

**Using History to Investigate Minority Consumer Cultures:  
Case of the Ebony Fashion Fair**

*Carlyne Wormley, Virginia Gunn, Barbara M. Heinzerling  
The University of Akron*

**Problem Statement and Background**

The diverse faces of American ethnic groups are common in national media presentations in the 1990s. But, this presentation of cultural diversity is relatively new. Exploring minority consumer cultures can reveal histories of the long struggle to reach acceptance of such diversity and integration of minorities into mainstream consumer culture.

In this article, the historical method is presented as a way to explore the impact of events on minority consumer cultures. In particular, the effects on Black consumers, *Ebony*, a magazine devoted to presenting Blacks in positive pictorials and narratives, and the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, a fashion show featuring Black models, are explored.

*Ebony* magazine, begun in 1945, and the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, begun in 1958, are recognized for their important impact on Black consumers. "*Ebony* provided the first forum for Black models in fashion and beauty, for never before had African-Americans witnessed a reflection of themselves as being beautiful, graceful, charming and stylish." (Fornay, 1996). *Ebony* assured Black consumers that their lives were important and that Blacks could never be edited out of history (Johnson, 1995). *Ebony* explained to "black women that despite the killing neglect of a larger society, our lives were precious in the main and imperative in the particular" (Angelou, 1995). Katz (1986) indicates that *Ebony* was the spark to a revolution which gave Blacks inspiration, pride, and courage to keep on moving forward to greater heights.

**Definitions**

At various times Black people were known as colored people, people of color, Negroes, Afro-Americans, Aframericans, Black Anglo-Saxons, Black Americans among other appellations (Hughes, 1983). In this article, the correct terminology for Black Americans for specific time periods is used as follows (a) colored people, 1930s and 1940s,

(b) Negro people, 1950s and 1960s, (c) Black people, 1970s and 1980s, and (d) African-American or Black, 1990s.

### Research Procedures

Historical research is heavily dependent upon the quality and number of sources that the researcher uses. Primary first-hand sources, such as visual and material evidence and written documentary sources, are the most desired. Secondary written sources are also helpful as they provide additional information.

The technique of oral history uses information gained from semi-structured interviews with people about events in the past. The approach is viewed as particularly valuable for non-elite minority groups often under-represented in printed records (Neuman, 1994). In the Black community, oral history has a strong tradition and that tradition is compatible with another tradition, networking. For many decades Black families opened their homes to friends and relatives who were traveling across the country because it was impossible for African-Americans to stay at motels or hotels in major cities or small towns due to prejudices toward them. In the early days of *Ebony* and the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, both oral history and networking traditions were strong, and words of praise about the magazine and the fashion show were widely circulated among Blacks.

In this study, steps traditionally used in a historical research project were followed. The first step was to conceptualize the object of inquiry. Initially this interest was focused on the *Ebony Fashion Fair* and its impact on Black consumers, particularly women. Both primary and secondary source materials were read, reviewed, and analyzed. Particularly helpful were the actual monthly editions of *Ebony* and the book, *Succeeding Against the Odds* (Johnson, 1989). From analysis of these written source materials, conceptualizations to be examined during the oral history interviews were formulated. These conceptualizations would be supported, refuted, or supplemented by the information provided by the actual interviewees. The interest in the *Ebony Fashion Fair* was expanded to include *Ebony* magazine, because respondents recalled reactions to both the *Fashion Fair* and the magazine.

For the oral history interviews, individuals who had actually experienced the *Ebony Fashion Fair* in one of three ways were sought: (a) early models, (b) members of the organizations that sponsored the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, and (c) audience participants. Each of the interviews with these individuals began with some standard questions in order to have continuity and focus. One

important aspect of oral history as a research technique, however, is that the interview must be sufficiently open-ended to allow the respondent to share information that the interviewer might not have contemplated. Thus, in the interviews conducted for this study respondents were encouraged to share their own recollections of attending the fashion fairs. The Interviewer in the oral history situation must be astute in recognizing new information from the respondent, following through as leads open, and incorporating findings into the results. The interviewees in this study shared invaluable information and perceptions that were not found in written sources.

All of the interviews were taped and transcribed. Because different viewpoints and perceptions were investigated, it was necessary for the interviewer to subsequently evaluate the quality of the evidence. Thus, the written source information on the *Ebony Fashion Fair* was of assistance at the end of the interviewing process to make quality evaluations of the taped interviews.

### Findings and Conclusions

The *Ebony* premiere fashion show, held in New Orleans in 1958, was an outgrowth of *Ebony* magazine. Mr. John H. Johnson, publisher of *Ebony* magazine, responded to an invitation to provide Black models for a charity fashion show. This premiere show grew into the annual *Ebony Fashion Fair*. In 1963, Johnson's wife, Eunice Walker Johnson, became producer and director of the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, one of the most unique fashion events and the only continuous traveling fashion show of its kind. Today, the *Ebony Fashion Fair* is a year-round business that travels to about two hundred cities in the United States, Jamaica, the Bahamas, London and Canada.

### Members of Sponsoring Organizations

The *Ebony Fashion Fair* helped local Black organizations generate thousands of dollars for charity and scholarships. Early sponsors included (a) local Urban Leagues; (b) the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; (c) the United Negro College Fund; (d) Black sororities including Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and Zeta Beta; and (e) national women's social and civic organizations like the Girl Friends, Inc., the Links, Inc., and Jack and Jill, Inc. Interviewees involved with local Black organizations spoke of the high standards set and enforced by the Johnsons, the multiple forms which had to be completed and all of the local arrangements which had to be made for the show.

### Early Models

Eunice Johnson's approach for finding models for the earliest shows was unique. In each city hosting a show she conducted a search for Black models who exhibited a flair for fashion, a good natural walk, and a sense of self-assured confidence. Models agreed that *Ebony* and the *Ebony Fashion Fair* created opportunities for them as well as for designers, photographers and entertainers. Also, Black models in the fashion show helped Black Americans see themselves in a positive light and aided in the development of the Black fashion and cosmetic industries.

Terri Springer Walker, one of the earliest models, was among the first to demonstrate the ebony-complexioned women could look vibrantly beautiful in bright colors. During her interview she recalled that, "When *Ebony Fashion Fair* really took off, I think people were happy to see African-American women wearing gorgeous, beautiful clothes to show what we had and it gave so many people great pride. *Ebony Fashion Fair* was just a great way to give people the opportunity to really see African-American people, to see ourselves in a sense." (Walker, 1997).

### Audience Participants

Those who attended an *Ebony Fashion Fair* generally remembered vivid details of their first impressions. These interviewees spoke with enthusiasm about their earliest experiences with the *Fair* and stressed the positive influence of the *Fairs*. Several saw attendance, especially at the earliest *Fairs*, as fostering audience self-awareness and self-esteem. Thus, the *Ebony Fashion Fair* appears to have given a face and a voice to African-Americans and a sense of who they are and what they could accomplish. African-Americans were no longer invisible in the world of fashion or in American culture (McDonough, 1996).

### Implications for Consumer Education Instruction

Consumer educators can use historical research to create educational lessons focused on the contributions of minorities to both the minority consumer culture and the mainstream consumer culture. The historical research steps discussed in the Research Procedures section can guide the teacher in adapting historical research for the classroom. Revealing the consumer past of minority populations can deepen understanding of the history of the larger mainstream

consumer movement and increase our understanding of the interrelationships among different consumer groups.

In addition to primary and secondary sources, minority students could use oral history interviews to explore older adults' recollections and thoughts about consumer experiences while they were growing up. Sharing these oral histories with a larger group of both minority and majority students could result in increased awareness of the complexity of the consumer role for minorities.

Class discussions could focus on the unknown contributions of minorities to the predominant consumer culture or key minority individuals who impacted their cultures and brought those cultures into the mainstream consumer culture. In writing about Afro-Americans, Katz (1986) noted that their contributions have been omitted. Historical research can correct omissions for all minority consumer cultures, including the African-American consumer culture.

### References

- Angelou, M. (1995). Then *Ebony* arrived. *Ebony*, 51 (1), 42-43.
- Fornay, A. (1996). The image makers. *Black Elegance*, 95, 25.
- Hughes, J. Tape recorded interview by J. C. Wormley, Shrewsbury, New Jersey, (1996, January 14).
- Hughes, L., Meltzer, M., & Lincoln, E. (1983). *A pictorial history of Black Americans* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Crown.
- Johnson, J. H. (1995). Founder's statement. *Ebony*, 51(1), 27.
- Johnson, J. H. & L. Benner, Jr. (1989). *Succeeding against the odds*. New York: Warner Books.
- Katz, W. L. (1986). *Black Indians: A hidden heritage*. New York: Atheneum.
- McDonough, P. *Jet and Ebony* founder, chairman and CEO John H. Johnson and civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks receive Medal of Freedom award. (1996, September 23). *Jet*, 90, 4-6.
- Neuman, W. L. (1994). *Social Research Methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Walker, T. S. Tape recorded interview by J. C. Wormley, Columbus, Ohio. (1996, July 28).
- Wormley, J. C. (1997). *Breaking Barriers: Ebony Magazine and Ebony Fashion Fair*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Akron, Akron.

**Carlyne Wormley** is Graduate Student, School of Home Economics & Family Ecology, The University of Akron, 215 Schrank Hall South, Akron, OH 44325; (330) 972-7721.

**Virginia Gunn** is Professor, School of Home Economics & Family Ecology, The University of Akron, 215 Schrank Hall South, Akron, OH 44325; (330) 972-7721; e-mail: vgunn@uakron.edu.

**Barbara M. Heinzerling** is Professor, School of Home Economics & Family Ecology, The University of Akron, 215 Schrank Hall South, Akron, OH 44325; (330) 972-7721; e-mail: bheinzerling@uakron.edu.

