; Massey 2004; Williams 1999; Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Hughes and Demo 1989), and previous studies have also indicated that perceived discrimination can likewise reduce life satisfaction (Williams et al 1997; Thomas and Hughes 1986). Thus, to the extent that such declines in discrimination might have occurred, they may have helped increase subjective well-being among African Americans. Of course, there are many unobservable factors in almost any study that relies on survey data, so we also would like to emphasize that we cannot offer firm conclusions on the role of discrimination in contributing to

changes in the black-white happiness gap other than noting that the unexplained portion of the gap has declined over time.

The finding that differences in various characteristics associated with race help explain a significant—and growing—proportion of the black-white happiness gap has a number of implications. Among these factors, we see that marital status plays the largest role, and its effects have increased over time. This is a function of, first, the strong positive association between marriage and happiness (Adous and Ganey 1999; Frey and Stutzer 2005; Kamp Dush and Amato 2005; Stack and Eshleman 1998; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue, for example, that marriage provides emotional, physical, economic, and sexual benefits that increase subjective well-being. Second, there are considerable differences in the prevalence of marriage by race in the United States, and these differences have increased over the past few decades (Raley, Sweeney, and Wondra 2015). Our results suggest that this trend has served to exacerbate observed racial differences in happiness. However, whether such trends will continue is unclear. For example, there has been sharp increases in the nonmarital childbearing among whites (Ventura and Bachrach 2000; Martin et al. 2013), and the decline in marriage more generally has been observed for all groups (Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston 2011).

Results also indicate that income plays an important role. Thus, trends in income disparities affect the gap in subjective well-being. As noted above, one of the indicators where black-white differences has persisted is median household income. If this trend continues, then a further narrowing of the black-white gap in happiness is less likely to occur. The fact that income inequality more generally has grown in recent decades provides a headwind in the effort to narrow racial inequalities in income and subjective well-being.

It will be important to continue to monitor trends in subjective well-being in the coming years. The United States remains divided in many respects: by race, class, and party, among many other dimensions. Whether we will see a further decline in many persistent racial and ethnic disparities is a critical question researchers undoubtedly will continue to interrogate in the coming years.

Appendix

Table A1.

Decomposition for Logistic Regressions of Differences in Happiness, by Race and Year,
Using Whites as the Reference Group

	Pooled sample (1972-2014)	First time period (1972-1976)	Last time period (2012-2014)
Panel A: Very happy vs pretty happy			
Prediction for whites	0.385	0.413	0.379
Prediction for blacks	0.298	0.293	0.336
Difference	0.087	0.120	0.043
Total percent explained by endowments	34.4%	24.9%	36.1%
Change due to specific endowments (variables)			
Income quintile	20.1% ***	15.0% ***	44.0% **
Age	1.9% ***	-1.8% **	-2.4%
Gender	-1.2% ***	-0.1%	-4.5%
Labor force status	0.3%	2.0% **	2.6%
Educational attainment	2.1%	4.6%	6.2%
Marital status	31.4% ***	15.3% ***	49.6% ***
Presence of children	1.6% ***	-0.4%	-1.4%
Church attendance	-15.5% ***	-4.2% *	-57.9% ***
Region	-6.2% ***	-5.6% **	1.0%
Panel B: Not too happy vs pretty happy			
Prediction for whites	0.149	0.178	0.163
Prediction for blacks	0.264	0.343	0.245
Difference	0.115	0.165	0.082
Total percent explained by endowments	23.8%	21.5%	38.0%
Change due to specific endowments (variables)			
Income quintile	13.1% ***	10.0% **	11.8%
Age	-0.1%	-0.0%	-2.5%
Gender	-1.4% ***	-0.2%	-8.4% **
Labor force status	4.3% ***	4.2% ***	16.2% ***
Educational attainment	7.6% ***	6.3% **	7.0% **
Marital status	9.5% ***	10.9% ***	19.9% **
Presence of children	1.3% **	0.4%	1.9%
Church attendance	-10.1% ***	-7.8% ***	-10.5%
Region	-0.2%	-2.1%	2.8%

p<.001

**
p<.01

*
p<.05

Note: decompositions using whites as the reference group.

Appendix

Table A2.

Decomposition for Logistic Regressions of Differences in Happiness, by Race and Year,
Using Blacks as the Reference Group

	Pooled sample (1972-2014)		First time period (1972-1976)		Last time period (2012-2014)	
Panel A: Very happy vs pretty happy						
Prediction for whites	0.385		0.413		0.379	
Prediction for blacks	0.298		0.293		0.336	
Difference	0.087		0.120		0.043	
Total percent explained by endowments	16.0%		-19.0%		75.0%	
Change due to specific endowments (variables)						
Income quintile	4.8%		5.8%		-10.1%	
Age	5.4%	**	-1.2%		-7.7%	
Gender	1.2%		1.0%		10.7%	
Labor force status	0.3%		-0.5%		12.9%	
Educational attainment	-4.0%		-6.4%		-12.7%	
Marital status	32.3%	***	9.8%	*	135.1%	**
Presence of children	1.1%	*	-1.4%		8.9%	
Church attendance	-19.9%	***	-18.1%	**	-57.2%	*
Region	-5.1%		-8.4%		-5.2%	
Panel B: Not too happy vs pretty happy						
Prediction for whites	0.149		0.178		0.163	
Prediction for blacks	0.264		0.343		0.245	
Difference	0.115		0.165		0.082	
T otal percent explained by endowments	31.4%		32.2%		67.8%	
Change due to specific endowments (variables)						
Income quintile	14.4%	***	6.9%		30.0%	**
Age	1.7%	*	-1.6%		-6.9%	
Gender	-0.8%		-2.0%		-5.1%	
Labor force status	3.5%	***	5.5%	*	-1.3%	
Educational attainment	6.3%	**	-4.4%		-2.4%	
Marital status	11.7%	***	13.1%	**	36.1%	
Presence of children	1.1%		0.6%		-2.2%	
Church attendance	-7.5%	**	-2.4%		18.6%	
Region	1.1%		16.4%	**	0.7%	

p<.001

**

p<.01

*

p<.05

Note: decompositions using Blacks as the reference group.

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Figure 1.
Percent Very Happy by Race, 1972-2014

Figure 2.
Percent Pretty Happy by Race, 1972-2014

Figure 3.
Percent Not Too Happy by Race, 1972-2014

Figure 4.
Adjusted Predictions for Very Happy

Figure 5:
Adjusted Predictions for Pretty Happy

Figure 6:
Adjusted Predictions for Not Too Happy

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics, 1972-2014

	<u>All Years</u>		<u>1972-1976</u>		<u>2012-2014</u>	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Happiness						
Very happy	34.8	23.8	36.6	21.4	33.8	27.6
Pretty happy	55.5	56.1	52.1	51.6	55.4	54.7
Not too happy	9.7	20.1	11.3	27.0	10.8	17.7
Quintile						
1st	22.3	43.2	21.7	46.4	22.7	39.8
2nd	20.2	22.3	17.2	20.2	19.6	26.0
3rd	21.4	15.3	23.8	15.6	18.9	14.3
4th	18.3	12.0	19.3	10.6	20.8	14.1
5th	17.9	7.3	18.0	7.1	18.0	5.8
Age	44.6	42.4	43.5	43.6	47.7	44.9
Male	47.3	41.6	49.1	49.9	47.3	36.8
Labor force status						
Employed	62.7	60.3	53.9	51.7	62.7	57.8
Unemployed	5.2	7.5	5.5	9.6	5.6	10.7
Out of the labor force	32.1	32.2	40.6	38.7	31.7	31.5
Educational Attainment						
Less than high school	19.5	29.9	33.1	55.1	10.3	16.9
High school	53.0	52.8	51.4	37.9	50.5	56.0
Some college	5.3	6.2	1.7	1.5	7.6	7.3
BA	15.1	7.6	9.6	4.3	20.9	12.6
Graduate	7.0	3.6	4.3	1.2	10.7	7.2
Marital status						
Married	65.6	43.6	76.0	60.8	57.4	31.7
Widowed/divorced/separated	16.6	25.4	10.2	22.6	19.8	27.7
Never married	17.9	31.0	13.8	16.6	22.8	40.6
With children	72.6	76.4	75.4	74.8	71.3	77.0
Religious Attendance						
Never	17.2	9.1	12.8	5.9	28.2	13.3
Seldom	22.7	14.8	22.0	16.3	21.3	13.7
Sometimes	19.7	21.9	21.0	23.4	16.4	20.6
Often	33.2	43.4	36.7	45.7	28.1	41.3
Very Often	7.1	10.9	7.5	8.8	5.9	11.1
Region						
Northeast	19.9	17.1	23.9	19.9	16.6	11.1
Midwest	27.5	21.1	29.3	24.4	25.1	17.9
South	32.1	53.6	29.8	46.9	34.0	59.7
West	20.5	8.2	17.0	8.9	24.4	11.3

	<u>All Years</u>		<u>1972-1976</u>		<u>2012-2014</u>	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
N	45,881		6,884		3,642	

Source: 1972-2014 General Social Survey data

shown. If anything, these results indicate that endowments explain a little higher of the proportion of the black-white gap in happiness than those shown.

Table 2.

Multinomial Regression for being happy

	Very Happy			Not Too Happy		
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Race (<i>White = ref. category</i>)						
Black	-0.282***	0.040	-0.528***	0.086	0.531***	0.046
Year Categories	-0.001	0.005	-0.006	0.005	-0.018*	0.008
Interaction Black *Year			0.052**	0.016	-0.018	0.018
Quintile	0.110***	0.010	0.120***	0.010	-0.175***	0.016
Age	0.005***	0.001	0.005***	0.001	-0.000	0.001
Gender (<i>female = ref. category</i>)						
Male	-0.077**	0.024	-0.077**	0.025	0.144***	0.036
Labor Force Status (<i>unemployed = ref. category</i>)						
Employed	0.101	0.058	0.103	0.058	-0.717***	0.062
Not in Labor Force	0.292***	0.061	0.293***	0.061	-0.535***	0.067
Education (<i>less than high school = ref. category</i>)						
High School	-0.065*	0.033	-0.069*	0.033	-0.324***	0.043
Junior College	-0.017	0.059	-0.020	0.059	-0.411***	0.090
Bachelor	0.047	0.044	0.046	0.044	-0.543***	0.070
Graduate	0.098	0.054	0.097	0.054	-0.410***	0.091
Family Status (<i>never married = ref. category</i>)						
Married	0.574***	0.041	0.582***	0.042	-0.376***	0.058
Divorced	-0.156**	0.048	-0.149**	0.048	0.249***	0.059
Children	-0.205***	0.032	-0.210***	0.032	0.189***	0.049
Church Attendance (<i>sometimes = ref. category</i>)						
Never	-0.127**	0.041	-0.127**	0.041	0.327***	0.054
Seldom	-0.110**	0.037	-0.110**	0.037	0.094	0.051
Often	0.221***	0.033	0.219***	0.033	-0.167**	0.050

	Very Happy			Not Too Happy		
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Very Often	0.664 ***	0.048	0.661 ***	0.048	-0.035	0.081
Region (<i>Northeast = ref. category</i>)						
Midwest	0.050	0.035	0.051	0.035	-0.102 *	0.051
South	0.190 ***	0.034	0.190 ***	0.034	-0.022	0.048
West	0.102 **	0.038	0.104 **	0.038	-0.010	0.054
Constant	-1.521 ***	0.084	-1.500 ***	0.084	-0.383 ***	0.102
N	45,881		45,881		45,881	
Pseudo R ²	0.0549		0.0551		0.0549	

Pretty happy is the reference category of the dependent variable in the multinomial regression;

*** p<.001

** p<.01

* p<.05

Source: 1972-2016 General Social Survey Data

Table 3.

Decomposition for Logistic Regressions of Differences in Happiness, by Race and Year

	Pooled sample (1972-2014)		First time period (1972-1976)		Last time period (2012-2014)	
Panel A: Very happy vs pretty happy						
Prediction for whites	0.385		0.413		0.379	
Prediction for blacks	0.298		0.293		0.336	
Difference	0.087		0.120		0.043	
Total percent explained by endowments	38.1%		26.9%		55.2%	
Change due to specific endowments (variables)						
Income quintile	19.9%	***	16.2%	***	39.8%	**
Age	2.1%	***	-1.9%	***	-3.9%	
Gender	-1.0%	**	-0.0%		-1.6%	
Labor force status	0.2%		1.9%	**	3.7%	
Educational attainment	1.9%		4.8%		-0.9%	
Marital status	32.5%	***	15.3%	***	67.1%	***
Presence of children	1.9%	***	-0.4%		0.6%	
Church attendance	-14.5%	***	-3.8%	*	-50.4%	***
Region	-4.7%	***	-5.2%	**	0.1%	
Panel B: Not too happy vs pretty happy						
Prediction for whites	0.149		0.178		0.163	
Prediction for blacks	0.264		0.343		0.245	
Difference	0.115		0.165		0.082	
Total percent explained by endowments	34.0%		31.5%		53.0%	
Change due to specific endowments (variables)						
Income quintile	15.0%	***	12.7%	***	17.1%	*
Age	0.3%		-0.1%		-2.7%	*
Gender	-1.4%	***	-0.4%		-8.6%	**
Labor force status	4.4%	***	4.2%	***	13.0%	***
Educational attainment	7.6%	***	5.8%	**	5.5%	*
Marital status	12.6%	***	11.7%	***	25.5%	***
Presence of children	1.7%	***	0.6%		2.4%	
Church attendance	-8.1%	***	-5.6%	**	-2.8%	
Region	1.9%		2.3%		3.6%	

p<.001**
p<.01*
p<.05

Note: decompositions use pooled (Neumark) weights.