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**HAPPINESS TRENDS UNDER DEMOCRACY:
WHERE WILL THE NEW SOUTH AFRICAN
SET-LEVEL COME TO REST?**

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ABSTRACT. Five years after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, life satisfaction and happiness still reflect societal divides sowed by apartheid social engineering. The paper reports the indicators: life satisfaction, happiness and expectations for the future, from national surveys conducted between 1983 and 1999 for the South African Quality-of-Life Trends Project. Post-election euphoria, which saw all South Africans happy and satisfied with life for a brief moment in 1994, raises the question where the new set-level of subjective well-being will eventually come to rest. In 1999, in spite of some gains in living conditions, the level of life satisfaction of blacks has not risen above the mid-point and happiness is only slightly above the mid-point. Meanwhile, whites, who have forfeited their political dominance, continue to score above the mid-point on happiness and life satisfaction. The paper draws on the literature, particularly on quality-of-life trends in reunified Germany and paradoxical trends in African-American life satisfaction when discussing the dynamics underlying South African subjective well-being. It is argued that coping mechanisms may play an important role in determining levels of subjective well-being in the complex situation of South Africa.

KEY WORDS: expectations, happiness, life satisfaction, relative deprivation, South Africa.

South Africa's first open general elections were hailed as a miracle and a beacon to a world caught up in turmoil and strife. For hours black and white South Africans stood shoulder to shoulder in snaking queues in April 1994 to cast their votes for a representative government. The euphoria of the birth of democracy was almost tangible. Black South Africans, who had lived under apartheid rule for forty years – and under colonial rule for some 300 years before that – walked tall. The negotiated settlement between whites in power and the excluded black majority was hailed as a major achievement for democracy. The ideal of a 'rainbow nation', signifying reconciliation and solidarity for post-apartheid nation-building, became the icon of the new democracy. South Africans from all social backgrounds were proud to introduce themselves to the world as the rainbow nation. Five years later on 2 June 1999 South Africans went to the polls again to vote in peaceful national elections to strengthen their fledgling democracy.



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The pertinent question is whether democracy has brought happiness to the majority of South Africans. In democratic societies around the world the vast majority of citizens tend to indicate happiness and life satisfaction above the midpoint of scales (Headey and Wearing, 1988; Michalos, 1991; Diener and Suh, 1997).

Results from the South African Quality-of-Life Trends Project shed light on this question. The project was initiated by a group of South African academics in the early 1980s in a pioneering effort to develop cross-cultural quality of life methodologies for a socially heterogeneous society (Møller and Schlemmer, 1983; 1989). Thereafter, Møller collected further national survey data to update the project (Møller 1989; 1994; 1998; 1999).

In the 1980s, the global indicators of happiness and domain satisfactions applied in the South African Quality-of-Life Trends Project showed up major divides in society. Over some 180 indicators confirmed that white South Africans were consistently happier with most aspects of life and black South Africans were least satisfied and happy. Coloured people (mixed race) and Indian/Asian South Africans fell somewhere in between. Essentially the results of the happiness surveys were a reflection of a caste-like social order in South African society.

A striking finding from the Quality-of-Life-Trends Project is that *subjective* social indicators tally perfectly with their corresponding *objective* counterparts. South Africans whose objective living conditions were least favourable in the 1980s were also the least satisfied generally and the most discontent with their living conditions. In short, the hierarchy of life satisfaction and domain satisfaction was a mirror image of objective living conditions for the racially defined social groups.

Standards of living were entrenched through the unequal disbursement of goods and services and unequal access to jobs under apartheid. For example, in 1984 social old-age pensions paid out to blacks were approximately half those paid out to whites; coloured and Indian pensions three quarters of those paid out to whites (South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 1985: 732). Thereafter the gap was gradually reduced until parity at the white level was achieved in 1993. Similarly, per capita expenditure on black, coloured, and Indian school children in 1985 was 14%, 32% and 50%, respectively, of that spent on whites. The gap in expenditure on black, coloured, and Indian school children relative to whites remained at 44%, 75% and 93%,

in the election year of 1994, when over one-fifth of South Africa's national budget was spent on education (SAIRR, 1995: 241, 398). Under apartheid, the movement of labour was restricted and job reservations limited social mobility for blacks and to a somewhat lesser extent for coloureds and Indians. Even the limited issue of standard public housing was colour-coded. Tellingly, South Africa's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality,¹ has been among the highest in the world for many years (May, 1998: 23). It is currently 0.59 according to the 1999/2000 World Development Report. Only 10% of South Africa's total income goes to the poorest 40% of households, while more than 40% of total income goes to the richest 10% of households.

The 1990s have seen great strides to redress past social inequalities in South Africa. There has been an increase in the share of government budget allocated to social services such as education, health, social security and welfare, housing, etc., from 43% in 1985 to 57% in 1995/96 (May, 1998: 5). After a slow start initially, the election promise of 1994 of 'a good life for all' has seen some positive results. For example, some 800 000 of the million houses promised in the first five years have been built or are under construction by the end of 1999. Between 1994 and 1999 some 1.8 million new electrical connections were made against a target of 2.5 million, and 3.5 million South Africans were provided with water (SAIRR, 1999: 149, 173). Some 42% of South Africa's rural poor had electricity by 1999 compared with 12% in 1994 (Chalmers, 1999). However, jobless growth has remained a critical problem with an official unemployment rate of 23% of the economically active population in 1997 according to the strict definition. Some 57% of Africans aged 15–30 years were unemployed in the same year (SAIRR, 1999: 247).

The restructuring of society has caused new imbalances and tensions. Under apartheid the social fabric of society had worn thin. Habits appropriate to the political struggle have persisted in the democratic era to cause embarrassment and financial problems for the new government. Non-payment for services, formerly a powerful weapon of civil disobedience, remains a widespread practice. Since 1994, a more transparent government has shown up widespread corruption and graft at all levels of government as well as in the private sector. Although political violence has receded in all but isolated pockets, it has been replaced by crime. Entrepreneurship, which was stifled under apartheid, has been slow to develop. It has emerged as most successful in the area

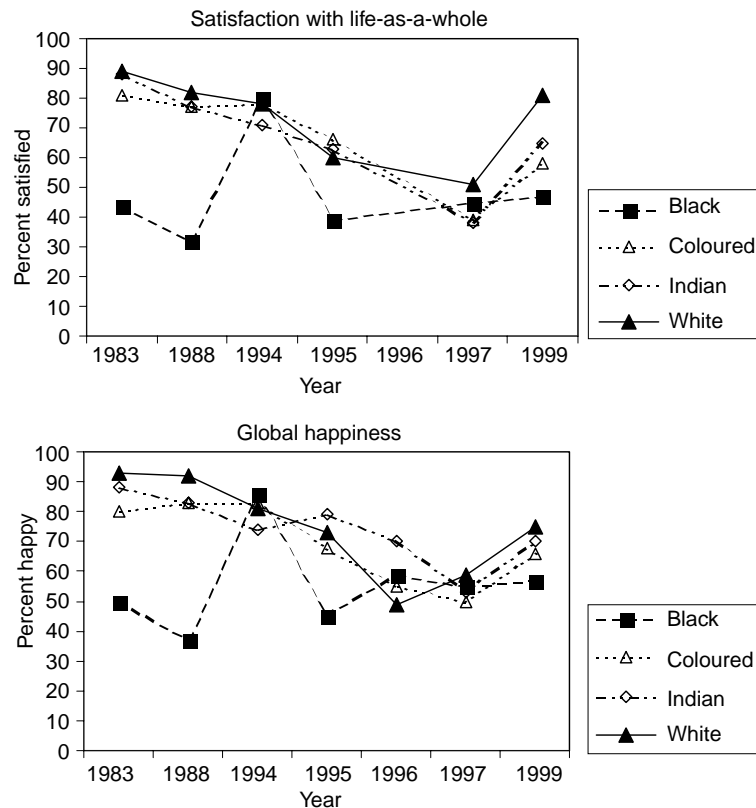


Figure 1. Trends in life satisfaction and happiness 1983–1999.

of organised and petty crime. The opening up of South African society in the 1990s has increased opportunities for drug-trafficking and money laundering. With a murder rate of 45 per 100 000 compared to an average international rate of 5.5, South Africa is among the most murderous in the world (Louw, 1997: 147). International comparisons of select serious crimes including murder and rape show that South African crime rates are among the highest in the world. South Africa has the fourth highest firearm-related murder rate in the world (SAIRR, 1999: 43). At the turn of the century, the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic sweeping through Africa has been officially recognised. An estimated 8.6% of the total population is HIV positive in 1998, and just under one quarter of pregnant women. In the province worst hit by the epidemic, deaths have exceeded births for the first time in 1999 (SAIRR, 1999: 218).

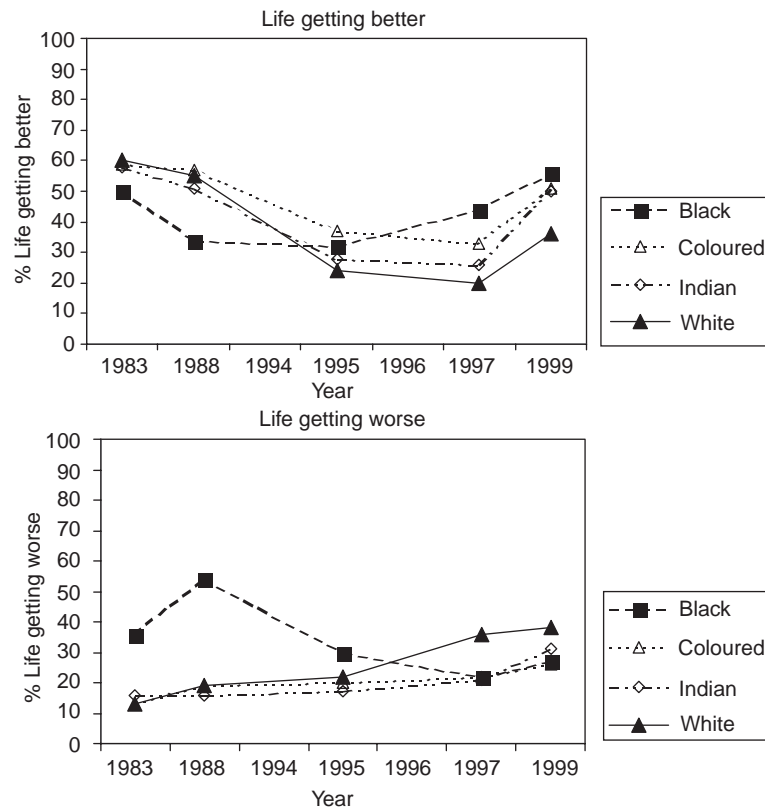


Figure 2. Expectations for the future 1983–1999.

The results of the South African Quality-of-Life Trends Project must be seen against this scenario. Figures 1 and 2 show trends for indicators: Satisfaction with life-as-a-whole, global happiness and perceptions of life getting better or worse, for the period 1983–1999.²

The racial hierarchy of happiness and satisfaction is evident in Figure 1 throughout the period. Generally, whites register the highest levels of subjective well-being and blacks the lowest levels in spite of major political changes. Post-election euphoria in 1994 disrupts this trend; one month after the elections in May 1994, happiness and life satisfaction embraced all South Africans for the first time in survey history. It is speculated that a technical artefact, the re-ordering of response categories, may have reinforced the hierarchy in the 1999 survey.³ The racial hierarchy is inverted in Figure 2 after 1994. A crossover occurs with blacks, who were pessimistic about the future especially in the last

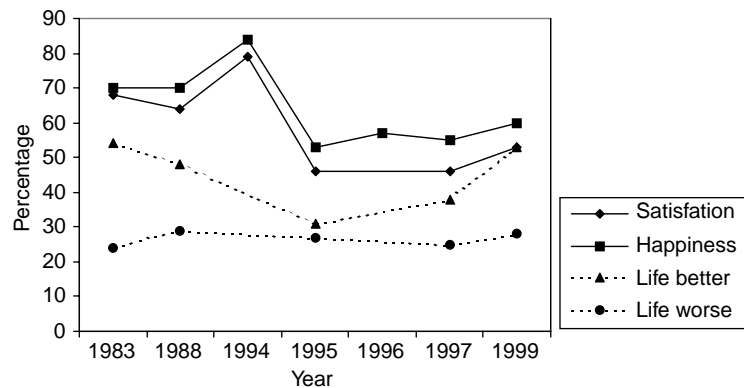


Figure 3. Overview of trends: South African totals.

days of apartheid in 1988, now predominantly optimistic. Whites who were previously optimistic are now more pessimistic. Figure 3 shows trendlines for South African totals by way of an overview.

THE LITERATURE

The sudden rise in levels of happiness and life satisfaction expressed in the post-election period is an exceptional phenomenon according to quality of life studies. Measures at both the individual and country level tend to be stable although they are sensitive to dramatic changes in living circumstances. The classical study of the effects of fortune and misfortune on perceived quality of life showed that after the event lottery winners' happiness shot up while accident victims dropped dramatically only to return to levels similar to the usual ones at a later date (Brickman and Coates, 1978). At the country level, happiness and life satisfaction trends are known to be remarkably stable over time. For, example, Americans, on average, scored between 7.2 and 7.5 on a ten-point scale during the period 1970–1990 (Diener and Suh, 1997: 211). Between-country comparisons typically show up a 'north–south' division in the happiness of nations. Levels of well-being are generally higher in the richer and more developed countries of the north than the poorer and less developed countries of the south.

An ongoing debate among quality of life researchers, launched by a study of the comparative wealth of nations by Easterlin (1995 gives an update), is whether happiness is 'relative' or 'absolute', that is,

linked to external factors such as living conditions (Diener et al., 1993; Veenhoven, 1991; 1994; 1996). The case of the accident victims above suggests that people adapt to the vicissitudes of life and manage to achieve personal happiness in spite of misfortune. Other scholars contend that there is a threshold of decent living standards below which people are miserable. Although the debate continues, it appears that what Veenhoven (1995) calls the 'liveability' factor may have a greater influence on the level of well-being of nations than cultural factors. Different cultural groups within countries tend to register levels of satisfaction which are more similar to those of their compatriots than to members of their cultural group living in other countries.

Within countries, demographic factors such as age, education, socio-economic status and race tend to explain a very low proportion of the variance in subjective well-being, on average less than 10% (Michalos, 1991: 59). Cross-national comparisons of income levels and subjective well-being suggest that improvements to the basic needs of people living in poorer countries will have a far greater impact than income gains in wealthier countries (Diener and Diener, 1995). In wealthier societies where material needs are by and large saturated, post-modern concerns tend to play a greater role in mediating happiness (Schulz, 1995).

South Africa as Unique Society

Seen against the state of the art of quality-of-life studies, the South African indicators of subjective well-being are highly unusual. Firstly, the huge gap between the life satisfaction of black and white South Africans is a rare phenomenon. Race, a proxy for income and access to resources, is the single factor which accounts for the highest proportion of variance of satisfaction with life and domain satisfactions. From a quality of life perspective, South Africa behaves like two separate countries, a 'north' and 'south' within one boundary. World-historian Paul Johnson aptly refers to South Africa as a 'microcosm' of global problems: "There is no other country on earth whose characteristics, and the difficulties they create, are closer to those of the world as a whole" (Johnson, 1996: 728).

Secondly, the dramatic rise in happiness registered immediately after the first democratic elections may be unprecedented in the history of quality of life research. By comparison, the record of happiness gains among East Germans after reunification appears to have been less clear-cut, at least initially (see Headey et al., 1995).

In one respect, however, South Africa's quality of life trends conform to the rule. Even under apartheid, the better-off in the black community indicated higher levels of subjective well-being than their poorer counterparts. Apartheid policy was more restrictive in some domains of life than others, a fact which was mirrored in domain satisfactions. For example, in the 1980s there was little difference between the satisfaction of richer and poorer blacks with some aspects of housing, a domain which allowed for very little leeway in consumption in the eighties. The more affluent achieved higher levels of satisfaction with housing issues only after the lifting of laws restricting residential choice (Møller, 1998; 1999).

If, on the other hand, South Africa is seen as two countries within a single national boundary – Johnson's microcosm – South Africa's quality of life trends conform to ones outlined in the literature. Indeed apartheid thinking made such a distinction between the core economy and peripheral bantustans. The result was a First and Third World division in terms of Veenhoven's liveability dimension, and a country of the free and the oppressed in terms of the political dimension.

Commenting on the situation in the united Germanys and post-communist Hungary of the early nineties, Headey et al. (1995) note that policy makers and the public hoped to achieve the best of both worlds simultaneously: economic prosperity and system legitimacy. Similarly, during South Africa's brief election euphoria political freedom appears to have had a decisive positive impact on black feelings of well-being but it was not able to sustain happiness. In the longer term, improvements to the material conditions of life were needed to substantiate political equality. While apartheid policy appears to have been highly effective in creating a wide gulf in happiness and depressing the well-being of blacks, it may have been less successful in stifling aspirations for better material living conditions. In the global era of communication, disparities in living standards have become more visible to fuel feelings of relative deprivation.

THE NEW SOUTH AFRICAN SET-LEVEL OF HAPPINESS

South Africa's post-election surge in happiness raises questions about the set-point where black and white happiness will settle in the longer term. The 70–80% indicating happiness and satisfaction immediately

after the first democratic elections in 1994 may be seen as the ideal set-level. The spontaneous outburst of happiness marked the triumph of a negotiated settlement which made all South Africans winners of the day. That the euphoria was not to last might have been expected. In the Philippines, Social Weather Stations has consistently observed a short-lived 'honeymoon' period with each change of government followed rapidly by disillusionment (Mangahas and Guerrero, 1998). Five years into South African democracy the new set-level of well-being may still not be fixed definitely. However, black and white levels appear to be converging (see Figure 1 and endnote 3).

What are the dynamics underpinning the determination of the new set-level? If the 1994 elections are considered as a watershed event in the life of a nation, the classical study by Bricks and Coates is relevant. In South Africa, a feasible adjustment for winners and losers in the new era would be for black happiness to increase somewhat on apartheid levels and white South Africans, whose privileges have been cut under the new political dispensation, to express slightly lower levels of satisfaction on aggregate.

The new South African set-level may hinge on causes underlying the happiness of nations such as the 'liveability' factor. If happiness is absolute in the sense that basic needs must be fulfilled in order for people to express satisfaction, trends may reflect fulfilment of the 1994 election promises for higher living standards for the masses.

However, there are some scholars who consider happiness a national characteristic (Inkeles, 1998), in line with the notion of life satisfaction as an individual trait (see Veenhoven, 1994; Stones et al., 1995). Psychological traits tend to be fairly stable over the life course in the sense that happiness at time one may be one of the best predictors of happiness at time two in panel studies.

Quality-of-life researchers tend to accept responses on happiness scales at face value (Headey, 1999). The assumption is that individuals are the best assessors of their own well-being. However, cross-cultural studies of happiness need to be aware of different cultural interpretations which might colour results (see Diener et al., 1995).

The South African Quality-of-Life Trends Project was originally modelled on the 'bottom-up' theory of happiness which states that global life satisfaction and happiness is the sum of satisfaction with discrete domains of life such as the family, health, housing, work, leisure, friends and the polity. However, the evidence is growing that this may

not be the case (Michalos, 1995). The notion of a national character or psychological trait is more consistent with the alternative spillover explanation which states that overall life satisfaction is projected onto domains of life. The 'feel-good factor' observed in South Africa during the democratic transition, and feelings of national pride in South African achievements in the 1990s are good examples of the spillover effect at the aggregate level.

Ego Integrity

Given that life satisfaction in general tends to be more closely related to central life concerns like self, family and health, life satisfaction may also be seen to fulfil an 'ego integrity' function. It is argued that mainly in the US context, extraversion is related to happiness in the sense that cultural expectations favour extraverts and projections of happiness as an indication of social adjustment or ego integrity. In other cultures expressions of unhappiness such as withdrawal into the self may not be viewed as social isolation or exclusion but as heroic.

There is growing evidence that people seek to maintain an even keel in their outlook on life and to preserve their ego integrity over the life course in spite of ups and downs. Commenting on results from Australian panel surveys, Headey (1999) observes that, contrary to popular wisdom, older Australians are just as satisfied with life as their younger counterparts. Although negative life events depressed well-being, the dip was temporary.

LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

South Africans have a tendency to see their history and contemporary situation as unique. In more recent times they are proud to draw on their experience when serving as role models for other nations seeking peaceful solutions to internal conflict. Notwithstanding South African claims to uniqueness, it may be instructive to compare South Africa's quality of life trends with those of two other societies with similar histories of transition to democracy and emancipation from oppression. Two cases are reviewed below: Quality-of-life trends in reunited Germany following the collapse of communism in 1990 and among African Americans who only gained equal civil rights in the second half of the twentieth century.

Lessons from Reunited Germany

In common with post-unification Germany, South Africa entered into the democratic era through peaceful negotiations. White South Africans and West Germans agreed of their own accord to a power-sharing arrangement. West Germans went a step further in that they agreed to a wealth-sharing arrangement by giving parity to East German currency. Annual monetary transfers from West Germany amounting to 5% of its GDP supported the economic and social transformation of East Germany (Hauser, 1999). Today East Germans are materially better off than they were under communism although they have lost many aspects of social security such as guaranteed housing and employment.

The German Quality-of-life Experience

Injections of development funds appear to have had an impact on happiness. Less than ten years after unification East German well-being has caught up with that of West Germans. According to the German Welfare Survey, on a scale of ten, the life satisfaction of East Germans with 7.3 lags only 0.4 points behind that of their West German counterparts in 1998 (Habich et al., 1999).

While global and domain satisfactions among East Germans have generally risen during the period 1993 and 1998, levels of satisfaction have remained constant or have fallen slightly in the West. Therefore the convergence of satisfaction levels is due to a gradual decline in the West of 0.2 combined with the rise of 0.4 in the East since 1993 (Habich et al., 1999).

In spite of a convergence in subjective well-being, major differences in priorities still exist between West and East Germans. In the integrated Germany material well-being and social security issues dominate in the East while post-materialistic concerns tend to be greater in the West (Habich et al., 1999).

Glatzer and Bös (1998) noted that West Germans experienced far fewer traumas during the earlier years of reunification than expected, an observation which is also confirmed in later results from the German Welfare Survey. Both West and East Germans are similarly of the opinion that living conditions have improved since reunification in 1990; East Germans to a somewhat greater degree than West Germans (Habich et al., 1999).⁴

There are indications in the Welfare Survey that West and East Germans had different expectations of life in a united Germany which

have coloured their perceptions of progress. While West Germans expected their future living conditions to become worse after reunification, East Germans expected more rapid improvement towards a normalised society. In both instances reality differed from expectations. Nevertheless, by 1998, optimism prevailed among a vast majority of Germans: 84% of West Germans and 72% of East Germans are optimistic about their personal future.

The *comparisons* between Germany and South Africa in transition are telling. In Germany a convergence of happiness levels between East and West has occurred with a positive outcome for both parties to reunification. The vast majority of Germans are currently satisfied with life and are positive about their personal future. Both East and West Germans have perceived improvements to living conditions since reunification.

The German situation differs from the South African situation in that living conditions for black South Africans have not improved dramatically since 1994 which is reflected in their perceptions of well-being. Unlike West Germans who expected their living conditions to deteriorate and may be pleasantly surprised that this is not the case, white South Africans are of the opinion that their living conditions have got worse. While the former 'haves' in Germany lead in their positive outlook on the future, it is the former 'have-nots' of South Africa who are more optimistic.

There are some similarities, however. In both the cases of Germany and South Africa, the convergence of trends is due to a gradual decline in happiness and life satisfaction of the richer as well as the increase in happiness and life satisfaction of the poorer who are catching up. Similar to reunified Germany, black and white South Africans' priorities for well-being reflect the gap between material and post-material. In the 1997 survey for the South African Quality-of-Life Trends Project, blacks appeared to be more concerned about basic need fulfilment while white South Africans focussed more on overarching macro-societal issues (Møller, 1999).

In *sum*, in reunified Germany, living conditions for East Germans have improved and so have their perceptions of well-being. South Africa's second president, Thabo Mbeki⁵, has reprimanded South Africans for not following the example of West Germans who have paid a wealth tax to uplift the living standards of their cousins in the East. In his biting 'two-nations' speech of 1998, he implied that lack of

patriotism on the part of richer and white South Africans was to blame for not meeting black expectations of the good life under democracy. Until the better-off showed more goodwill, the nation would remain divided in two: black and white and rich and poor South Africa (cited in Møller, 1999).

Lessons from Well-being Trends among African Americans

African Americans and black South Africans have a number of historical facts in common. Throughout the apartheid years black South Africans looked to the United States for moral and financial support in their struggle to overturn the regime. South Africa's independent churches had their origins in church movements in the American south. In this century Martin Luther King's civil rights movement was a source of inspiration for South Africa's political activists. United States support for economic sanctions and cultural boycotts proved decisive in bringing about a change in government.

It is widely accepted that the experience of life as a second class citizen in the United States and South Africa was very similar. Nowhere did discrimination hit harder than in education. In the United States, literacy served as an instrument of liberation for slaves. Unlike later waves of voluntary immigrants who integrated rapidly and caught up on educational achievement, African-American descendants of slaves continue to experience difficulties catching up. Similarly, in South Africa, Bantu education branded Africans as inferiors, destined to forever stay in the most menial and subservient jobs. High school students took to the streets in the Soweto uprisings of June 1976 to protest against Bantu education. The 1980s saw a massive defiance campaign under the slogan 'liberation before education' which created a generation of uneducated blacks. Following the United States example, the new democratic government is seeking to reverse the educational disadvantages of Africans with affirmative action measures. Currently, inner-city ghetto dwellers and South African township dwellers continue to display below-average income levels and living conditions. In the United States only dual earner blacks who have moved beyond the south states have reached income parity with whites (Adams III, 1997: 206). Similarly, only a minority of South African blacks who have moved into the white suburbs are on par with whites economically.

Given the striking parallels of history, how do trends in African-American and black South African happiness compare?

African-American Happiness Trends

Two studies have noted counter-intuitive trends in African-American quality of life. Paradoxically, perceptions of subjective well-being do not match objective living conditions. Drawing on data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Adams III (1997) found that more African Americans reported increased general life satisfaction between 1980 and 1992 during a period when objective well-being indicators such as health, education and economic status either remained stagnant or declined. Most surprisingly, respondents who reported being worse off financially when compared to the previous year showed a pattern of increasing satisfaction over three waves of questioning.

These findings are reminiscent of ones produced in an earlier study by Gibbs (1973) conducted after World War II. Gibbs found decreasing happiness among elite African Americans following the war, while African American farm workers reported high levels of happiness throughout the period. Quality of life scholars, including Gibbs and Adams III, have sought various explanations for these counter-intuitive findings mainly in shifting reference standards. In his classic review article, Diener (1984: 555) hypothesises that the political awakening of more educated African Americans may have caused an imbalance between aspirations and hopes and actual gains achieved. Veenhoven (1984: 189ff.) in his seminal work on happiness findings argues that black elites who had penetrated the barriers between black and white America to gain access to mainstream society may have exposed themselves to greater social prejudices. Their success made them more vulnerable to and aware of possible rejection. Thus, association with mainstream society might lower the self-esteem of successful black elites, at least in the shorter term.

With regard to African-American happiness trends between 1980 and 1992, Adams III checked that increasing life satisfaction was not due to more dissatisfied respondents dropping out of the sample which was not the case. He then asks whether survey questions of general life satisfaction might trigger a cognitive response that acts like a coping mechanism: "Rising subjective evaluations of one's general life satisfaction may facilitate efforts to remain viable – psychologically, spiritually and physically – both as an individual and as a group – in the face of stagnation or decline of objective conditions" (Adams III, 1997: 209). This explanation is compatible with Headey's (1999) recent observations that people seek to steer an 'even keel' through the life course.

Inconsistent African-American Trends in Life Satisfaction and Happiness

Noteworthy is that happiness and life satisfaction trends did not match in the National Survey of Black Americans between 1980 and 1992. During the same time period, African Americans reported significant *decreases* in happiness. The decline in happiness is consistent with stagnating or declining objective measures and meets expectations. The contrasting findings between happiness and life satisfaction among African Americans raises the question for Adams III of how interchangeable happiness and life satisfaction are as global measures of subjective well-being. The diverging trends of general life satisfaction and happiness indicate that for African-Americans these two measures appear to tap into different aspects of global well-being. Adams III (1997) calls for a better understanding of the general structure of the principles governing well-being and how these differ between groups.

For this paper it is important to note that notwithstanding the paradoxical findings in African-American quality of life, levels of African American subjective well-being remain below those of whites.

Comparisons. How do African-American and black South African happiness and life satisfaction compare? The tendency for African Americans to have lower well-being scores relative to white Americans compares with the gap between black and white well-being scores in South Africa. However, none of the paradoxical findings are replicated in the South African data. One reason may simply be due to the fact that black South Africans make up the vast numerical majority, some 77% in a population of 43 million in 1999, while African Americans remain a minority. Since 1994, black South Africans, who predominantly support the ruling African National Congress, are also the dominant political power. Thus, a sense of entitlement may shield blacks from vulnerability when penetrating mainstream society. Feelings of relative deprivation may be defused by moral outrage that blacks are not advancing faster in the democratic era which is reflected in expectations that the future will favour blacks.

Similar to the studies of African Americans cited above, earlier studies among South Africans found that relatively better-off blacks tended to express higher rates of dissatisfaction with select domains such as education and housing. An explanation similar to the one offered by Diener (1984) was advanced. It was argued that better educated blacks were more likely to feel relative deprivation as second class citizens

in their own country than the rank and file. However, with the opening up of post-apartheid society in the 1990s, better-off black South Africans tend to register higher levels of satisfaction in most domains (Møller, 1998).

Generally, trends in objective and subjective well-being tend to correspond in South Africa. Unlike in findings from the National Survey of Black Americans, there is no apparent disjunction between happiness and life satisfaction trends in the South African surveys. There is a slight tendency for *all* South Africans to score higher on happiness than life satisfaction although the two measures are significantly positively correlated. For the average black South African material conditions have not yet improved markedly under democratic rule and neither have their levels of reported well-being. However, it may be worth looking beyond resources to cognitive elements of expectations and reference comparisons as suggested by Schulz (1995).

Consider that happiness and life satisfaction may mean different things to white and black South Africans in the apartheid and post-apartheid period. Reference standards have shifted. For blacks, Michalos' reference standard of 'best hoped for' now includes levels of consumption and power which were the stuff of dreams under apartheid. On the other hand, whites now share resources and compete for positions as a minority rather than a dominant elite. For whites, virtually all seven comparisons which make up Michalos' (1991) Multiple Discrepancy Theory (MDT) are likely to be negative unless they are buoyed by a sense of historical fairness and reconciliation (see Schulz, 1995: 168 for a list of Michalos' MDT comparisons). Paradoxically, for whites ego integrity may demand assessments of life satisfaction as usual along the lines argued by Adams III for African-Americans. Attrition in the form of voting with one's feet (the 'pack for Perth' syndrome or emigration to Australia) may remove a small proportion of dissatisfied and disillusioned white South Africans from aggregate measures. However, the fact remains that the vast majority of whites who have stayed on and experienced a loss of power under the new political dispensation continue to express satisfaction with life and happiness in spite of anxiety about the future (see Figures 1 and 2). Expressing happiness and life satisfaction in spite of perceived problems may function as a coping mechanism which sustains ego integrity among whites.⁶ A more positive and politically correct interpretation is that happiness may be indicative of social adjustment and willingness

to contribute positively to nation-building. Earlier research suggested that whites who believed in the ideal of the 'rainbow nation' in 1997, that is the prospects for a unified nation, were more likely to express life satisfaction than others (Møller et al., 1999). Future research has yet to be undertaken to test whether 'patriotic' whites are willing to pay the wealth tax referred to in President Mbeki's 1998 speech.

A similar explanation might be ventured for the persistence of low levels of satisfaction and happiness combined with optimism for the future among black South Africans. Here ego integrity might dictate public expressions of dissatisfaction and happiness among the poor in the interview situation in anticipation that living conditions for previously disadvantaged communities will actually improve as promised by political leaders. To borrow from the gerontology literature, 'complaint discourse' is a powerful weapon to remind political leaders of their duty to their constituencies while boosting the ego of the complainant (Cattell, 1997). Importantly, a number of smaller and larger-scale South African studies suggest that disadvantaged communities are appreciative of improvements in living conditions (Møller and Jackson, 1997, among others). Meanwhile those who have not experienced improvements are still sending messages to political leaders to remind them of their duty to improve living standards for all South Africans.

CONCLUSIONS

The sharp rise in life satisfaction and happiness among newly enfranchised black South Africans may be a unique phenomenon. Post-apartheid society has seen a slight convergence of black and white levels of happiness and life satisfaction but the new set-level is still illusive. In 1999, subjective well-being among South Africans appears to be a compromise between expectations and reality. The dynamics underlying perceptions of subjective well-being in societies in transition may be particularly complex. There are useful lessons to be learnt from the examples of quality-of-life studies in re-unified Germany and among mobilising African Americans to explain South African well-being. While the liveability factor claims to be the most powerful explanatory tool, the important role of aspirations and expectations and coping mechanisms in colouring perceptions of well-being should not be dismissed lightly.

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NOTES

¹ The Gini coefficient measures income inequality with 0 indicating absolute equality and 1 absolute concentration of wealth.

² The questions were “Taking all things together, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Generally speaking would you say you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?”; “Taking all things together in your life, how would you say things are these days? Would you say you are very happy, fairly happy, fairly unhappy, or very unhappy?”; “How would you describe life now: is your life getting worse or getting better?” (worse/better, between the two). Happiness and life satisfaction were measured on a five-point scale with a neutral (‘neither/nor’ satisfied/happy) mid-point; life getting better/worse on a three-point scale with indeterminate (‘between the two’) midpoint. Results in Figure 1 are responses above the mid-point, that is ‘very satisfied/happy’ plus ‘satisfied/fairly happy’; in Figure 2 above/below the midpoint. MarkData, a Johannesburg-based research organisation carried out all surveys on behalf of the researchers. Personal interviews were carried out by trained fieldworkers in the homes of respondents in the language of their choice. Sampling methods used in the 1980s differed from those of the 1990s in that each population group (ca. n800–1000) was sampled separately so that totals are illustrative rather than accurate. In the 1990s a national sampling frame (ca. n2200) was devised which covers residents of both urban and rural areas weighted to population totals. The 1999 version of the ‘life getting better/worse’ item shown in Figure 2 read: “How do you think things will be for people like yourself in five years’ time? Taking all things together will things be better, worse or about the same as today?” coded in five categories from ‘much better’ to ‘much worse’ with a mid-point (‘about the same’).

³ Technical factors should be taken into consideration when comparing trends over time. The change in sample design in the 1990s is referred to above. Although the wording of items was the same throughout the period under review, a change in the manner in which responses were recorded by the interviewers may have influenced the response pattern somewhat. In the 1983 survey few respondents gave neutral responses, only 4% for life satisfaction and happiness. In the 1983 questionnaire schedule, the code for the indeterminate mid-point (neither happy/satisfied nor unhappy/satisfied) was placed *after* the definite choices along with the off-scale response categories of ‘don’t know’ and ‘not important’. In the later surveys the neutral response was recorded between the positive and negative response categories

which saw a steep rise in the intermediate response rates up to 19% in 1997 for life satisfaction and 21% in 1996 for happiness. The sharp increase in indeterminate responses was interpreted as a sign of increasing feelings of uncertainty during the transition period (Møller, 1998; 1999). The 1999 survey reverted the order of the response categories to the original one and saw a drop in neutral responses back to 3% for life satisfaction and 5% for happiness similar to the 1983 results. Although the changes in recording responses should theoretically only affect the distribution of responses below the midpoint, one might speculate whether the more positive assessments of well-being by whites in 1999 was somehow influenced by this technical change. As non-neutral assessments of life quality are desirable, the intention is to stick with the original ordering of response categories in future surveys.

⁴ The percentages of East Germans indicating improvement in living conditions increased from 48% in 1993 to 59% in 1998, the corresponding percentage increase among West Germans was from 10% to 20%. Not surprisingly, more West than East Germans report no change in living conditions over the period (59% versus 29/25% for East Germans in 1993/98). The proportion of West Germans who think living conditions have deteriorated declined from 31% in 1993 to 21% in 1998. Corresponding figures among East Germans are a decline from 23% to 16% (Habich et al., 1999).

⁵ Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's second democratically elected president, took office on June 16, 1999.

⁶ This line of argument is consistent with the disjunction between collectivist and individualist ideals of black and white South Africans. In a national sample of older South Africans Møller and Ferreira (1991) observed stronger expressions of independence and denial of problems among the mainly satisfied whites while 'complaint discourse' was the medium of expressing dissatisfaction with life among blacks.

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