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# HOPE, HAPPINESS, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS: CHANGES BETWEEN 1980 AND 1992

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## Introduction

Hope can be thought of as a “sustaining life-force that provides meaning, reason, and direction for one’s existence” (Blankstein and Guetzloe, 2000). Snyder (1994; 2000) has argued that hope contains two goal-related concepts: pathways, or the belief that one can come up with viable routes to desired goals, and agency, or the perception of being able to actually use those routes. In the Snyder model, as one encounters goal blockages, people seek new pathways and channel their motivations (agency) into those other pathways for goal achievement. Indeed, this pattern of thinking emerged in Woodbury’s (1999) study of African American college students who were making career decisions. As their pathways and agentic thoughts increased, so to was there a decrease in their perceived life indecision. Filled with this sense of hope and aspirations of future success, African Americans’ overall sense of well-being also has been found to be elevated (see Adams, 2000).

Of all the racial and gender groups in America, perhaps none have been more maligned than African American males. Media depictions, such as those used in the Willie Horton ad during the Bush presidential campaign, have only further undermined the attempts by African American males to become a part of mainstream society (Frazier, 1994). African American males, similar to others in the broader African American community, can readily see that persistent prejudice, the suburbanization of jobs, and the general stagnation of urban economics have virtually blocked their attempts to play a vital role within their families (Frazier, 1994).

Bowman (1997, 1998) has observed that African American fathers’ difficulties in providing for their families, along with their accompanying senses of estrangement resulted directly from the rapid post-industrial displacement of unskilled industrial jobs (and their related trends). In this context, it is easy to see how the media, along with the absence of positive older male role models, could lead to the loss of hope by young African American males (see Freeman, 1994). Although Freeman (1994) arrived at these conclusions via a qualitative methodology and with only a small number of participants, the results reflect a clear concern that many researchers have had

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for some time in regard to the circumstance of African American males. Namely, the disenfranchisement of African American males, their lack of positive employment opportunities, and their high rates of involvement with the justice system often can contribute to the feminization of poverty, an increase in single mother households, and a decrease in father and child interactions. This is a recipe for the loss of hope and happiness among a sizable portion of African American males (Snyder, Tran, Schroeder, Pulvers, Adams, & Laub, 2000).

This seemingly carousel of low hope and happiness among African American males is based on media presentations and only scant research. Therefore, it is crucial to study African American males, and in so doing to sample larger samples and use more reliable measures than has been the case previously. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine the levels of hope, well-being, self-esteem, provider discouragement, and whether there has been a change in these dimensions from 1980 to 1992. Of particular interest will be the ability of hope to account for variance in well-being and self-esteem beyond the forces of provider and father role discouragement, joblessness, income, family closeness, and religiosity.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

African American single fathers were selected from the National Survey of Black Americans panel data (Jackson & Gurin, 1987). This panel study collected responses from African Americans who were self identified, U.S. citizens living in non-institutionalized housing in the continental United States. The surveys were conducted in 1979-80 (Wave I), 1987-88 (Wave II), 1989 (Wave III), and 1992 (Wave IV). A subset of the original data that consisted of unmarried fathers (n=202) was selected for the present study.

There were several changes between Wave I and Wave IV of the data set. First, there was an eight percent increase in the number of respondents reporting that they had earned a college degree. Similarly, there was a decrease in the percentage of respondents who reported having less than a high school education (from 49.8% to 35%). In 1979/80, 38% reported earning less than \$15,000 the previous year, 47% reported earning between \$15,000 and \$30,000, and 15% earned more than \$30,000. By 1988, comparable figures had changed to 23%, 35%, and 42%, suggesting an overall drop in those at the lowest income levels and an increase in those at the highest income levels. Respondents also were asked how much they worried about bills. In Wave I and Wave IV, the percentages reporting they 'worried a great deal' was 13.1%, whereas those reporting they did not worry at all decreased from 47.7% in Wave I to 41.4% in Wave IV.

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## Measures

To ease interpretation of results, all items used in the present analyses were recoded so that higher values reflected more of the positive characteristics, i.e., having more satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, etc.

*Quality of Life* was assessed using two items that measure life satisfaction (In general, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Would you say that you are “very satisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” “somewhat dissatisfied,” or “very dissatisfied?”), and happiness (Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you’re “very happy,” “pretty happy,” “or not too happy” these days?). These items were analyzed separately because of previous divergent trends (see Adams, 1997). Self-esteem was measured by six items that were adapted from the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem scale.

To assess *Objective Provider Role Difficulties*, we used a measure similar to Bowman (1998). Specifically, employment status was coded as 1 for those gainfully employed or looking for work and 0 for those who were jobless or out of the work force. We also used annual household income to assess inadequate income.

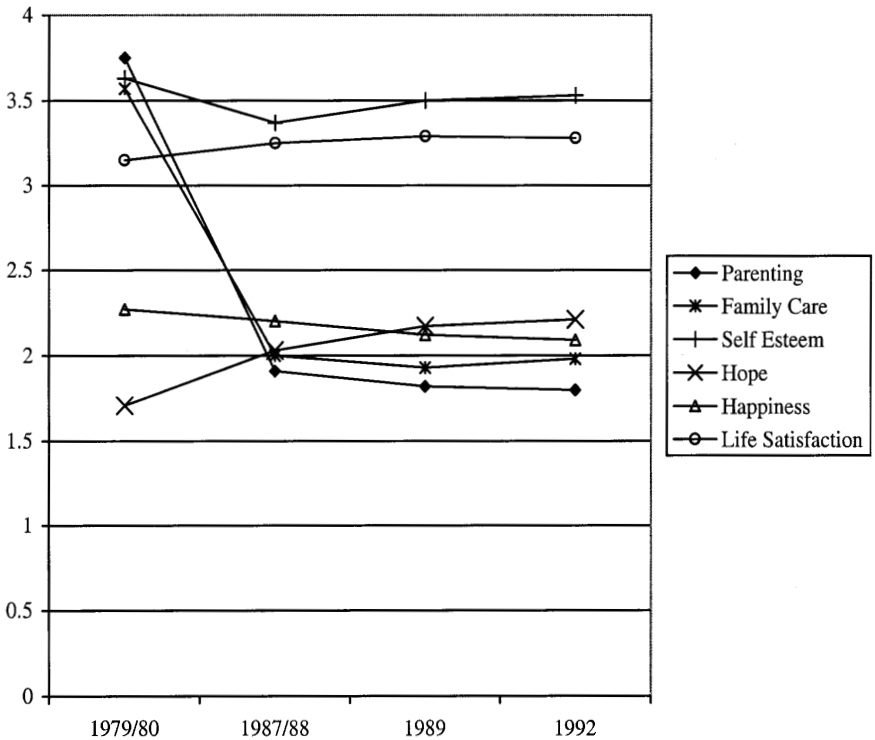
*Primary Provider Discouragement* was assessed on a four point scale based on responses to the item “Given the chances you have had, how well have you done in taking care of your family’s wants and needs.” *Father Role Discouragement* was tapped by the item “Given the chances you have had, how well have you done at being a good father to your children.” Both of these items had response options varying from “very well,” to “fairly well,” to “not too well,” to “not at all well.”

*Resource variables* included a four-point Religiosity item (“How religious would you say you are?” [“not at all” to “very religious”]), and Family Closeness (“Would you say your family members are very close in their feelings to each other?” [“fairly close,” “not too close,” or “not close at all?”]). Also assessed was whether the respondent lived in an urban or rural setting. Finally, we used a single item measure of hope (Have you usually felt “pretty sure” your life would work out the way you want it to, or have there been times when you “haven’t been sure about it?”).

## Results

Multivariate Analysis of Variance was used in order to assess changes in life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, perceptions of family, perceptions of parenting, and hope across the four waves. Hierarchical regression procedures were then used to examine additive relationships between the four sets of predictor variables and each of the psychological well-being measures separately. Employment status and household

**Figure 1. Mean levels of selected variables in 1979/80, 1988/89, 1989, and 1992.**



income were entered as a block in the first step. Perceptions of how well the respondent provided for their family and success of parenting were entered as a block in the second step. A block including assessment of family closeness, religiosity, presence of a best friend, and non-urban community residence formed the third step. Lastly, hope was added at the fourth step.

### **Multivariate Analyses of Changes Across Waves**

As shown in Figure 1, contrary to previous analyses (Adams, 1997), there was no significant change in life satisfaction across the four waves [ $F(3, 143) = 3.39, p < .06$  and thus this variable was eliminated from further analysis. This finding is contrasted with the significant linear decrease in the mean level of happiness [ $F(3, 147) = 5.03, p < .05$ ]. In both cases the quadratic and cubic contrast failed to reach significance, [ $F(3, 143) = 1.74, ns, F(3, 143) = .23, ns, F(3, 147) = .15, ns$  and  $F(3, 147) = .46, ns$  for life satisfaction and happiness respectively]. Thus psychological well-being as mea-

sured by life satisfaction and happiness present an intriguing paradox. Life satisfaction for this sample of African American single fathers was unchanged across the four waves of the survey, where as there was a decrease in happiness.

In terms of self-esteem, there was a decrease between the first and second waves, followed by a slight increase between the second and third waves, and little change between the third and fourth waves. Both the linear and quadratic contrasts were significant [ $F(3, 139) = 11.58, p < .001$ , and  $F(3, 139) = 9.81, p < .01$ , for the linear and quadratic contrast respectively]. Thus, the drop between the first and second waves was significant, as was the gain between the second and third waves; however, the slight increase between the third and fourth waves was not significant.

Similar to the decrease in happiness across the four waves, we also found significant linear declines in perceptions of how well participants felt they cared for their families and how they have done as a parent [ $F(3, 134) = 591.39, p < .01$  and  $F(3, 147) = 291.28, p < .01$  for family care and parenting respectively]. In both cases the qua-

**Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Results for Variables Predicting Happiness in 1992.**

| <b>Variables</b>    | <b>r<sup>a</sup></b> | <b>β</b> | <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>R<sup>2</sup>change</b> |
|---------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Step 1</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Total Family Income | .06                  | .21      |                      |                            |
| Employment Status   | .17*                 | .14      | .04                  |                            |
| <b>Step 2</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Family Care         | -.29*                | -.25*    |                      |                            |
| Parental Strain     | -.19*                | -.11     | .14*                 | .10**                      |
| <b>Step 3</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Family Closeness    | .10                  | .09      |                      |                            |
| Religiosity         | .19*                 | .11      |                      |                            |
| Have a Best Friend  | .15                  | .22*     |                      |                            |
| Rural/Urban         | .08                  | .11      | .21***               | .07*                       |
| <b>Step 4</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Hope                | .14                  | .22**    | .25***               | .04*                       |

<sup>a</sup> Pearson Product Moment Correlation between predictor and criterion  
 \*p<.05    \*\*p<.01

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dratic contrast was also significant, [ $F(3, 134) = 74.92, p < .01$  and  $F(3, 147) = 46.08, p < .01$ , again for family care and parenting, respectively, see Figure 1]. Interestingly, there was a significant increase in the mean level of hope across the four waves [ $F(3, 145) = 32.46, p < .01$ ].

### **Hierarchical Regression Analyses**

As shown in table 1, hierarchical regression analyses were used to assess the ability of the predictor variables to account for changes in happiness in the fourth wave. In the first step of the analyses, total household income and employment status were entered into the equation. The  $R^2$  for regression failed to reach significance [ $F(2, 114) = 2.21, ns$ ]. However, when perception of how well the family was cared for and perception of parenting effectiveness were entered in step 2, they did produce a significant  $R^2$  for regression [ $F(4, 112) = 4.67, p < .01$ ]. There was a significant gain made by adding family closeness, religiosity, presence of a best friend, or the rural/urban in the third step [ $F(8, 108) = 3.79, p < .001$ ]. Yet the addition of hope in the final step did significantly account for variance in happiness,  $F(9, 107) = 4.24, p < .001$ .

Table 2 presents hierarchical regression analyses of the predictor variables on self-esteem within the fourth wave. Note that within the first step, the  $R^2$  for regression did reach significance when Family Income and Employment Status were in the equation [ $F(2, 110) = 4.52, p < .01$ ]. In the second step, the addition of Family Care and Parenting did produce a significant  $R^2$  for regression [ $F(4, 108) = 2.45, p < .05$ ]. However, neither family care nor perceptions of parenting uniquely accounted for significant variance in happiness. It appears that the combination of variables significantly accounted for shared variance in self-esteem within the fourth wave. For the third step, which added family closeness, presence of a best friend, religiosity, and rural/urban residence, the  $R^2$  failed to reach significance [ $F(8, 104) = 1.52, ns$ ]. The  $R^2$  for regression also did not reach significance in the final step [ $F(9, 103) = 1.46, ns$ ].

### **Discussion**

The analyses presented here are intriguing. First, when examining the changes of individual items over the four waves of panels, we note the significant declines in perception of providing for the family and how well they perceive themselves doing as parents. This no doubt is related to the decline in happiness as evidenced by the emergence of family care as one of the predictors of happiness within the fourth wave. We also found that respondents' self-esteem declined, yet there is hope, literally. Hope increased over the twelve years that the survey spanned. Hope appears to be related to the efforts of respondents to maintain in the face of adversity. Despite

**Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Results for Variables Predicting Self-Esteem in 1992.**

| <u>Variables</u>    | <u>r<sup>a</sup></u> | <u>β</u> | <u>R<sup>2</sup></u> | <u>R<sup>2</sup>change</u> |
|---------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Step 1</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Total Family Income | .14                  | .27**    |                      |                            |
| Employment Status   | .09                  | .05      | .08                  |                            |
| <b>Step 2</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Family Care         | -.15                 | -.02     |                      |                            |
| Parental Strain     | -.10                 | -.08     | .09                  | .01                        |
| <b>Step 3</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Family Closeness    | .08                  | .11      |                      |                            |
| Religiosity         | .08                  | .14      |                      |                            |
| Have a Best Friend  | .18*                 | .00      |                      |                            |
| Rural/Urban         | .02                  | .07      | .11                  | .02                        |
| <b>Step 4</b>       |                      |          |                      |                            |
| Hope                | .04                  | .09      | .12                  | .01                        |

<sup>a</sup> Pearson Product Moment Correlation between predictor and criterion  
 \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

declines in self perceptions of how well they provided for their family or how well they have done as parents, these single fathers still had hope that somehow their lives would work out. Similar findings were reported for the cohorts in previous studies (Adams, 2000). The failure of life satisfaction to show significant changes across the twelve year span was surprising. Previous studies have found measure of happiness and satisfaction to be interchangeable (Diener, 1984); that does not appear to be the case for African American men.

Eliminating the strain associated with the roles of fatherhood is imperative if we are to assist in providing a context that is conducive to family development. As noted by Freeman (1994), most adolescent fathers have every intention of being good providers for their families. Indeed, in America a man is defined by his ability to provide for his family (McAdoo, 1994). Data presented here indicate that one mitigating factor is the ability to be gainfully employed. Limited resources have a negative impact on self-image, dignity, and self-esteem (Freeman, 1994). As Corbin and Pruitt (1999) have noted, part of the picture will need to include consideration of how African

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American males define themselves. “The search for a viable combination of values that will result in a productive and emotionally satisfying life style can prove to be elusive” (White, 1984, p. 97). With the continued sense of isolation and pessimism associated with alienation from broader society, it is imperative that we continue to develop models that ask not what is wrong with African American males, but instead what is right. Perhaps by turning the question in this way will allow the emergence of an understanding that many of the values and desires that African Americans have are not so different from the rest of society.

We should also keep in mind the strong relationship that hope has on the resiliency of African Americans in general, and the African American male in particular. Our findings clearly point to hope as being part of the coping mechanisms utilized by African American males. Recall that hope was entered into the equation after all other variables were accounted for, yet hope still significantly accounted for variance in happiness. As Snyder (2000, p. 407) has noted: “...one’s perceived sense of meaning in life is robustly and positively correlated with higher levels of hope.” As we go forth in the new century, “we must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope” (King, 1977, *Strength to Love*, as quoted by Snyder, 2000).

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