



How Middle-Class Blacks Fit into American Suburbs

Karyn Lacy, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

When white ethnic immigrants are used to gauge how groups have gotten ahead in American society, observers often presume that blacks can – and should – leave race behind as they climb the class ladder. A classic model of assimilation – a model of how and to what extent different groups blend into American society – suggests that newcomers voluntarily trade their immigrant cultures for a mainstream identity as they meld into the American mainstream.

Blacks have long been understood as the glaring exception. Most researchers believe that the way U.S. culture assigns meaning to physical characteristics such as skin tone and hair texture leaves people of African descent no choice but to identify as distinctly black – at all times and in all places. This perception tends to lead to the belief that blacks cannot fully blend into mainstream culture. However, my research in three middle-class suburbs in Washington, D.C. shows that blacks do have options about when and where to identify along racial lines.

Black Racial Identity and Assimilation

By studying the connection between social mobility and identity among middle-class blacks – some who live in a majority white suburb, others in a predominantly black one, and still others in an upper-middle class subdivision nestled within the black suburb – I discovered something different. Middle-class blacks in all three suburbs are unwilling to give up their racial identity and culture completely as a precondition for acceptance in America. Instead, they deliberately keep a foot in each world, refusing to abandon the black community, a phenomenon I call “strategic assimilation.”

To be sure, the black world is a refuge from the racism that black professionals experience in predominantly white workplaces and neighborhoods. But that is not the only reason middle-class blacks prioritize social connections to other black people. The people I surveyed don’t think of race as a liability. They believe there is something enjoyable about being black and participating in black residential and social communities. Furthermore, my research shows that there is only one way for people to acquire an authentic black racial identity: they must spend time interacting with other blacks. Black neighborhoods, churches, and social organizations are premier sites for fine tuning racial identities. As explained by Greg, a resident of the black, upper-middle class suburb I studied, “we encourage our children to be black just by living here. We’re in a black neighborhood, so...all her friends will be black, and she can live that black experience [for] herself.”

Social Class Shapes Beliefs about Assimilation

Race is conspicuous, but being middle-class is typically invisible. However, different rules apply to blacks who, in America, are often presumed to be poor. To correct for such misperceptions of their class standing, middle-

class blacks often take extra steps in public spaces to signal their high status to white strangers. For example, Philip shops in a suit, because “being black is [perceived] negative[ly]...if you’re not lookin’ a certain way.” Other signals about his class position – credit cards, an exclusive zip code – can also reassure store clerks.

Many scholars treat the black middle class as a homogeneous group, as people who all have the same opportunities for economic success. But I find significant variations. Although everyone I talked to referred to themselves as “middle class,” differences in lifestyles reveal there is an *elite* black middle class and a *core* black middle class.

- Elite blacks living in the upper-middle class suburb view their economic circumstances as stable and secure. They believe work is a pathway to independence, that their children are entitled to material comforts, and they willingly defer their own desires to provide their children with the finer things in life. In doing so, they privilege *status reproduction* – ensuring that their children’s lives will be as comfortable in adulthood as it was in childhood. As Brad, a member of the elite black middle class, explained, “the top priority for me is getting my sons...as far as they need to go...I will do everything that I can to help them” get ahead, with little concern for the costs associated with exclusive private schools, cars, and other luxuries.
- Members of the *core* black middle class report feeling financially burdened and believe they cannot afford to spend so liberally. Unlike the elite, these blacks are concerned with protecting what they have. They believe work is a moral obligation, spending should be limited to necessities, and children should purchase non-essentials with their own money. Shelley’s seven-year old son desperately wanted a pair of Jordans. She refused to buy them, but allowed him to buy them with money he received for his birthday.

Suburban Divisions

Historically, the suburbs have been a site of intense racial hostility. But in today’s middle-class suburbs, race is not the only factor that divides or unifies residents. In all three places I studied, local development and school quality are the most urgent concerns for all residents. Black and white residents in the upper-middle class, majority-black suburb avoid the public schools (with the exception of special magnet programs) and support the construction of a controversial tourist development, since they live far enough away to avoid being affected by traffic, noise, and pollution. By contrast, both black and white middle class residents of the middle-class black suburb want to improve the troubled school system and vehemently object to proposed development. Finally, in the predominantly white suburb, older residents are resistant to developments that younger residents may favor.

Broader Implications

With the knowledge that race and class are fluid identities for middle-class blacks, scholars, policymakers, and other civic leaders should distinguish between circumstances where blacks are excluded or limited in their efforts to get ahead versus circumstances where blacks choose to limit their contact with whites or reinforce ties to one another. Residential segregation needs to be considered with more careful attention to the nuances of strategic assimilation. Federal and local policy must fight exclusions while at the same time recognizing that blacks value their racial identities and actively maintain distinctive social ties.

Read more in Karyn Lacy, *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (University of California Press, 2007).