

African-Americans Express Optimism as Millennium Approaches

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As the African-American population looks toward the year 2000, they do so with the hope and expectation that their social, cultural and political environments will continue to improve and prosper. This optimistic outlook is based on the belief that the best way to achieve the goals they have set for themselves and their families is to make it happen on their own through continued dedication, commitment and hard work. Despite the negative publicity and apparent racial divisiveness as reflected by the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson cases, African-Americans are feeling better about themselves and express a desire for increased racial and social harmony, not only in their relations with others but also among themselves.

JRH Marketing Services, New York, recently completed a series of focus groups to investigate current attitudes and opinions about lifestyles and personal goals among a cross-section of African-Americans nationwide. These focus groups were the latest in a series of trended studies that we began in 1975 and have conducted periodically since then.

The latest project consisted of 10 focus groups, five each among men and women. Among the five groups conducted within each gender, two were among adults aged 21-29. We used an annual household income of \$40,000 as a definition of "affluent," and one of these groups was above, and the other below, this level. The second two groups were constructed in the same way, except that the age category was 30 to 39; the fifth group consisted of respondents who were between 40 and 50, regardless of income.

Participants in all of the groups were currently employed, either full- or part-time, or were retired. In addition, we conducted eight groups among teens, four each among males and females, who were either students or were working. Among the areas of inquiry in these groups were the following:

- How do they assess their current lifestyles?
- What lessons have they learned from the past?
- What are their personal goals and aspirations?
- With whom do they spend their time?
- How sensitive are they to how others see them?

Although these and other issues were incorporated into a discussion guide document, respondents were encouraged to digress and discuss anything that

they thought relevant to their perception of their lifestyle and the impact of outside influences on that lifestyle.

Perception of current lifestyles

There was a strong tendency among men and women at all age and income levels to see themselves as better off now than they were in the past. There was general agreement that the "good life" was definitely attainable. They were under no illusions, however, that this would be easy; they would have to strive for it, perhaps more than other ethnic groups. It was clear to them that no one was going to give them anything, but they were convinced that all they really needed was an equal opportunity to improve their lives and those of their loved ones.

As a group, the men indicated that they took great satisfaction and pride in the fact that they were accomplishing personal goals, establishing their independence and economic security, and making important choices for themselves. Most of these men perceived that their lives were improving or had improved because of the control they were taking over their own destiny. They expected to make more money in the future and to experience increased spiritual and personal growth. This was especially true of, but not limited to, the younger men. The most important challenges they saw in life were related to concerns about unemployment and downsizing, concerns about personal health, increased responsibility in relationships with women, and heightened sensitivity to levels of racism toward black men.

The reactions among women were even more positive than those expressed by the men. Overall, they were more confident and self-satisfied than black women of previous generations. They perceived the future as getting better because they were more focused, better able to cope with problems, and had a higher level of appreciation for the good things in their lives. "Stand by your beliefs," "Imagine what might be," and "Take a chance" were the attitudes that best described their approach to life and lifestyle decisions.

Compared to their predecessors, they expected to make more money, possess more household conveniences and to better provide for their children's education. Their strong sense of self-esteem was very evident: they said that they were accomplishing personal goals, were eating better, and were generally happy about their marital status. Positive expectations were particularly strong among younger women, while a sense of accomplishment was very evident among those who were older.

Impact of outside influences

The male respondents felt that they had to develop as many skills as possible for the future to keep pace with the economy. Male teens were well aware of the importance of education; computer literacy was mentioned as a skill that was particularly important. In general, there was little concern about foreign policy, except among those who saw it as affecting the economy or the availability of

jobs.

There was a higher level of concern about domestic politics. Politics, and in particular some politicians and political parties, were seen as contributing to the degradation of their communities by scaling back social programs and by not doing enough to combat drugs, violence and negative influences among young people. Race relations were less important as a political abstract, although very important on a personal development level, i.e., how they got along with co-workers and how that affected their potential for advancement. These men expressed increased confidence in themselves, very high confidence in black women, some confidence in religious affiliations and very little confidence in the media's commitment to provide an unbiased reporting of social and political events. For example, they, as well as black women, did not all believe that O.J. was innocent, although they felt that the media wanted others to believe they did. African-American women of all ages and income levels shared many of the same attitudes as the men. They felt, perhaps even more strongly, that they were directly affected by the economy, politics, foreign policy, and drugs and disease. Because they were more likely than in the past to have careers and be independent, they were increasingly concerned about race relations in the workplace, and although they expressed a desire to get along with others, they felt that racism directed at them was difficult to control. Despite these outside pressures, they expressed enormous confidence in themselves and increased confidence in black men.

How lifestyles have changed

Males reported that socializing was less spontaneous than in the past, and there was an increased tendency to spend leisure time at home as opposed to going out. Clearly, they were becoming more sensitive to the "quality" in quality time spent with their family, which was becoming a higher priority than socializing with their peers. Although this attitude was stronger among the older respondents, younger men were also relatively conservative and introspective, and were spending less time "on the streets," in recognition of the increasing costs and potential hazards associated with street life. When they did socialize with friends it was geared more toward relaxation; they saw themselves as more "responsible" and having "direction" and "control" over themselves than in the past.

The desire to spend free time at home with their family was also prevalent among the women, yet there was also increased interest in developing and cultivating a close circle of female friends, following the same-gender friendship patterns that have traditionally been attributed to men. Their approach to leisure time was a function of the increased work and family responsibilities they had, and going to clubs and spontaneous partying were of less importance, even among the younger women.

Despite the importance of family and female peers, these women felt it was very important to make time for themselves alone. They were interested in activities that were self-improving and were willing to spend money on themselves to achieve this end, which was regarded as an indication of their continued optimism about their self-image and earning power. Teenaged girls seemed more mature than in the past. Although they liked to socialize and have fun, they recognized the awesome responsibility of raising children and were less inclined to rush into relationships, preferring instead to concentrate on their education and beginning to secure their financial future.

Freedom and opportunities

African-Americans from all walks of life shared a positive outlook on their place in society, both as an ethnic group and as individuals. There was a feeling, particularly among the younger and more affluent respondents, that they were standing on the shoulders of those who had come before them and had fought to attain the freedom and opportunities that they currently enjoyed or could expect to realize if they applied themselves. There was a sense of reality, which the participants liked to refer to as "maturity," in the understanding that although freedom and opportunities were increasingly available to them, these ideals were not necessarily easy to obtain.

They had no false hopes or illusions. Nothing would be handed to them on a silver platter, and in fact, there were elements in society that might still seek to hold them back. If they wanted a good education, they would have to earn it by hard study and application. If they wanted a good job, they would have to struggle for it. If they wanted the "good life" for their family, they must establish that as a priority and find a way to make it happen.

They believed that affecting social change was best accomplished through legal means and that learning to get along with themselves and others was essential. If there was a central theme or focal point of their attitudes regarding their current hopes and expectations, it was that the door to a successful future, while still closed, had been unlocked; it was up to them to push it open and walk through.