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## Race, Social Context, and Consumption: How Race Structures the Consumption Preferences and Practices of Middle and Working-Class Blacks

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**Race, Social Context, and Consumption: How Race Structures the Consumption Preferences and Practices of Middle and Working-class Blacks**

**Abstract**

The contemporary experience of race in America demands that blacks become astute observers of their surroundings, required to read subtle social, interactional and environmental cues to determine how to appropriately engage others in order to gain respect and social acceptance. Consumption objects, whether physical or material goods or services and experiences, are symbolic tools that blacks mobilize in order to define and assert themselves wherever they may be.

Market research reveals that divergent patterns of consumption exist along racial lines. Blacks outspend whites in three central categories: apparel, personal care, and electronics and technology. Sociological research on consumption, however, has inadequately addressed how race influences blacks' consumption. Claims that blacks are conspicuous consumers are pervasive in both popular and academic works, and research indicates that blacks' consumption is, at least partially explained by status considerations, yet no comprehensive, empirically grounded theory exists to account for the contextually determined, symbolic and strategic use of goods by middle and working-class blacks.

In my dissertation entitled "*Race, Social Context, and Consumption: How Race Structures the Consumption Preferences and Practices of Middle and Working-class Blacks*," I offer an account of blacks' consumption that addresses this gap in the literature. I analyze qualitative interview data collected from 55 blacks residing in the New York City area, focusing on blacks' consumption preferences and practices in three social arenas: where they live, where

they work, and where they play. Through examining middle and working-class blacks' consumption I show the ways that race remains salient in blacks' everyday lives; affecting their routine practices and marketplace interactions. Blacks differ as consumers as a consequence of a history of racial alienation, segregation, and discrimination in public settings, which has resulted in their use of goods to mitigate racial stigma, but distinct patterns of consumption emerge as blacks mobilize consumption objects to express and affirm their racial identities. This dissertation demonstrates that whether consumption goods are used to contest racial stigma or to express feelings of racial affinity, in both instances blacks' consumption preferences and practices reflect their reactions to the settings in which their consumption is enacted.

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## INTRODUCTION

While some cultural commentators have argued that we are living in a post-modern, post-racial, and even post-black era,<sup>1</sup> the research summarized in this dissertation reveals that race is highly relevant in the social interactions and contexts blacks encounter daily, impacting their everyday routines and rituals. In the seminal sociological text, *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson (1980) theorizes the importance of class relative to race in accounting for blacks' life chances. In this dissertation, I offer theoretical insight useful to understanding blacks' lifestyles. That is, blacks' consumption preferences and practices.<sup>2</sup> I compliment and extend Wilson's classic work by revealing the degree that middle- and working-class blacks encounter implicit racial resentment, using consumption as a window into blacks' everyday performance and negotiation of race. Wilson argues that for blacks, opportunities for social mobility and advancement changed dramatically as a consequence of the passage of Civil Rights legislation and with the adoption of Affirmative Action policies, and changes in the modern economy. The resultant shifts in the opportunity structure gave rise to a contingent of middle class blacks. Accordingly, *The Declining Significance of Race* spurred research on the black middle class. This dissertation contributes to that body of work. By focusing on consumption, an aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural commentator Touré (2011) extends the concept of "post-black," a term originally used to describe a category of contemporary black art and artists who did not want to be labeled as 'black' artists, though they were black and often dealt with race in their art. Touré uses the term to identify what he perceives to be a broader trend among the post-civil rights movement era generation of blacks. He argues blacks of this generation perceive that "there is no dogmatically narrow, authentic Blackness because the possibilities for Black identity are infinite"(Touré 2011:5).

<sup>2</sup> As explained by Yaish and Katz-Gerro (2010) consumption preferences and practices form one basis of cultural dispositions. Preferences refer to people's taste and symbolic knowledge, and practices refer to people's behavior and participation in cultural activities and the processes through which they acquire and engage with goods.

middle- and working-class blacks' lives that has been relatively overlooked, I indicate the ways that race continues to impact and inform blacks' everyday preferences and practices.

From their neighborhoods to their workplaces, and many places in between, middle and working-class blacks in the United States operate in social contexts that impose social requirements on them that are at times different from the requirements that white Americans and other racial groups' experience. A history of alienation, segregation, and discrimination uniquely shape blacks' cultural dispositions. This is particularly evident in blacks' experiences as consumers. Regardless of their class position, blacks' contemporary experiences with racism burden them with the task of becoming astute observers of their surroundings, requiring them to read subtle cues to determine how to appropriately use consumption objects to gain respect and acceptance.<sup>3</sup>

Blacks' consumer experiences are embedded in a shared culture of consumption that is emblematic of American society. Historians have noted that mass consumption has been a central feature of American life since the 1930s. Historian Lizabeth Cohen defines mass consumption as "the production, distribution, and purchase of standardized, brand-name goods aimed at as broad a buying public as possible"(2003:22). Shopping has played an increasingly important role in shaping both the U.S. economy and culture (Zukin 2004). A point, illustrated by the fact that consumer spending accounts for over 60 percent of national economic growth and there are more shopping malls in American than there are high schools (Zukin 2004:16). In the twentieth century the nation's culture has been characterized by a marked shift toward consumerism. Even outside of the U.S. consumption is increasing consequential; with rising levels of household consumption in nations with dramatically different political and economic

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<sup>3</sup> Consumption objects include both physical objects (e.g., a car or clothing) and services or experiences (e.g., attending a sports event or Broadway show) (Holt 1995).

orders, such as communist China (Doctoroff 2012). Despite the relevance of consumption and the important symbolic function consumption objects play in almost every sphere of life, scholars of inequality rarely consider consumption to be a factor that contributes to, impacts, or serves as an indicator of inequality in the United States. Yet existing literature reveals that empirical research is needed to improve not only our understanding of the connection between consumption and economic inequality, but also what we know about race relations and social inequality, that is, the extent to which individuals and groups in a society do not have equal access to social status and styles of life.

With the aim of addressing this shortfall in the literature, this dissertation offers a nuanced account of the means by which race and contextual dynamics intersect to structure blacks' consumption. Using consumption as an analytic lens this dissertation offer new insight on the contemporary experiences of middle- and working-class blacks, additionally, by bringing race to the forefront I advance the debate on the relationship between consumption preferences and practices emerging out of the sociology of consumption. As the dissertation unfolds, I demonstrate empirically how and in what instances race is a factor that affects the relationship between blacks' consumption preferences and practices.

In each of the ensuing chapters I explore the function that consumption serves and the symbolic meaning that blacks attach to consumption objects, while also addressing the extent to which social contexts affect the relationship between blacks' tastes and cultural proclivities and their enactment of consumption practices. Blacks' consumption is explored in three social arenas: where they live, where they work, and where they play. In the chapter that immediately follows I present a theoretical overview of the present study. I begin with a review of market research that reveals a divergence in consumption patterns along racial lines. I then present an

extensive discussion of both the insights and limitations of existing accounts, the most predominant of which emphasizes status when explaining blacks' divergent consumption. In addition to concerns of status, I argue that blacks use consumption objects in the construction and expression of racial identity, and the opposition and mitigation of the negative effects racial stigma. I argue that the pervasiveness of racial stigma and the extent to which a setting is public or private affects the social climate, which in turn influences blacks' preferences and practices, determining the means by which race affects blacks consumption.

In chapter 2, "Where Blacks Live— Rep Your Hood and Your Hoods' Rep," I examine blacks' neighborhood preferences and posit neighborhood desirability as an important site of consumption. I argue that where blacks prefer to live reflects the social and symbolic meaning they attach to particular neighborhoods. For example, a black neighborhood's racial composition can signal the types of social interactional styles and norms of engagement that reflect racialized forms of expression—black culture instantiated in public spaces. Blacks who have a high regard for other blacks, whose race is a central aspect of their identity, and who maintain an ideological commitment to racial uplift,<sup>4</sup> may prefer to live in neighborhoods with large black populations because they represent an opportunity to realize and affirm their racial group membership. In exchange, however, for enacting their racialized preferences blacks, particularly middle-class blacks, often forfeit their class-based preferences. Similarly, blacks living in upper-class, majority-white neighborhoods are afforded the prestige associated with living there, as well as, easy access to an assortment of amenities. But they must contend with racial stigma and the heightened salience of their race. Living in prestigious white neighborhoods can exact a toll on

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<sup>4</sup> Historian Kevin Gaines (1996) argues that the "uplift the race" ideology, is a set of beliefs, held by middle class blacks, that espouses adherence to principles of self-help and regards education as important to group progress. Furthermore, he argues "uplift signified the aspiring black elite's awareness that its destiny was inseparable from that of the masses" (Gaines 1996:21).

blacks, as they must contend with tokenism, being the only black on the block. Gender, too, adds a dimension that affects blacks' day-to-day experiences in their neighborhood for both blacks in majority white and majority non-white neighborhoods. Hence, as a consequence of their race, black consumers are often not fully able to realize their ideal housing preferences; where they live, their consumption practice, is often disconnected from either their class- or race-based preferences. They are unable to realize both sets of preferences in tandem and may even have to reconcile that their race- and class-based dispositions are at odds.

In chapter 3, "Where Blacks Work—Dressing for Success," I analyze blacks' dress and personal grooming, as exhibited in the workplace, as a form of consumption practice. I argue that the daily ritual of getting dressed and attending to one's personal grooming holds social and symbolic meaning that is contextually driven, and for blacks, such practices take on a special meaning. The objective of this chapter is to empirically gauge how the conditions of the workplace affect the self-presentation strategies blacks adopt. I examine blacks' perceptions of the role that race plays in the workplace influences the extent to which they engage in consumption practices with the intent of heightening their status and offsetting racial stigma. I find support for the claim that blacks use consumption objects as a means of responding to stigma, but also that the extent to which this is true reflects the racial makeup and climate of their workplace. The racial composition and climate of a workplace also affects the extent that blacks conceal and/or modify the performance of racialized tastes and preferences in interactions with non-blacks. In general, I find that blacks use consumption objects instrumentally to reduce stigma, particularly in environments where they perceive their status to be low, in comparison to their non-black peers, and the stakes, for their advancement high.



In chapter 4, “Shopping While Black in a Consumer Republic,” I focus my investigation on retail stores as sites of leisure, thus social contexts where blacks play. But retail venues are also places where blacks encounter discrimination. Managing racial stigma and stereotypes is a common part of the black experience when spending their free time and money, as retail settings are sites where class and racial hierarchies exist overtly, evident and reinforced in blacks’ experiences and interactions while shopping- a dynamic described as “shopping while black.” I find strong evidence that the black consumer experience is affected by race. Namely, blacks’ anticipate and prepare for the possibility of encountering racial stigma and discriminatory treatment when they shop. Particularly as retail stores are places characterized by interactions with strangers that can result in status ambiguity. Consequently, racial discrimination is a barrier that blacks’ must confront when they attempt to enact their consumption preferences—their practices then may not fully reflect their actual preferences.

This dissertation finds evidence that race influences the engagement of blacks’ preferences and the performance of their consumption practices, and illustrates that the impact of race and racial stigma is influenced by the dynamics within social spaces where their preferences and practices are enacted. The lived experience of being black affects not only how blacks’ style their hair and choose their clothes and neighborhoods; it affects how and where they spend their money when they shop. Race affects their consumption, by way of their racial identity and the pervasiveness of racial stigma, which are contextually specific. In turn, their consumption is also affected by the interplay of race, class, and gender in specific contexts.

### **Methodological Overview**

In the following section I present an overview of the methods employed, accounting for how the study was designed to gauge blacks’ consumption preferences and practices across

social contexts. This dissertation draws upon 55 in-depth interviews with middle- and working-class black men and women living in the New York City metropolitan area conducted between February 2009 and June 2011. Qualitative interviews were employed because they allow respondents to give lengthy accounts explaining their tastes and choices. Respondents were able to describe their preferences, as well as, render subjective accounts of their experiences and practices using goods in different contexts. By using a qualitative approach to data collection I was able to uncover the meanings blacks attach to consumption objects and respondents' own assessments of how they mobilized their preferences and practices in different contexts. Such an approach enabled me to collect micro-level data that would be exceedingly difficult to obtain utilizing a social survey.

All interviews were conducted in person and were approximately two hours in length. In order to maintain respondents' anonymity each respondent was given a pseudonym, which is used throughout the text. Each interview was transcribed and coded with the use of ATLAS.ti and TRANSANA, both qualitative data analysis software programs. Descriptive and interpretive codes were applied to the transcripts and subsequently used to determine if patterns existed across respondents (Miles and Huberman 1994).

A qualitative research design has two central methodological advantages for examining blacks' racial residential preferences. First, by utilizing an in-depth interview based approach over a survey approach respondents are able to provide detail accounts and rationales for their preferences and provide rich descriptions of features of their neighborhoods they find desirable. Second, by comparing the preferences, as well as experiences, of blacks who live in neighborhoods with contrasting racial compositions, I was able to examine the underlying factors that contribute to variation among blacks in their racial residential preferences. Consequently, the

results or this research will suggest ways to better construct a measure that more accurately accounts for relevant dimensions of racial identity and ethnocentrism which affect racial residential preferences.

**Table 1. Racial Demographics of Respondents' Neighborhoods (N=55)**

	<b>Black Neighborhoods (N = 35)</b>	<b>Non-Black Neighborhoods ( N=20 )</b>
<b>Middle Class (N =41)</b>	<b>27</b>	14
<b>Working Class (N= 14)</b>	8	6

\* Neighborhoods areas denoted by respondents were matched to “*Neighborhood Tabulation Areas*” (NTAs) defined by the New York City Dept of City Planning, and racial demographic data was determined accordingly. NTAs are aggregations of census tracts that are subsets of New York City's 55 Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). Neighborhoods were categorized as black neighborhoods if blacks constituted the single largest racial group in the area according to the 2000 and 2010 US Census. All other neighborhoods were classified as non-black neighborhoods.

In terms of the racial composition of respondents' workplaces, the sample included respondents who worked in settings that were both predominately white (N= 32) and predominately non-white (N=21). Respondents' self-reported descriptions and estimates of their workplace demographics were used to determine which category they were classified. There are obvious limitations to using self-report data.

**Table 2. Racial Demographics of Respondents' Workplaces (N = 53)**

	<b>Predominantly white workplaces (N = 32)</b>	<b>Predominantly nonwhite workplaces (N = 21)</b>
<b>Middle Class (N =42)</b>	28	11
<b>Working Class (N= 14)</b>	4	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	32	21

*Description of Respondents*

All respondents were between the ages of 24 and 44, all adults of working age before their peak earning years. The average age was 29 years old. All respondents self-identified as African American or black. Respondents were all raised in the U.S. and all except for two were born in the U.S. Respondents' class status was determined by their level of education and occupation. Middle-class respondents had to minimally have a college degree. Twelve of the middle-class respondents additionally had advanced degrees. Middle-class respondents all worked in occupations defined by the Bureau of Labor statistics as managerial or professional. A few also worked in supervisory roles in service-related occupations. Working-class respondents typically had some college or had attended a trade school. They tended to work in lower tier white collar jobs (e.g., secretary) or in solidly blue collar jobs (e.g., firefighter).

**Table 3. Demographic and Social Profile of Sample (N = 55)**

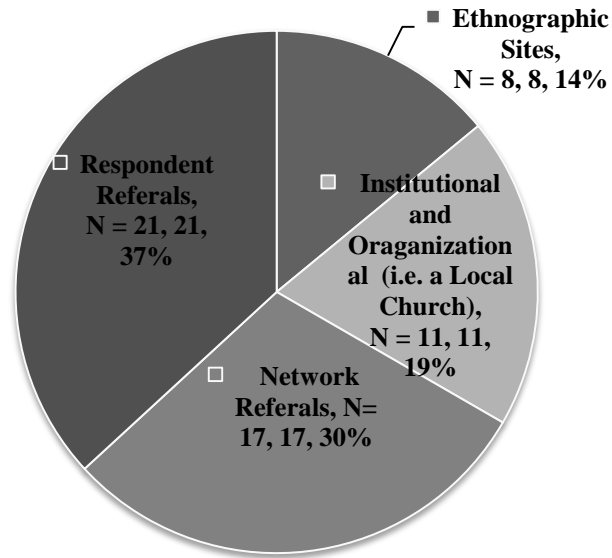
		<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Class</b>	Middle Class	41	75
	Working Class	14	25
<b>Gender</b>	Female	26	47
	Male	29	53
<b>Education</b>	High School	3	5
	Some College/ Trade School/Associates	4	7
	Undergraduate Degree	35	63
	Graduate Degree	12	21
<b>Age</b>	24-27	10	18
	28-29	21	38
	30-33	15	27
	34+	7	13
<b>TOTAL</b>		55	100

Respondents were recruited using three techniques. First, I contacted sixteen people who were members of my personal network and sought referrals from them. For each member of my personal network I limited the number of referrals to three and did not interview people I knew personally. Eighteen respondents were recruited in this way. Second, respondents were recruited using referrals from non-profit organizations, institutions, and professional and social organizations. I limited referrals from each institutional source to four. Eleven respondents were recruited in this way. As such, four respondents were recruited during fieldwork at various ethnographic sites<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, I asked interviewees for referrals of potential respondents and interviewed up to three people referred to me by respondents. Eleven respondents were recruited from the referrals of respondents.

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<sup>5</sup> This research entailed an ethnographic component. While an analysis of the data collected as a result of that fieldwork is not reported or discussed here, living in Harlem, New York and conducting a participant observation at two different luxury retail stores certainly contextualized the data collected from the qualitative interviews.

**Figure 1. Avenues of Respondent Recruitment**



*Description of the Study Setting*

This research explores the experiences of blacks living and working in the New York City metropolitan area. New York City represents a unique site. An inherent limitation of conducting research in New York City is, arguably, that the experiences of respondents are not generalizable to other metropolitan areas. Yet New York City was chosen because it represents an ideal opportunity to examine the population of interest, non-poor blacks, and the behavior of interest, consumption.

To the first point, New York City has the largest population of blacks out of any U.S. city and includes a large black middle class. In fact more affluent blacks live in New York City, than any other metro area (Packaged Facts 2010:16). In total 13 percent of all affluent blacks in the U.S. live in New York City (Packaged Facts 2010:16). This study focuses on non-poor blacks for two reasons. First, as Feagin and Sikes (1994) argue non-poor blacks are the segment of the

black population most likely to have interactions with whites “across the broadest array of social situations” (26). Second, middle and working class blacks have discretionary income and account for a large fraction of all black spending. In fact the top 17 percent of all black households contribute to nearly half of the black population’s buying power. The consumption patterns of middle class blacks is also important to study because previous research indicates that consumer debt, a byproduct of consumer spending, has risen most markedly among the middle class, where 63 percent of households are in credit card debt (Schor 1998).

In addition to having a substantial population of blacks, as other scholars have noted, the New York City metropolitan area is a particularly informative site to investigate race relations and the social salience of race (Logan and Alba 2002). New York City constitutes a cultural center for black American life and is home to a number of well-regarded black cultural institutions, such as The Apollo Theater<sup>6</sup> and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, blacks in New York have been noted to be trendsetters (Stoute 2011; Miller and Kemp 2005).

To the second point, opportunities for consumption and leisure in New York City allow for more dynamic patterns to emerge in the areas of consumption relevant for the theoretical agenda of this project (Glaser and Strauss 1967). New York City is a central place for understanding consumption and the role of shopping, as other scholars have argued. Zukin (2004) argues that “New York has always been a crucial meeting point for shipments of goods

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<sup>6</sup> The Apollo Theater, located on Harlem’s 125<sup>th</sup> street, is one of the oldest theatrical venues in the U.S. that has consistently featured African American entertainers. Available online: <http://www.apollotheater.org/>

<sup>7</sup> The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is a preeminent research library located in Harlem, NY. It is a part of the New York Public Library system and for nearly a century “has collected, preserved, and provided access to materials documenting black life, and promoted the study and interpretation of the history and culture of peoples of African descent.” Available online: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/64/about>

and a critical mass of eager consumers” (p 18). Many consumer goods, historically and today, reach New York first (Zukin 2004, p18). Shopping is both “one of the city’s major activities,” as well as attractions. New York City is a center for various cultural industries (fashion, entertainment, media, etc.) and the opportunities for people to act as cultural agents and producers, as well as consumers are widespread. With world-class shopping, museums, and entertainment opportunities, respondents’ opportunities to participate in cultural activities are almost infinite.

The housing market in the New York metropolitan area has a number of unique characteristics. Housing costs are prohibitively expensive, reducing the likelihood of homeownership, consequently most New Yorkers are renters. While in the U.S. as a whole 34 percent of the population resides in renter-occupied housing, in New York 67.9 percent of the city’s population are renters.<sup>8</sup> In general renters differ from homeowners because their housing decisions are less permanent and require less of a financial investment (Rohe and Stegman 1994, Charles 2000; Ellen 2011).

While New York City represents a unique site, it also shares several relevant features with other cities. In particular New York is no exception in terms of racial segregation; it is one of the most segregated cities in the country and has remained stably so for decades (*see Table 4*). Even in the face of shifting ethnic composition New York’s predominantly black neighborhoods remain primarily black. The “exposure index,” a measure of residential segregation that indicates the level of exposure (and converse isolation) of one group to another, for the New York metropolitan area was 61 percent; indicating that most Blacks in the New York City metropolitan area live in neighborhoods with sizable black populations.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: NMHC tabulations of the US Census Bureau's 2011 Current Population Survey, [http://www.nmhc.org/Content/ServeContent.cfm?ContentItemID=1152#large\\_cities](http://www.nmhc.org/Content/ServeContent.cfm?ContentItemID=1152#large_cities)



**Table 4. Top Five Most Segregation U.S. Metro Areas, Ranked by White/black Dissimilarity Index**

<b>Metro Area</b>	<b>Black Population (Percent)</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Dissimilarity Index</b>
1. Gary, IN	122,686 (19%)	428,791 (68%)	631,362	87.9
2. Detroit, MI	1,012,262 (23%)	3,096,900 (70%)	4,441,551	86.7
3. Milwaukee-Waukesha, WI	232,247 (15 %)	1,116,150 (74%)	1,500,741	84.4
<b>4. New York, NY</b>	<b>2,118,957</b> <b>(23%)</b>	<b>3,684,669</b> <b>(40%)</b>	<b>9,314,235</b>	<b>84.3</b>
5. Chicago, IL	1,541,641 (19%)	4,798,533 (58%)	8,272,768	83.6

Source: William H. Frey and Dowell Myers' analysis of Census 2000; and the Social Science Data Analysis Network (SSDAN). Available Online at:  
[http://www.censusscope.org/us/rank\\_dissimilarity\\_white\\_black.html](http://www.censusscope.org/us/rank_dissimilarity_white_black.html)

## **Chapter 1**

### **Theoretical Overview**

This dissertation offers new theoretical and empirical insight into the question of how race structures blacks' consumption. In the proceeding chapter I review the literature on blacks' consumption, starting with market research that reveals racial variation in expenditures. I then focus on existing accounts that explain variation in blacks' consumption as a function of their quest for status, evaluating both the strengths and the limitations of such accounts. Regarding the latter, I discuss researchers' (1) inadequate conceptualization of consumption, (2) failure to recognize that consumption often simultaneously fulfills multiple functions, and (3) insufficient attention to how racial discrimination and pervasive stigma generate different responses in blacks' consumption. By addressing these shortcomings, I reveal how race differentiates blacks as consumers, not only with regard to their underlying consumption preferences, but also in the mobilization of consumption objects and participation in racialized cultural activities.

The account I propose draws on conceptualizations of consumption emerging out of the sociology of consumption which characterizes consumption as a complex web of preferences-tastes, dispositions, proclivities, and attitudes, and practices-behaviors, actions, engagements, and performances. It addresses the diverse functions of consumption for blacks, as consumption objects constitute symbolic resources used to express racial identity and to overcome the negative effects of racial stigma. Additionally, by emphasizing the social contextual determinants of blacks' consumption, my analysis both compliments and extends previous work, as considering the social context not only improves our understanding of blacks' use of goods, but when consumption patterns are examined in specific social contexts, our understanding of the relationship between consumption preferences and practices more generally is enhanced.

## **A Brief Overview of Patterns of Racial Divergence in Consumption**

Trends in blacks' expenditures show that real and glaring differences exist along racial lines in terms of spending patterns. Market research, utilizing a variety of methods, including focused groups and extensive social surveys, has indicated that blacks spend more than other racial groups, particularly whites, in three categories; personal care, apparel, and electronics and technology. In addition to evidence revealing divergent patterns of spending in these areas, research has also demonstrated that blacks spend less in certain sectors. Specifically, blacks spend "17 percent less on education, approximately 50 percent less on entertainment, and 56 percent less on health spending" (Charles and National Bureau of Economic Research 2007:17). Blacks also tend to spend less on housing outlays. Why blacks' allocate a smaller fraction of their budgets to these categories is not the focus of the present study, however, it is something that should be investigated considering the long-term consequences of spending (or the failure to spend) on education and health related costs impact a person's economic advancement and quality of life.

Reviewing evidence of personal care expenditures suggest that black people do not hesitate to spend money to appear well-dressed and well-groomed. In the most recent edition of "The African-American Market in the U.S."<sup>9</sup> a trade publication produced by the market research firm Packaged Facts, the authors indicate that "personal-care products have a higher priority for black consumers than they do for other consumers" (Packaged Facts 2010:13). In comparison to non-blacks, blacks dedicate a larger proportion of their total annual budgets to this

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<sup>9</sup> "The African-American Market in the U.S." is one of the most comprehensive reports available. It presents an overview of black consumers' expenditures and a basic analysis of an assortment of consumption practices., combining data from a number of sources including the Summer 2009 Experian Simmons National Consumer Study (NCS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey, economic data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, as well as "information collected directly from firms active in the African American market as well as a thorough analysis of relevant industry and trade publications" (Packaged Facts 2010:2).

sector (Packaged Facts 2010:13). With regard to hair, black consumers “account for more than 30 percent of hair care industry” (Miller and Kemp 2005:10). This propensity to spend more on personal care is also evident in blacks’ expenditures on personal hygiene. With regard to dental hygiene, blacks are more likely to buy mouthwash and tooth whiteners (Packaged Facts 2010:13). Similarly, both black men and women spend more money on perfume and cologne than other groups (Packaged Facts 2010:12).

Blacks also dedicate a larger proportion of their total annual budgets to apparel<sup>10</sup>; blacks spend 5.4 percent, in comparison, non-blacks spend 3.4 percent (Packaged Facts 2010:11). Furthermore, even though “the average income of black consumers is lower than that of other consumers, they still spend more in absolute terms on apparel (\$1,983 vs. \$1,776)” (Packaged Facts 2010:11). Blacks also make up a disproportionate share of the footwear market. Blacks spending on footwear accounts for 18 percent of all spending on footwear, totaling \$6.8 billion dollars in 2008 (Packaged Facts 2010). Furthermore, as indicated by both their expenditures and responses to survey questions, blacks maintain a preference for up-to-date and more formal clothing. Compared to non-blacks, black women are more likely to buy “a suit (21 percent vs. 6 percent), dress (35 percent vs. 27 percent) and blazer (10 percent vs. 8 percent)” (Packaged Facts 2010:11). Similarly, black men are on average more likely to buy “a suit (19 percent vs. 8 percent), overcoat (10 percent vs. 6 percent) and necktie (18 percent vs. 14 percent)” (Packaged Facts 2010:116). However, black men are also more likely to purchase casual clothing, such as sweats and jeans (Packaged Facts 2010:116).

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<sup>10</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics which conducts the Consumer Expenditure study, upon which much of the reported data is from defines apparel for to include any of the following: coats and jackets, furs, sweaters and vests, sport coats and tailored jackets, blouses and shirts, dresses, jeans, culottes, trousers and slacks, shorts and short sets, sportswear, shirts, underwear, nightwear, hosiery, uniforms, and other accessories (Available online at: <http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxgloss.htm#apparel>).

In terms of their shopping habits, market researchers find that blacks enjoy staying on trend when it comes to what they wear and are “much more likely than other consumers to keep up with the latest fashions (38 percent vs. 23 percent) (Packaged Facts 2010:11). This finding is consistent across genders, as black women are more likely than non-black women to indicate that they keep up with the latest fashions, 43 percent vs. 31 percent, while for men “the fashion gap” is even wider—32 percent vs. 15 percent (Packaged Facts 2010:11). Furthermore, blacks are “more likely to turn to fashion magazines for cues about what clothes to buy and have a higher likelihood of saying they like to make a unique fashion statement”(Packaged Facts 2010:112). Evidence additionally suggests that blacks are early adopters of fashion trends. When compared to non-blacks, blacks indicate a higher propensity to try out new stores, 16 percent vs. 8 percent, and are more likely to indicate that they are the “first among their friends to try a new store (19 percent vs. 9 percent)” (Packaged Facts 2010:76).

Blacks’ propensity to pick up on trends early is also indicated in their higher rate of consumption of electronics and technology. Miller and Kemp (2005) reveal that while 60 percent of blacks spend money on electronics such as televisions, radios, and sound equipment, only 32 percent of whites indicate that they do the same (Miller and Kemp 2005:10). Furthermore, while 75 percent of blacks agree that “it is important to keep up with the latest technology products and services” only 65 percent of whites agree (Miller and Kemp 2005:14). In addition to purchasing electronics at higher rates, blacks also have been found to use technology differently. For instance, blacks use mobile technologies and social media at higher rates. According to researchers at the Pew Research Center for Internet and American Life Project, “75 percent of blacks text, while only 50 percent of whites” do and while 25 percent of

online blacks use status update services like Twitter, only 15 percent of online whites use such services (Smith 2010).

In summary, racial differences in expenditures suggest which sectors black's purchase commodities at higher rates. Both black men and women spend more on personal care, apparel (with tendencies to buy formal clothing), and footwear. Blacks' spending patterns suggest that they prioritize maintaining a well-kept demeanor, with hair, dress, and personal hygiene being important. Their higher rates of spending on technology and their use of electronics hint at a tendency to keep up with the latest technological advances. While revealing the extent of racial differences in patterns of consumption, much of market research on blacks' expenditures is largely descriptive and does not analyze or explain why divergent patterns exist along racial lines. In the next section I discuss research that does offer insight into why blacks' spending patterns diverges from non-blacks.

### **An Examination of Existing Accounts of Blacks' Consumption**

Within the sociology of consumption there is neither debate nor consensus on the how race serves to differentiate blacks as consumers, both with regard to their mobilization of goods and their participation in cultural activities (for exceptions see Chin 2001; Lamont and Molnár 2001; Banks 2010a, 2010b). Given the importance of consumption in the lives of Americans (Packard 1959; Schor 1998; Cohen 2003; Zukin and Maguire 2004; Zukin 2004), as well as clear evidence of racial divergence in consumption (as previously discussed), there is a definitive need for research to generate empirical knowledge of how race affects blacks' consumption.

Economists, Charles and his colleagues (2007), offer a systematic analysis of racial divergence in consumption. They propose a model of blacks' consumption premised on the idea that status considerations drive blacks' divergent spending. Their argument is centered on the

claim that blacks use their economic capital in ways to compensate for their low societal standing.

Similar versions of this argument appear in historical and ethnographic research. Much of this work focuses on blacks' styles of dress and self-presentation to illustrate that status considerations motivate blacks' consumption. The relative status approach has three critical shortcomings.<sup>11</sup> First, it relies on a conceptually inadequate definition of consumption. Second, and relatedly, it neglects consumption's multifaceted function. For blacks, consumption is a means to affirm their racial identity not just a response to racial stigma; however, this critical function of consumption is unexplored by proponents of the relative status approach. While a strength of the relative status perspective is that it illustrates the competitive function of consumption, it however, does not account for the role of consumption in racial identity construction as it ignores aspects of consumption that are collaborative, expressive, and experiential in character. Third, it does not account for racial discrimination in the market and the effect of discrimination on blacks' consumption. Accounting for blacks' consumption as a consequence of status considerations, at best, provides only a partial understanding of how and why race matters for black consumers.

To date research has paid inadequate attention to the complexity and nuance of blacks' consumption. To address this gap in the literature I present an account of blacks' consumption that emphasizes its social contextual determinants. By examining the social context in which blacks enact their preferences and practices, I address the limitations of the relative status model,

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<sup>11</sup> I classify a wide range of accounts that argue that blacks' consumption is a consequence of status considerations as the 'relative status approach.' This abbreviation does not refer to the model proposed by Charles et al. (2007) specifically. Rather it serves as a form of shorthand to refer to multiple versions of this argument, though these parallel arguments are not formally articulated as a single perspective.

while also offering new insights about the relationship between consumption preferences and practices more broadly.

Charles et al. (2007) find evidence that blacks are conspicuous consumers. Even when controlling for socioeconomic characteristics, they find that blacks spend roughly 30 percent more on visible goods than whites, a rate that has been relatively consistent for the period of 1986-2002. They propose a model based on the idea that goods are used in competitive displays and they argue that the consumption of visible goods is driven by the relative status of one's reference group. They define a visible good as one that is both portable and easily perceptible to others (e.g., cars, clothing, and jewelry) and they identify a person's reference group as their racial in-group. They argue that blacks' reference group is other blacks, and therefore blacks gauge their status by comparing themselves to other blacks. Charles et al. (2007) find that blacks engage in consumption of visible goods at higher levels in states where blacks are on average poorer. Yet they also discover the same pattern holds true for other racial groups, including whites.

Underlying this model are two assumptions; (1) First, that the function of visible goods is to communicate one's economic status. In other words, that people use commodities to convey their social status to others. (2) Second, that preferences for visible goods and the desire to improve one's status is true irrespective of one's race. Considering the fact that the United States is a status-oriented society where competitive consumption is the norm, this model is almost intuitive (Packard 1959; Schor 1998). It builds on arguments made by Veblen (2006) regarding the status function of goods and is also consistent with Goffman's (1986) claim that stigmatized groups adopt strategies to manage the poor treatment they receive as a result of the traits they possess, which are perceived as discrediting.



Additional theoretical and empirical works indicate both support for the importance of status considerations but also reveal areas in which a relative status account is insufficient. Austin's (1994) assessment of a wide-ranging body of work including academic and popular texts, finds that the outlook that status considerations are central devices driving blacks' consumption is pronounced. She highlights what she classifies as the *consumption as alienation* perspective. This perspective asserts that blacks use goods to respond to racial alienation, however, by privileging consumption as a means of gaining "rank and recognition" blacks are only further alienated from one another and society at large (Austin 1994; p 156). As Austin describes "once the black consumer gets the latest thing, she or he will not be satisfied for long because the need for the thing grows out of a sense of inferiority, and the possession of the thing is a constant reminder of that" (1994; 156-7). The consumption as alienation perspective described by Austin is comparable to the relative status approach in that blacks are described as status seekers, willing to invest in visible markers of the status in order to avert stereotypes and to reduce the costs imposed by their stigmatized position. Yet it also extends a critique, arguing that blacks' efforts to gain status through consumption are counterproductive and often futile.

Austin criticizes the 'alienationist' perspective for mistakenly projecting blacks' consumption as a response to whites and ignoring the extent to which blacks' consumption is affected by intra-racial status hierarchies. She argues that blacks also use consumption in the "black public sphere to create alternative mechanisms for achieving status and recognition" (Austin 1994; 163). This point sensitizes us to the idea that dimensions of social space, in this case the racial makeup of the public sphere, importantly shapes blacks' the orientation toward consumption. By examining how the social context mitigates blacks' consumption, I offer insight

into the role of consumption in both inter-racial, as well as, intra-racial interactions, addressing Austin's concern regarding status hierarchies among blacks.

Lamont and Molnar (2001) offer a different criticism of the 'alienationist' perspective in their examination of blacks' consumption. They argue that the 'alienationist' critique "predefines consumption as repressive" and "downplays the subjective meaning that consumers attach to their consumption practices" (p 34). Both the critiques raised by Austin (1994) and Lamont and Molnar's (2002) parallel the limitations I raise concerning the relative status approach, in that both the 'alienationist' and relative status model, do not address the collaborative, expressive, and experiential functions of consumption. Blacks' consumption is not solely motivated by their quest for status, it also is a means to affirm one's racial identity and to gain status among in-group members, however, I argue that the collaborative, expressive, and experiential dimensions, as well as the status function of consumption, is conditional on the social context.

The weight of the relative status approach, however, is displayed by the fact that several ethnographic studies demonstrate support for it. In what follows I discuss evidence from a wide range of scholarly work that assert claims which correspond to the argument that status considerations drive blacks' consumption. Research has illustrated that across class lines, both rich and poor blacks, employ consumer goods in varied ways to reduce or counteract the negative consequences of racial stigma. Most of this research focuses on blacks' self-presentation strategies and styles of dress, and not specifically on their expenditures. These studies indicate that status considerations importantly influence blacks' consumption broadly, yet they also offer nuances not addressed by a status driven accounts of blacks' consumption. For example, they show that class is also a factor mitigating the function goods serve and the meaning blacks attached to goods they use. Ethnographic evidence suggests status considerations

motivate blacks' consumption, but other considerations impact blacks' preferences and practices as well.

Historians indicate that the inclination for blacks' to use material goods and accoutrements as a way of contesting their low status and to mitigate the effects of racial stigma is a deeply rooted tradition. Investigating the late 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Higginbotham (1993) describes black Baptist women's fervent belief in the importance of neatness and an orderly self-presentation. She characterizes these women's beliefs, values, and actions regarding dress and self-presentation as the "politics of respectability," arguing that black women adopted the "politics of respectability" as a response to a "history of stigmatization" (Higginbotham 1993:189). For these church ladies, consumption of material goods was a highly conscious, purposeful activity, relentlessly pursued as part of the quest for racial equality. A great deal of historical work has further examined the relevance of respectability politics among blacks, demonstrating that it was a central dimension of black public and private life during the early part of the century, but also continued to operate throughout the civil rights era (White 2001; Wolcott 2001; P. J. Harris 2003).

Scholars whose work has specifically examined well-to-do blacks, beginning with E. Franklin Frazier (1962), have also indicated that for the black middle class material goods not only play an important role countering negative perceptions of blacks, they also fulfilled an important symbolic function, as they signified upward mobility, and economic and social advancement. Frazier (1962) describes attitudes toward material goods among a newly emerging, pre-civil rights era black middle class, arguing that "conspicuous consumption" was pronounced. His analysis is most consistent with the 'alienationist' account as he argues that the black middle class is "constantly buying things – houses, automobiles, furniture and all sorts of gadgets, not to

mention clothes” in order to cope with a profound sense of inferiority (Frazier 1962: 230). He contends that middle class blacks’ belief that “wealth will gain them acceptance in American life” results in their “fetish of material things or physical possessions” (Frazier 1962; 230). Frazier extends a harsh critique of the black middle class and their status-oriented consumption. He argues that prioritizing consumption reflects a short-sighted goal, of amassing material possessions to signify the acquisition of a middle class lifestyle, even though doing so might worsen blacks’ economic position, as it diverts energies and resources from increasing real wealth and true economic power and influence.

In more recent work examining the lives and lifestyles of the black elite, Karyn Lacy (2007) illustrates the myriad of ways upper-middle class blacks create “public identities” based on their class standing in an effort to minimize the impact of racial stereotypes. Their efforts to limit their encounters with alienating treatment in public settings, particularly while shopping, results in their resolve to “dress with care” (Lacy 2007:75). She describes her respondents as being constantly mindful of their self-presentation and argues that they are attentive to their dress because they anticipate they will be treated badly and will have “unpleasant” experiences in public if they are dressed casually. Lacy (2007) contends that whites may similarly “portray distinct identities as a way of signaling social position” (Lacy 2007:39), but she argues that “blacks who have ‘made it’ must work harder, more deliberately, and more consistently to make their middle-class status known to others” (Lacy 2007:3). Elijah Anderson (2011) also stresses that middle class blacks maintain what he describes as a near obsession with being well-dressed when traveling through and interacting in public spaces. He suggests that middle class blacks have a preference for expensive, high-end goods because they clearly convey their class status

and provide a means to reducing discrimination as they differentiate middle class blacks from poor blacks.

But Lacy also finds that some respondents resist pressures to demonstrate their status and instead they intentionally dress casually. If they are treated unfairly they then draw on their arsenal of middle class resources to show store staff the error of their ways (2007:94–95), by, for instance, issuing a formal complaint with management. Lacy's (2007) findings are illustrative of arguments that blacks also use goods to subvert the dominant order, what Austin (1994) identifies as the *consumption as resistance* critique. Building off of Austin, Lamont and Molnar (2002) argue that this perspective asserts that blacks consume in order to “express resistance and defiance to mainstream society and create and transform mainstream commodities to suit their own purposes” (2002:93). Similarly, in his classic study of sub-cultural groups Hebdige (1979) argues that subordinated groups often use goods subversively. He argues that “commodities can be “symbolically ‘repossessed’ in everyday life and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings” (Hebdige 1979:16). Cultural studies scholar, Tricia Rose, makes the case that this function of material goods, is particularly relevant for the consumption practices of black youth, who, she argues, use goods to defy societal standards and to assert and privilege a subversive value system. While she notes that young blacks' actions are oriented toward gaining status, she argues that they do not seek to signal an aspiration for a white normative, middle class lifestyle. As she describes hip hop and the subversive value embodied in consumption objects:

Style can be used as gesture of refusal or as a form of oblique challenge to structures of domination. Hip hop artists use style as form of identity formation that play on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain. Clothing and consumption rituals testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression. Hip hop fashion is an especially rich example of this sort of appropriation and critique via style (Rose 1994:36).

Austin (1994) suggests that a strength of this perspective is that it projects a sense of blacks' agency, however, she argues that it simultaneously overplays "the significance of symbolic protest" (Austin 2002;164). Likewise, Lamont and Molnar argue this perspective overstates "the consumer's ability to shape the meaning of consumption against dominant consumption narratives" (2002:91).

Studies of poor blacks have demonstrated support for the resistance framework, as well as the 'alienationist' perspective, indicating indeed that a great deal of nuance is not addressed by the idea that status considerations primarily motivate blacks' consumption. Research on the black poor indicate that they consume in order to prove "themselves to be worthy" (Austin 1994) often in ways that resist dominant norms. In Carl Nightengale's (1993) vivid account of poor black inner-city youth, *On the Edge: a History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams*, he argues that "African American inner-city kids have also become eager practitioners of America's ethic of conspicuous consumption" (1993:10). He argues that their "conspicuous consumption" is a reaction to their marginalized position resulting from both the stigma attached to being poor and being black. As he states "to counter feelings of humiliation and frustration derived from poverty and racial exclusion, kids like the ones described in this book have enthusiastically embraced the American consumer culture – hundred dollar sneakers, sports jackets, gold and all" (1993:10). Majors and Billson (1992) similarly argue that black men use "coolness" to present and preserve a sense of themselves in the face of "daily insults and oppression" (p xi). Inherent in the enactment of the "cool pose" is the desire to maintain a "show & prove" composure resulting in stylistic choices that draw on clothing and other consumer goods (footwear, jewelry, cars etc.) as props (George 1999; Majors and Billson 1992). Comparable to the black youth studied by Nightengale, Majors and Billson (1992) find that for

black men “dignity and recognition are bound up with the immediate rewards of money and material goods” (1992:50). However, they argue that black men’s desire for status often results in their adopting alternative codes of conduct and stylistic choices that are at times negatively perceived by society at large. Consequently, as a negative repercussion of adopting a “cool pose” demeanor is that “the cool front leads the black male to reject mainstream norms, aesthetics, mannerisms, values, etiquette, or information networks that could help him overcome the problems caused by white racism”(Majors and Billson 1992:42).

Chin (2001) offers a different and contrasting account of the consumption practices of poor black children. She emphasizes that while “expressions of or responses to structural oppression” are imbued in the consumption practices of the children of Newhallville, the community she studies, she also finds that consumption is “deeply social, emphasizing sharing, reciprocity, and mutual obligation” (p 4-5). Her work reveals that for blacks’ consumption serves multiple functions, being more than just a symbolic communicator of status, but also a means that black youth build and sustain ties to significant others.

Like their male counterparts poor black women have been found to engage in consumption and use goods to achieve social status in ways that are consistent not only with the relative status approach, but with the alienation and resistance perspectives as well. The young mothers depicted in Elijah Anderson’s (1999a) *Code of the Street*, adorn their babies with expensive clothing and footwear. As he describes, “the teenage mother derives status from her baby; hence her preoccupation with the impression that the baby makes and her willingness to spend inordinately large sums toward that end”(Anderson 1999a:165). Pattillo (1999) too reveals that one of her respondents, Neisha, perceives other women in her neighborhood as her social inferiors if they either choose to or could not afford to dress their babies in the latest fashions. In

some sense, Anderson and Pattillo's works illustrate the degree to which one's economic position and social status are disconnected in poor black communities and that consumption of high-status goods is an important avenue to attain social honor, particularly in these communities, where there is little to go around. For these mothers, consumption does not reflect their class position, but it does improve their social status within their communities. As Anderson (1999a) explains:

This seeming irresponsibility of the young mother evolves in a logical way. For a young woman who fails to secure a strong commitment from a man, a baby becomes a partial fulfillment of the good life... "Looking good" negates the generalized notion that a teenage mother has messed up her life, and amid this deprivation nothing is more important than to show others you are doing all right (1999a:165).

Among poor blacks, just as among the well-off blacks, consumption provides a means of heightening one's status, though arguably not in the same way due to their different orientations and access to economic resources.

Much of the ethnographic and qualitative analysis discussed in the above section was not conducted with an explicit goal of focusing on blacks' consumption or with the aim of exclusively investigating the impact of race on consumption. In other words, the empirical focus of Anderson's examination of baby clubs or Lacy's discussion of shopping while black was not how race influences black's consumption. Yet this rich body of scholarship provides detailed accounts of blacks' use of goods and offers important insights sensitizing readers to the factors that influence blacks' consumption preferences and practices. They indicate that consumption for blacks fulfills a status heightening function; however, they demonstrate that consumption is motivated and conditioned by additional factors that the relative status model insufficiently addresses.



## **Addressing the Limitations of an Account of Blacks' Consumption as a Quest for Status**

I employ a comprehensive definition of consumption that incorporates insight gained from scholars in the field of the sociology of consumption. In doing so, I address the first of the three shortcomings of the relative status approach previously outlined. Second, I demonstrate that consumption serves multiple purposes. I show that in addition to using goods instrumentally to achieve competitive, status oriented ends, blacks also engage in consumption to achieve collaborative, expressive, and experiential ends. Third, I show that racial discrimination and racial stigma impose costs which affect blacks' consumption. I argue that the social context matters to the extent that blacks orient and mobilize consumption objects for the purpose of addressing racial stigma or with the aim of expressing racialized tastes and preferences that affirm their racial identity.

### *Operationalizing a Comprehensive Definition of Consumption*

In addressing the limitations of the relative status approach, my first objective is to define consumption as thoroughly as possible. A central weakness of the relative status model is that it relies on an overly simplistic view of consumption. For one, it measures consumption in terms of spending, thereby focuses too narrowly on one part of a larger system and process. Consumption commences long before people acquire a commodity; it starts with "pre-acquisition activities" such as dreaming, longing, browsing, and anticipatory planning (Fournier and Guiry 1993: 352; Twitchell 1999; Zukin 2004). I propose an alternative conceptualization of consumption that views it as a "cycle that includes acquisition, consumption and possession, and disposition" (Arnould 2005:872).

Scholars in the field of the sociology of consumption have developed a rich conceptualization of consumption. Warde (2005), a prominent scholar in the field, defines consumption as:

A process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion (Warde 2005:137).

Holt (1995) also extends a broad definition of what consumption objects comprise of; defining consumption objects to be physical, material, or cultural products that are acquired (e.g., a car or clothing), and the cultural, social, or economic activities, services, and experiences that are engaged in (e.g., attending a sports event or Broadway show). Although there is no official agreement among scholars in the field, consumption has been generally measured by systematically examining either peoples' preferences- taste and symbolic knowledge, or their practices- behavior and participation in cultural activities (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010).

Much of the work pertaining to consumption preferences and practices extend or empirical investigate the theoretical claims put forth by Bourdieu (1984). There is a great deal of debate regarding how to best operationalize Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as it pertains to consumption. In his seminal study *Distinction* Bourdieu (1984) outlines the cultural manifestation of economic position, introducing the concept of cultural capital. He argues that cultural capital, expressed in part through the maintenance of consumption preferences and the enactment of consumption practices, affirms and reproduces social and economic inequality. Bourdieu (1984) defines cultural capital as cultivated dispositions, knowledge bases, and skill sets that distinguish the possessor and allow him or her to gain prestige and symbolic advantage

in specific contexts<sup>12</sup> where such faculties are valued (Richardson 1986). He asserts that cultural capital emerges in three forms: embodied, forms of cultural capital that are gained throughout life and used to define one's lifestyle; objectified, cultural capital represented in the ownership or display of physical/material objects and cultural goods; and institutionalized, cultural capital that is acquired through schooling and is signified in academic credentials. A person's tastes and preferences represent embodied forms of cultural capital and objects acquired through consumption constitute objectified forms of cultural capital.

In spite of its prominence Bourdieu's theory has been criticized for its lack of applicability to the American context (*see* Gartman 1991; Halle 1992; Lamont, 1992; Marsden and Swingle 1994; Erikson 1996). However, Holt (1998) contends that Bourdieu's theory has in some sense been misapplied in studies of the U.S. He argues that scholars have focused too narrowly on objectified forms of cultural capital identified by Bourdieu. That is, the goods and physical manifestations of tastes, in contrast to embodied forms of cultural capital, attitudes and preferences that reflect a system of tastes and dispositions. In American today he notes that class differences in cultural capital are "no longer easily identified with the goods consumed" by any particular group (Holt 1998:5). He makes the case that instead of focusing on objects what people consume, researchers ought to focus on how people consume. Namely, how they actualize their consumption preferences in their practices (p 132). He argues that any analysis that focuses narrowly on the physical and material objects procured through consumption is inherently limited in its ability to shed light on the causal dynamics underlying consumption. In short, in order to understand how cultural capital perpetuates and reproduces inequality, particularly in the U.S., scholars must focus on embodied forms of cultural capital, empirically

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<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu (1984) conceptualizes social spaces defined by particular sets of meanings and hierarchies as social fields.

investigating the meaning people attach to goods and how they use goods. My dissertation builds off of Bourdieu's conceptualization of how cultural capital affects one's mobility prospects but also seriously considers Holt's call to scholars to focus on embodied forms of cultural capital. Other scholars also emphasize the importance of the study of practices, for example, Ostrower (1998) argues that the consequences of cultural consumption in the U.S. for class relations is contingent the organization of social activities and participation. In order to understand how consumption facilitates the reproduction of the status order, she argues researchers must evaluate people's participation in social and cultural activities, i.e. their consumption practices.

Yet some contend that researchers studying consumption should focus on consumers' preferences. This line of inquiry suggests that questions regarding how people mobilize "aesthetic knowledge" in order to demonstrate a critical appreciation or discernment should be privileged in relation to assessments of their actual participation in cultural activities (Peterson and Roger 1996). Peterson and Roger's (1996) study of musical taste is an example of research that focuses on taste and dispositions. They analyze patterns of stated musical preferences and find evidence that increasingly high-status Americans are becoming cultural omnivores. That is, the American elite indicate a taste for a diverse, eclectic mix of high-brow, middle-brow and low-brow cultural forms.

Consumption is theorized as an important expression of cultural capital, thus there is a great deal of debate about how to best to measure consumption, whether utilizing preferences or practices. Preferences and practices in research on consumption have been argued to be (1) interchangeable measures which essentially gauge the same thing, (2) conceptually distinct but similar concepts that often operate in tandem, and (3) entirely separate concepts, one emerging or resulting from the other (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010). Employing an analytic lens that addresses

the influence of race on consumption across social contexts contributes to the debate on the nature and relationship between consumption preferences and practices. Evidence that blacks' maintain race-based preferences and engage in practices that demand race-based cultural competences and capacities, combined with evidence that blacks encounter pervasive racial stigma and discrimination, indicates that depending on the context, blacks practices may be detached from their race-based preferences. Moreover, blacks are often unable to realize both their class and race-based preferences in the market, further suggesting that blacks' preferences and practices are often not completely aligned.

Yaish and Katz-Gerro contend that, while preferences and practices are often treated as interchangeable in studies of consumption, they are analytically distinct concepts that are "shaped by different determinants" (2010:1). They argue that consumption practices are shaped by external conditions. Structural and institutional factors, operating beyond the control of the individual, for example, the availability of goods and cultural activities, access to economic resources to purchase commodities, and institutional requirements such as "mandatory school activities or professional pressures," importantly condition people's consumption practices (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010:2-3). Additionally, practices are externally motivated to the extent that they are modified as a response to the conditions of the social context.

In contrast, they conceive of tastes as more rigid and while not fixed, tastes are less variable in light of structural or external conditions. Tastes do not reflect a person's present social and economic circumstances, but are more aligned to and reflective of internal motivations. They argue that tastes are determined by cultural resources and the cultivation of dispositions over the life course, particularly early on through socialization. To the extent that blacks maintain race-based tastes, that is, racialized cultural dispositions acquired over time,

arguably these cultural competences and understandings would reflect internal motivations, rather than external constraints.

With regard to the relationship between preferences and practices, Yaish and Katz-Gerro (2010) contend that preferences precede practice. They argue that consumption practices emerge from the tastes a person maintains and are facilitated or restricted by a person's access to economic resources. In contrast tastes are derived from internal, individual factors. As they state "taste are mainly the results of socialization, while participation is affected by the end product of the socialization process, namely taste, and by opportunities as conditioned by income" (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010:13).

Warde (2005), proposes a contrary account of the relationship between consumption preferences and practices. He suggests that dispositions and systems of taste are inseparable from consumption practices. He defines a "practice" as "a routinized type of behavior," having two central dimensions: "practice as a coordinated entity" and "practice as performance" (Warde 2005:134). The former is taken to mean "spatially dispersed" ways of doing things and knowledge about how things are to be done, for instance activities such as cooking practices or driving a car. The latter, refers to the regular enactment and engagement in a specific action or group of actions. Warde (2005) argues that preferences emerge from and are shaped by practice. Rather than a product of underlying values or inclinations, he argues that consumption preferences are developed by engaging in social practices. He asserts to understand the nature and process of consumption researchers must analyze consumption practices.

Central to Warde's argument is the claim that practices are affirmed and sustained by their performance, i.e. their regular enactment. He also argues that contextual contingencies shape practice. He suggest that practices constitute an interconnected spatially dispersed "nexus"

of understandings, procedures, and “teleoaffective” engagements, they are simultaneously “a ‘type’ of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds” (Warde 2005:135). In essence, practices are “general and transposable dispositions” but also organized and effected by the time and place they are enacted. Holt (1998) supports a similar approach to consumption, which prioritizes the social contextual factors that influence how people use goods. In her research focusing on “gastronomicalism,” national discourses regarding the cultural representation and regulation of food, DeSoucey (2010) argues that local contexts dictate the meaning attached to “production, distribution, and consumption of food” (DeSoucey 2010:432).

This dissertation compliments the existing literature in the field of the sociology of consumption by employing a conceptualization of consumption that addresses consumption objects as important manifestations of embodied and objectified forms of cultural capital, as well as, examining the relative significance of consumption preferences and practices. By considering the ways that race influences blacks’ consumption and examining the relationship between blacks’ consumption preferences and practices as displayed and enacted in specific social contexts, this dissertation offers new insight, deepening the debate on the nature of the relationship between consumption preferences and practices.

As a consequence of being a racial minority, I argue that blacks differ from other consumers, even those who share their class position. Blacks develop particular racialized preferences, cultivated through socialization throughout the life course and affirmed and reproduced in consumption practices, which reflect both a system of beliefs and experiences unique to their group and their low status position. As a consequence consumption functions as a tool to offset negative perceptions of their status, as well as a means to cultivate, assert, and

affirm their racial identity. As Lamont and Molnar (2001) argue consumption, for blacks, is utilized in processes of social identification and social categorization.

Through their underlying dispositions and cultural participation blacks engage in what Patricia Banks (2010b) entitles “black cultivated consumption” (discussed at length in the next section). However, as a consequence of pervasive racial stigma, blacks also face externally imposed (and sometimes internally reinforced) constraints on their consumption practices. Racial discrimination and racial stereotypes impose additional costs on black consumers (also discussed below). Blacks also face the challenge of determining when and to what extent they can simultaneously enact both their class and raced based preferences, as such, their ability to fully engage their preferences are not always or entirely expressed by or imbued in their consumption practices. The degree that the race differentiates blacks experience as consumers, calls into question Yaish and Katz-Gerro (2010) and Warde’s (2005) assumptions about the association between consumption preferences and practices, as blacks consumption practices may not reflect a sincere and genuine commitment to particular set of dispositions, but reflect an requisite cultural flexibility. The racial dimension embedded in black consumers’ experiences structures blacks’ consumption in ways that are unaccounted for in much of the existing literature.

### *The Diverse Functions of Consumption*

While the relative status perspective describes the competitive function of consumption, it ignores the collaborative, expressive, and experiential roles consumption plays. A social contextual account of consumption allows for the multiple purposes of consumption to be investigated. Because consumption objects perform multiple purposes, often in tandem, it is imperative to explain how these diverse functions together motivate blacks’ consumption. While describing the functions of consumption as categorically distinct (i.e. as collaborative,



expressive, and experiential), creates idealized, and somewhat artificial categories, for the sake of analysis, it is useful to consider the relevance of these varied functions of consumption for blacks. For blacks, the functions of consumption frequently operate in ways that are collaborative, expressive, and experiential, but also in ways that specifically are a consequence or reflection of their race.

In terms of its experiential dimension, while consumption can be used instrumentally, as a means to an end, it can also be an end in itself (Holt 1995). For example, owning a luxury car might confer status, serving as a symbolic device used to enhance one's perceived status. A car may also maintain an equally important experiential dimension for its owner, being a source of pleasure because it is fun to drive. Consumption objects serve as symbolic tools, but they can also be instruments of pleasure. Twitchell (1999) argues that shopping is widely experienced as a form of leisure and often considered a pleasurable pursuit. Consumption objects represent the "good life" in part because of the pleasure they give to people. As such blacks' consumption may be motivated by the enjoyment consumption objects confer, satisfying their desire to have fun, in addition to, and at times irrespective of, status considerations. One advantage of employing a richer conceptualization of consumption is that it allows for an analysis of the full spectrum of activities and meanings that constitute blacks' consumption. Beyond spending practices, blacks' consumption comprises of their dreams and aspirations, the pleasure they find in having and doing things, and the part material goods and experiences play in their definitions of the good life (Austin 1994).

When enacted for the purpose of achieving collaborative ends, consumption facilitates the formation and maintenance of social relationships (Douglas and Isherwood 1996). DiMaggio (1994) argues that consumption plays an critical role in forging social collectivities as goods are

used to demarcate who belongs in a group. Research further illustrates that “cultural resources” gained through consumption are used to enhance and cultivate “in-group solidarity” (DiMaggio 1994:43). In what Lamont and Molnar (2002) define as the *consumption as social identity* perspective, they argue that blacks’ consumption reflects the internal and external processes involved in the construction and expression of social identities. They argue that social identities, partly an outcome of a person’s self-professed group membership, whether based on race, class, or nationality, are fashioned through consumption (Lamont and Molnár 2002:90). That is, consumption supplies the “cultural tools” required “for the formation of collective identities” (Lamont and Molnár 2002:90).

Consumption also plays an expressive function, an aspect that is key to processes of identity formation and social legitimation. The idea that individuals construct themselves through their consumption, that “you are what you consume,” is argued to be a central characteristic of the post-modern era (2001). Post-modern social theorists, such as Beck, Giddens, and Bauman, assert that consumption is a sphere where people construct their “self-identity” (Warde 1994). That is, “people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display” (Warde 1994:878). Individuality expressed through consumption results in the “choosing self” (Zukin and Maguire 2004: 180). In this way consumption serves a means of “self-cultivation and agency” (McGovern 1998:58) and “fields of consumption commonly espouse ideals of authenticity, freedom from institutional constraints” and “autonomous self-expressiveness”(Arsel and Thompson 2011:5). This literature suggests that consumption is a symbolic tool that people use to articulate their authentic selves and cultivate individuality and distinctiveness. However, there is reason to suspect that this perspective of the function of consumption is ill-suited when applied to blacks. The purpose of

consumption for blacks extends beyond “self-identity” and “self-cultivation,” to include the use of consumption to create images of themselves in opposition to racial stigma and negative stereotypes.

Increasingly consumption has also become a site for ethnic identity construction as a means to express individuality. Historian and American studies scholar Marilyn Halter (2000) argues that in recent decades a trend has emerged where “consumers look to the marketplace to revive and re-identify with ethnic values” (Halter 2000:13). As such people acquire goods that communicate their ethnic identity. Consumption objects that signify their ethnic origins are valuable to the extent that people perceive them as communicating distinctiveness. She argues that while in the past cultural assimilation was demanded of immigrants in order to achieve the American dream, currently ethnic identity, once “a liability has now become an asset.” She finds that middle class consumers are the most likely participants in the trend toward ethnic revivalism (Halter 2000:10), which she argues is decidedly individualistic in orientation.

Consumption objects serve as strong ethnic and racial markers in a collectivistic fashion as well. For example, DeSoucey (2010) argues that consumption preferences and practices with regard to something as simple as what we eat can perform a highly symbolic function; serving as a cultural resource used to construct and reinforce nationalistic narratives. Her research demonstrates that food can be an emotionally charged, symbol affirming a sense of belonging and uniting people around shared practices (think Thanksgiving Turkey). As she notes food is used to “demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment” (DeSoucey 2010:432). She notes that consumption practices that are the target of criticism and opposition in one context, can be regarding in other context as valorized symbols of identity, history, and

culture (DeSoucey 2010:443), implying that consumption objects can signify divergent things to different people, in differing local contexts.

Research has demonstrated that for blacks' consumption is used for the purposes of expressing and affirming one's racial identity, but also as a response to racial alienation (Lamont and Molnár 2001; Banks 2010a, 2010b). Accounts of blacks' divergent consumption as a consequence of status differentials insufficiently addresses the role of consumption in both of these spheres. With regard to expression and affirmation of racial identity via consumption, Bank's (2010) ground breaking study on elite blacks' consumption of black art demonstrates that through their consumption upper-middle class blacks "assert and nourish cultural connections" to other blacks (2010:4). Through their consumption of art, she argues her respondents engage in "black cultivated consumption," demonstrating their racial pride and actualizing their belief in racial uplift by supporting black artists through their purchases. As such, encoded in their consumption are sentiments of racial solidarity. Their acquisitions facilitate the assertion of their membership in the imagined black community, and displays racial pride and racialized tastes and cultural competences.

Research has additionally demonstrated that blacks' maintain race-based preferences, and race-based cultural competences and capacities, which motivate, facilitate, and at times restrict their consumption. DiMaggio and Ostrower's (1990) research reveal racialized preferences instantiated in blacks musical tastes and consumption. They find that while blacks engage in "Euro-American" cultural activities, they are "considerably more likely than comparable whites to attend jazz concerts, watch jazz on television, or report that they enjoy listening to jazz. They are also significantly more likely than whites to report enjoying soul, blues, or rhythm-and-blues music"(DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990:761). They conclude that blacks indicate a proclivity to

engage in both “Euro-American and historically Afro-American art forms” more so than similar positioned whites. They argue that blacks’ “high and undiminished levels of black participation in historically Afro-American art forms,” reflect the fact that blacks’ consumption is a consequence of “the complexity of roles that black Americans, especially those in the middle class, must play” (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990:774). They conclude by arguing that blacks exhibit “a bicultural competence that Americans with more limited role sets need not achieve” (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990:774). DiMaggio and Ostrower’s findings on blacks’ consumption both support and challenge the idea that consumption objects are used to construct identities. While blacks employ goods in the construction of their racial identity, they also indicate culturally flexibility in their consumption, which challenges the idea that goods are used to create identities that are stable across contexts.

Blacks’ requisite “bicultural competence” is partly a consequence of their subordinate social status in the U.S. racial order.<sup>13</sup> Just as racial affinity influences blacks consumption, arguably so too does racial alienation. Sentiments of racial alienation, according to Bobo and Hutchings (1996), range along a continuum from feeling incorporated and entitled to societal resources to feeling completely excluded from such benefits. They argue that feelings of racial alienation are integral to a shared system of beliefs maintained by racial minorities. While affected by individual-level factors, such as familial background, they argue that the collective experience of societal maltreatment is more determinative of the level of racial alienation that exists for any particular group. They find that feelings of racial alienation, which are highest for blacks, increase as blacks’ incomes rise.

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<sup>13</sup> Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch (2012) define the American racial order as “the beliefs, institutions, and practices that organize relationships among the nation's races and ethnicities.”

Just as consumption objects supply blacks with symbolic devices through which they can communicate their racial self-concept, they also provide blacks with a means of responding to racial alienation, triggered by encounters with discriminatory treatment and pervasive racial stigma. Accounts of blacks' consumption emphasizing status considerations are pervasive but they provide only a partial account of blacks' consumption at best. This is most obvious, as they insufficiently address the effect of racial identity and racial discrimination (real and perceived) on blacks' consumption.

### *How Racial Discrimination and Racial Stereotypes Impact Blacks Consumption*

In the post-civil rights movement era discrimination is often anything but explicit. Consequently, blacks must first decipher to what extent a setting is racially hostile or hospitable, and then determine how and when to use consumption objects to gain respect and recognition. Even if whites and blacks maintain the same preferences, the impact of racial discriminatory treatment results in blacks having a differential experience acquiring goods and participating in cultural activities. Racial discrimination and racial hierarchies affect blacks' experience and engagement in the marketplace. As a consequence of racial discrimination cultural participation can impose costs and offer divergent rewards for racial groups. As DiMaggio and Ostrower (1990) argue "discrimination raises costs and reduces potential rewards to blacks" of engaging in consumption (p 764). For example, they argue that "racial exclusion at high-culture events" may "raise costs of attendance and lessen rewards to blacks relative to whites" (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990:757). Austin (1994) also contends that discrimination in the marketplace imposes additional cost on blacks not necessarily conferred in the price. She argues that blacks' experience a forms of exploitation in the marketplace to the extent that they pay the same price for goods but receive poor service and are mistreated (Austin 1994). Blacks' experiences as

consumers are arguably effected not only by the experience of discrimination, but also by the possibility or the expectation that discrimination might occur (Austin 1994). As consequence of their anticipation and response to discrimination blacks' consumption practices cannot be taken to entirely reflect their preferences.

Additionally, racial stereotypes affect how blacks' consumption is interpreted. The status, honor, and prestige goods afford their owners are conditional on the owner's race. Crockett, Grier, and Williams (2003) argue for the limited effectiveness of "status markers" and propose that status markers can be reinterpreted such that they are consistent with racially biased views (Crockett et al. 2003:2). In other words, a high status good may not confer status for blacks in the same ways that it does for whites. For example, a black man driving an expensive car may be coded by police as a drug dealer not a doctor. Racial stereotypes undermine the status function of goods for blacks.

Racial discrimination and stereotypes uniquely affect blacks as consumers and have consequences on the benefit and costs blacks gain from enacting their preferences and engaging in consumption practice. Racism and societal racial hierarchies also impact how blacks' consumption is interpreted. The perception and meaning attached to blacks' use of goods is influenced by their race. Through these means blacks are made distinct as consumers in ways that are not accounted for in arguments that emphasize status considerations.

### **Extending Accounts of Consumption by Seriously Considering Race and Social Context**

Researchers have theorized the importance of consumption for sustaining class relations and reproducing inequality (Veblen 2006; Bourdieu 1984) and have argued for the importance of local conditions for understanding consumption practices (Zukin and Maguire 2004; Halter 2000; Warde 2005). However, to date research has largely ignored the contextually contingent

ways that race influences consumption. I argue that conditions of the social context impact if and how blacks use goods to gain status, to offset racial stigma, to express their racialized tastes and engage in practices that affirm their racial identity, and even, to have fun. Through analyzing the social context in which blacks' enact their consumption preferences and practices it quickly becomes clear that status considerations are just one of many considerations motivating blacks' consumption, and even concerns of status are conditional on the social context.

By analyzing the social contextual determinants of blacks' expressed preferences and enacted practices I integrate several important perspectives on the role of consumption as a type of cultural resource. I build on previously discussed research, (e.g., DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; Banks 2010a, 2010b) that finds that through their consumption blacks express and affirm their racial identity and maintain race-based preferences, while also using goods as status markers to respond to racial alienation. However, I argue that dimensions of the social context additionally determine what goods people make use of or refrain from using.

I offer an analysis of consumption that recognizes that consumption objects are cultural resources that are utilized differently across contexts. This analytic approach is consistent with Swidler's (1986) articulation of culture as a "toolkit." Swidler (1986) argues that cultural resources are amendable to circumstances; that individuals and groups "know how to do different kinds of things in different circumstances" (Swidler 1986:4). Douglas and Isherwood (1996) claim that social pressures and sanctions, often operating at a local level, compel people to buy certain goods and/or refrain from purchasing others. By arguing that the degree that race affects consumption is contingent on the social context, I demonstrate that consumption practices are "readily re-contextualized across new settings" (Holt 1998: 3).



Furthermore, I address the idea that blacks' tastes may be modified in light of discrimination. Due to racial alienation, reinforced through pervasive racial stigma and discriminatory treatment, black consumers face additional pressures and costs when enacting their preferences. Consequently, their consumption practices may be restricted or take on a different meaning than comparable whites. Over time, blacks' preferences may shift as a consequence of the burdens they bear as members of a marginalized group.

*Examining the Social Context: The Means by Which Race Structures Consumption*

I contribute to the literature on consumption and research on non-poor blacks by illustrating that blacks' tastes and dispositions are not fixed and static; rather they are flexible and amendable social circumstances. Race is a product of interaction and informed by social circumstances, but there are costs and benefits to the everyday performance of race. Social circumstances and external conditions impose requirements for the actualization (or concealment) of racialized tastes and consumption practices, and at times requirements for the display (or suppression) of racialized tastes and consumption practices are imposed from within. Depending on the social setting there are different referents and gatekeepers determining what are acceptable and legitimate dispositions. As such, the social context, that is, the conditions and dimensions of social spaces, affect if and how blacks realize their consumption preferences and instrumentally engage in consumption practices. Two dimensions of social space- (1) the perverseness of racial stigma, i. g. the underlying racial and status hierarchies of a social setting and (2) whether a space is public or private -impact of the meaning blacks attach to goods and the ways that they engage in social practices.

Arguably social settings, where blacks encounter high levels of racial stigma, are characterized by low demographic representation of blacks and low levels of intimacy. That is,

majority white public spaces. Public spaces are often characterized by status ambiguity. As such public settings may illicit the use of consumption objects to heighten one's status, especially when race is salient.

While racial stigma is pervasive at a societal level, blacks do not always operate in social settings where their race is salient or where their race elicits experiences of alienation. Social settings that tend to have low or no levels of racial stigma are often private and characterized by blacks being well represented demographically. Furthermore, private spaces tend to be low stakes settings, in contrast to high stakes public settings like workplaces. Majority black social settings are sought out by blacks, middle and working class alike, because they impose fewer restrictions and allow greater freedom of expression. One avenue in which this freedom is experienced is in terms of their consumption preferences and practices. Private spaces in contrast are characterized by greater intimacy and more personal social interactions. They maintain a "home" like quality and are perceived as comfortable and comforting places. Black social spaces afford blacks an opportunity to affirm their racial identity, but also grant them the freedom to be themselves and to have a good time. The function of consumption objects in such spaces is arguably more expressive and experiential. In these spaces blacks interact with other blacks, and those interactions are important in maintaining a "collective conscious" or "collective effervesce." However, in majority black settings, differences, for instance in terms of class and gender, are often highly salient. These settings also have status hierarchies and impose social norms that affect blacks' experiences.

Research has suggested that certain conditions of social settings are likely to be perceived by blacks as racially hostile. That is, places where blacks perceive that they will encounter negative perceptions of their race and subsequent be subject to alienating treatment. Social

settings where blacks are numerically few are more likely to elicit such responses from blacks. Purdie-Vaughns and her colleagues contend, that settings with “low minority representation” and “few individuals from underrepresented groups in positions of power” (2008; 628) often heighten feelings of racial alienation. There are several characteristics of spaces where there are few other blacks that can make settings inhospitable for blacks. Such circumstances are likely to illicit feelings of being a “token” (Kanter 1977) and to generate stereotype threat. Kanter’s theory of proportional representation in the workplace argues that there are social costs to being a “token,” that is, a numerical minority (Yoder 1991). She suggest that as a consequence of being one of few “tokens experience heighten visibly, stereotyping, and isolation from others” (Wingfield 2010:252). Additionally, their evident “differentness” makes them a symbolic representative of their “type” (Kanter 1977; Yoder 1991; Jackson, Thoits, and Taylor 1995). While largely applied to the workplace, the theory of tokenism is relevant to understand blacks’ experiences in other settings; people can experience tokenism in their neighborhoods or while engaging in leisure. Race is also frequently made salient in public spaces where blacks’ status is unknown and where they regularly interact with strangers.

The salience of their race is, however, only part of the story, as not all social settings where blacks are numerically few are perceived as high stakes. Blacks’ consumption is also impacted by the degree that their race consequential for their social and economic prospects. In settings where race is both salient and consequential, blacks may feel more pressure to adjust their practices and employ consumption objects to heighten their status. That is, to use goods to counteract racial stigma. This argument is consistent with work on stereotype threat, which finds that stereotype threat emerges in settings where blacks perceive that performing well is consequential. Settings that are high stakes tend to be less intimate and more public, reflecting

increased opportunity for status confusion, are more likely to demand the display of status and demonstration of adherence to social norms. The higher the stakes, the more likely blacks will use goods instrumentally.

## **Summary**

In the ensuing empirical chapters I present a picture of black consumers that illustrates their agency and avoids treating divergent patterns of consumption as simply evidence of a quest for status. I examine how blacks employ and engage consumption objects in three different social contexts—where they work, live, and play—in order to determine how they use goods to respond to racial stigma and to assert and affirm their racial identity. In each chapter I am not only interested in the function that consumption serves and the symbolic meaning black attach to goods, but also in the extent to which the social contexts determines the relationship between blacks' consumption preferences and practices.

In Chapter three, *Where Blacks Work*, I examine the relative salience of different self-presentation strategies across workplaces that vary in terms of their racial makeup. I find that blacks' preferences and practices with regard to how they dress and style their hair for work, are contingent on the pervasiveness of racial stigma evident in their workplace setting. Blacks report that they encounter racial stigma and experience tokenism when they work in majority white workplaces. By far the most salient strategy was to overcompensate, instantiated in cases where blacks report going above and beyond workplace standards and norms, and this was the strategy blacks tended to adopt when they worked in majority white workplaces. Blacks also report that they conceal and/or modify their performance of racialized preferences in interactions with non-blacks in context where their race is salience and racial stigma is pervasive. In majority white settings blacks' practices with regard to how they dress and style their hair, do not necessarily

reflect a sincere and deeply embedded commitment to particular style; rather, their practices are often necessary adaptations to environmental cues which signal to them that their race is highly salient and consequential for their advancement.

In the Chapter four, *Where Blacks Live*, I demonstrate that blacks maintain race-based preferences and through their practice, they are able to affirm their racial identity. However, here blacks' again are not able to fully realize their preferences as their race and class preferences often emerge as competing interests. Once again illustrating that race, their racial identity in this case, impacts the degree to which their consumption preferences and practices are aligned in their realization.

In final empirical chapter, Chapter five: *Shopping While Black*, I demonstrate that the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in low-stakes, public spaces alters blacks' experiences as consumers, requiring them to adopt a range of strategies including deploying goods instrumentally and abstaining from consumption altogether. The looming threat of discrimination in public spaces often produces an undesirable racial climate for black consumers, which results in enactment of blacks' consumption preferences as being frequently inhibited.

At the onset of this research the primary focus was on developing an account of the impact of race, together with social context, on consumption. Inductive analysis revealed that gender identities were infused with race. As such in each empirical chapter the intersection between race, class, and gender is addressed, substantially strengthening the contribution of this research, as it provides the most extensive investigation of blacks' experiences as consumers to date.

### Chapter 3

#### Where Blacks Live--Rep Your Hood and Your Hood's Rep

##### *How Racial Identity Informs Racial Residential Preferences*

Majority-black neighborhoods are rarely thought of as desirable places to live, let alone prestigious. Research consistently demonstrates that nonblacks often consider predominantly black neighborhoods the *least* desirable of all possible neighborhood options (C. Charles 2006; Shlay and DiGregorio 1985; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996). Even controlling for the income and socioeconomic status of their residents (Krysan 2002; Shlay and DiGregorio 1985; D. R. Harris 1999) and social and structural conditions, such as school quality and level of crime (Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001; John and Bates 1990), majority black neighborhoods are considered unfavorable. Sampson and Raudenbush (2004) find that even when poor physical and social conditions are absent, black neighborhoods are still perceived as low-status, “disreputable areas” (p 319). Blacks, however, diverge from other racial groups in their assessment of majority black neighborhoods, often viewing them favorably (Krysan 2002; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996). In fact, Ellen (2011) finds that minorities “exhibit affirmative preferences for neighborhoods with larger minority representation” (p. 24).

Scholar have argued that where one lives signals one's lifestyle and social position (Holt 1998; Felson 1978). Like the type of car a person drives or the clothes he or she wears, where one lives serves as a proxy that others use to infer one's status. Although the status associated with a neighborhood is reflected in the availability of services and amenities and the socioeconomic status of its residents, I argue that a neighborhood's reputation is also associated with its racial makeup.

In this chapter I treat one's neighborhood as a form of consumption. I draw on literature from the sociology of culture and consumption to illustrate the ways that neighborhood preferences are both connected to and reflective of people's race, class, cultural, and social orientations. I focus my investigation on the symbolic value blacks attach to particular localities and how this reflects their racial identity. Subsequently, I examine how blacks' racial identity is instantiated in their residential preferences. More precisely, I look at how the neighborhoods' symbolic dimensions affect how blacks evaluate them. I suggest that racial identity affects blacks' preferences, in this case with regard to their neighborhood desirability, by examining how middle- and working-class blacks, living in neighborhoods with contrasting racial compositions, think about neighborhood desirability and the meaning they attach to residing in a particular place. I find that the benefits and drawbacks blacks associate with living in a neighborhood vary in accordance with the neighborhood's racial composition. For blacks who live in majority black neighborhoods, living there is an affirmation of their racial identity and affords them highly valued opportunities to interact with other blacks. This underlying preference for black interactions is rooted in racial identity. Race remained relevant for blacks who lived in majority nonblack neighborhoods, although they often did not experience it in a positive way, reporting experiencing the negative social costs associated with tokenism. That is, they report racial prejudice and stereotypes from their neighbors, as well as heightened visibility and social isolation.

This chapter has two objectives that will help advance what we currently know about blacks' racial residential preferences and perceptions of majority black neighborhoods. First, I go beyond claims that economic resources and discrimination are predominant factors that shape blacks' residential outcomes, arguing that culture also informs and motivates blacks' housing

decisions. Second, although the literature on racial residential preferences reveals that “the way people evaluate neighborhoods is strongly shaped by racial considerations” (Ellen 1996:5), the idea that a neighborhood’s racial composition serves as a proxy for an underlying positive, symbolic dimension is largely absent. Research on how race affects evaluations of black neighborhoods usually focuses on negative properties associated with black neighborhoods, such as crime and inferior amenities. For just one example, Harris (1999) states, “racial preferences simply represent a desire to live in areas free of crime, deteriorating buildings, ineffective public schools, and other social ills” and “selecting a ‘good’ environment usually means choosing a predominantly white neighborhood” (p. 464). I offer an alternative perspective on the characteristics that are associated with a neighborhood’s racial makeup. I find that blacks’ evaluations of black neighborhoods are positive when they perceive them to be places that hold a social and symbolic value. Accounting for this symbolic dimension may help explain racial divergence in perceptions of black neighborhoods.

Toward the first point, when it comes to residential patterns, both access to economic resources and discrimination play a leading role in the story of blacks’ residential experiences. Although structural conditions and economic resources do affect blacks’ residential outcomes, it is important not to overplay their importance and conversely reduce black agency, overlooking other factors that motivate their residential preferences.

Blacks negotiate housing decisions in a market where racial residential segregation and discrimination are pervasive. Racial residential segregation persists at high levels in most American cities; Massey and Denton (1989, 1993) have shown that most large U.S. cities remain hypersegregated—segregated across multiple measures of segregation (see also Wilkes and Iceland 2004). Blacks are more segregated than whites, and black segregation levels are



substantially higher than levels for other groups (Emerson et al. 2001:318, 325). Blacks tend to favor neighborhoods with around 50 percent of the population (Charles 2006) neighborhoods that meet the demographic profile of being half black, half non-black, are few and far between (Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor 1999; Farley and Frey 1994). The availability of neighborhoods with different demographic profiles is a product of metropolitan and regional level housing market conditions (Chowder 2002).

Class differences—meaning access to economic capital—also affect residential preferences. For blacks, however, greater access to economic resources does not always result in living in neighborhoods comparable to those of similarly positioned whites. Logan (2002) finds that on average well-to-do blacks, with annual incomes over \$75,000, live in neighborhoods with a higher poverty rate than low-income white households earning less than \$40,000 annually. Logan and Alba (2002) find that even wealthy, college-educated black New Yorkers live in neighborhoods with large minority populations (p. 82). The average black household earning over \$75,000 in New York lives in a neighborhood where the median household income is \$52,560, whereas the average white household earning over \$75,000 lives in a neighborhood where the median household income was \$96,927. Logan and Alba (2002) suggest, “Ghettoization, in terms of living in a largely minority community, is not experienced only by the black underclass” (p. 82).

Additionally, research indicates that noneconomic factors play an important factor in motivating neighborhood selection. For instance, Ellen (2011) finds that higher income households who move into lower income neighborhoods are more likely to have selected their neighborhood for its convenience to family and friends. She argues that for this group, proximity to social ties is more important than other movers.

With regard to the second point, I argue that blacks see black neighborhoods as desirable in part because of the meaning they attach to living there. Living in a black neighborhood is an affirmation of racial identity and affords them valuable opportunities to interact with other blacks. Hunter (1974) finds evidence that blacks conceptualize their neighborhoods as places where they have intimate social interactions and are more likely to feel positively toward the people who live around them. This is an important factor motivating blacks' residential preferences, but also a positive quality associated with majority black neighborhoods, signaled by their racial composition.

Similarly, an all-white neighborhood might serve for blacks as an important signal associated with negative qualities that are not conferred in the level of crime or quality of schools. Blacks' aversion to neighborhoods with a large portion of out-group members, particularly whites, is arguably an effort to avoid being subject to racial prejudice and animosity (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996). Kyrsan (2002) finds that blacks associate undesirable white neighborhoods with histories of racial hostility. And blacks' perception of majority-white neighborhoods as undesirable may reflect anticipation of the alienating experiences associated with tokenism. Cashin (2004) suggests that blacks suffer from "integration exhaustion," and consequently avoid all-white neighborhoods because they maintain a distaste for being one of few blacks. As she describes, "they prefer places that are recognized as being welcoming to blacks and seem less willing than in the past to be integration pioneers and move into neighborhoods that might be hostile to their presence" (p. 9).

In summary, accounts that focus on blacks' residential patterns as being contingent on finances or constrained by segregation and discrimination do not tell the whole story, just as it is insufficient for research to examine a majority black neighborhood's racial composition as a

proxy for negative qualities but overlook positive features. By looking at blacks' residential preferences and subsequent experiences in their neighborhood, this research begins to unravel structural constraints from blacks' underlying preferences. That is, it is possible to analyze blacks' preferences separate from the constraints they face in the marketplace that may or may not inhibit the realization of those preferences in practice. The symbolic and social qualities blacks associate with black neighborhoods, such as racial pride, indicate that they maintain race-based tastes that differentiate them from comparable whites, but also that whites and blacks may differ in how they evaluate the desirability of a majority black neighborhood.

The existing literature on racial residential preferences indicates that there is a gap in the empirical knowledge of how race informs blacks' residential preferences, such that the impact of people's systems of taste and culture have been largely overlooked. I argue that blacks' residential preferences represent a form of embodied cultural capital; they reflect blacks' cultural dispositions and how blacks think about the attributes of neighborhoods that they value. I argue that underlying racial residential preferences are dispositions rooted in racial identity and that the decision of where to live is connected to decisions that blacks make in other consumption spheres.

In framing my discussion, I draw on two distinct literatures to gain insight into what drives blacks' considerations of neighborhood desirability: the literature on culture and the literature on racial residential preferences. The sociology of culture offers a distinct analytic lens with which to examine the symbolic function implicit in housing preferences. The research on racial residential preferences offers theoretical insights with regard to how race impacts people's evaluations of neighborhoods. Both literatures, however, have limitations. For instance, the literature on racial residential preferences has historically understudied how cultural tastes and

preferences influence housing decisions. Nor has the literature on consumer culture thoroughly interrogated neighborhoods as consumption objects, instead presenting arguments of the culture associated with particular localities. This chapter draws from both literatures with the aim of extending and elaborating the discussion of the ways that race-based preferences, rooted in blacks' racial identity, and class-based preferences are indicated in blacks' considerations of neighborhood desirability.

The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows. First, I outline important theoretical insights emerging out of cultural sociology to buttress the argument that neighborhood preferences constitute a form of consumption. I then review key debates in the literature on racial residential preferences. Thereafter, I present my findings. Blacks' residential preferences reflect their racial and cultural sensibilities, in that the meaning and symbolic value that blacks attach to majority black neighborhoods reflect their racial identity. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of this research for future work on racial residential preferences and consumption.

### **Building a Better Framework to Understanding How Racial Identity Informs Racial Residential Preferences**

#### *Symbolic Considerations Underlying Perceptions of Neighborhood Desirability*

Cultural theorists argue that people maintain systems of tastes and preferences and the decision of where to live is not enacted in isolation of these preferences (Bourdieu 2005). Research on the symbolic considerations that affect people's perceptions of neighborhoods reveal that neighborhoods (1) serve as status markers, (2) signify cultural group membership and social identities, and (3) maintain both cognitive and affective dimensions. Like other consumption objects, for its residents and as perceived by outsiders, neighborhoods maintain a symbolic function.

Hunter (1974) argues that people value neighborhoods for what they represent. Living in a particular sort of house, in a particular sort of neighborhood can bestow prestige (Bourdieu 2005:19). People find affluent neighborhoods desirable, in part, because of the status living in such neighborhoods conveys (Hunter 1974). Even features of homes such as size, layout, and granite countertops matter because they are indicators of social position (Schor 1998). Hunter (1974) contends that class and status hierarchies are reinforced in neighborhoods, such that “there is close affinity between social and physical space and social and physical boundaries” (p. 88). He asserts not only that neighborhoods maintain a symbolic dimension, affording social status, but that they can be arranged hierarchically in terms of the social status they impart. He argues that neighborhoods vary in the status associated with them, which can be modified and manipulated.<sup>14</sup> From the perspective of theorists of culture, neighborhoods are important markers of status, fulfilling a competitive function.

A cultural analytical approach also reveals that neighborhoods reflect a person’s lifestyle and tastes. Zukin (2008) argues that neighborhoods can signify their residents’ social identities and group membership. Neighborhoods are indicators of a person’s lifestyle, in part, because they encompass sites of leisure (Hunter 1974; Zukin 2008). Lifestyle amenities factor into peoples’ considerations of neighborhood desirability. For instance, Lamont and Rivera (2012) find that real estate brokers for elite New Yorkers indicate that amenities related to class-based preferences are important in how neighborhoods are perceived and whether they are considered desirable. Ellen (2011) finds that households who place less value on neighborhood services and amenities are more likely to move into neighborhoods with large low-income populations.

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<sup>14</sup> Hunter (1974) evidences this in describing organizations and institutions’ “attempts to symbolically manipulate residents’ conceptions of their local areas” by “redefining boundaries, borrowing a name for a neighboring high prestige area, and changing a name that has acquired a bad connotation” (p 71–72).

Hunter (1974) argues that the symbolic character of a neighborhood is generated from a combination of cognitive and affective dimensions. The cognitive dimension refers to the way a person thinks about and determines what is included in his or her neighborhood, resulting in the “identification *of* his community.” The affective dimension refers to the sentiments and attachments a person has toward the place where he or she lives, resulting in the “identification *with* the community.”

### *Blacks' Racial Residential Preferences*

In the literature on racial residential preferences, there is a debate regarding why and how race matters. Three hypotheses exist to account for racial residential preferences. First, the “in-group preference” hypothesis posits that ethnocentrism underlies racial residential preferences. Second, the “out-group avoidance” hypothesis suggests that race informs residential preferences as racial groups avoid living in neighborhoods with out-group members. Third, the “racial proxy” hypothesis presupposes that race serves as a proxy for nonracial factors, such as a neighborhood’s social and physical condition.

According to the in-group hypothesis, racial residential preferences are a consequence of “neutral ethnocentrism” (Krysan 2002). This hypothesis asserts that people prefer “association and interaction with fellow racial/ethnic group members” (Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001:923). Evidence for this argument is mixed: research indicates that groups maintain a preference for both a significant number of same-race neighbors and some degree of integration. For instance, Charles’s (2000) study of people’s ideal neighborhood composition finds that among all groups there is a preference for racially integrated neighborhoods and simultaneously a preference for neighborhoods in which “in-group representation always exceeded that of any particular out-group” (p. 386). Blacks express less of a preference for same-race neighbors than

whites, but like all other groups (Hispanics, Asians, and whites), blacks' ideal neighborhood would consist of a large contingent of in-group members.

The second hypothesis asserts that racial residential preferences reflect a desire for out-group avoidance. Evidence for this argument is also mixed, indicating that although it is relevant for whites, it does not account for blacks' residential preferences. Research has consistently found that whites' racial prejudice is linked to the expression of out-group avoidance (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Charles 2000) Yet the same is not true for blacks. Zubrinsky and Bobo (1996) indicate that blacks' highest ranked neighborhood would be racially mixed, which is inconsistent with the out-group avoidance hypothesis.

The third hypothesis, the "racial proxy" hypothesis, suggests that the racial composition of a neighborhood affects its perceived desirability because of nonracial factors associated with the race of a neighborhood's residents (Harris 1999, 2003). Harris (1999) argues that if "people prefer affluent, well-educated neighbors, and these traits are more common among whites than blacks" (p. 476), then they will prefer whites for neighbors. Perceived cultural and behavioral differences associated with class are intertwined in this argument. For instance, Patterson (1998) argues that lower class blacks maintain "different views about the public uses of space, different tolerance levels for the public display of sounds, different norms of teenage sexuality, and a much higher rate of crime" (p. 44). Differences in what is perceived as acceptable forms of public engagement indicate middle-class tendencies that are not racial but class-based. This argument suggests that "a rational desire to avoid downward social-class integration, not an aversion to blacks or Latinos per se" is indicated in neighborhood preferences (Charles 2000:394).

The “race-based neighborhood stereotyping” hypothesis suggested by Ellen (1996) proposes that the racial composition of a neighborhood matters because other socioeconomic factors are associated with race. Consequently, whole neighborhoods are stereotyped, and because whites associate majority black neighborhoods with poor neighborhood quality, they avoid moving into them (Ellen 1996). Bobo and Zubrinsky (1996) found no evidence in support of the racial proxy argument. However, Krysan (2002) found that blacks tend to favor neighborhoods with significant proportion of blacks whose residents are middle and upper class (Krysan 2002:528).

Each argument presupposes that different processes are at work, and that there are different pathways by which race matters for neighborhood preferences. The first privileges a desire for in-group inclusion, the second privileges avoidance of out-group members, and the last emphasizes the desire for shared social class character of neighborhoods.

### *Linking Racial Identity and Racial Residential Preferences*

Quantitative studies and survey research has reached no consensus on the effects of ethnocentric attitudes on racial residential preferences (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Charles 2000). Ethnographic research reveals that blacks often seek out black neighborhoods, their racial identity and regard for blacks implicit in their residential choices. Pattillo (2007) argues that blacks are motivated to move into black neighborhoods “out of a sense of racial pride and duty” (p. 3) and with the explicit intention of improving them and giving back. Additionally, Lacy (2007) argues that well-to-do blacks seek out black social spaces, including black neighborhoods, as an expression of racial identity and for the purpose of “black identity formation” (p. 165). Yet survey research indicates limited support for ethnocentric values shaping residential preferences.



These contradictory results maybe a consequence of how survey research measures in-group preferences. For instance, Bobo and Zubrinsky (1996) use a feeling thermometer metric, a scale that examines the degree that individuals' feel "warmly" or "coldly" toward their in-group and various out-groups, to access the relationship between in-group attachment and attitudes about racial integration. They find no statistically significant relationship between people who rate their group more warmly than other groups and people who prefer neighborhoods with large shares of in-group members. Charles (2000) uses linked fate, a concept introduced by Dawson (1994) that posits that an individual's position is affected by the overall group's position, as an indication of ethnocentric preferences in her ordinary least squares regression analysis. She finds no significant support for the relationship between preferences for in-group neighbors and linked fate. She concludes by arguing that people in a multiethnic metropolis prefer multiethnic neighborhoods that are predominantly composed of various out-groups but where their in-group constitutes the largest minority. Although Charles (2000) finds little evidence for ethnocentric preferences as indicated by linked fate measures, she proposes that "measures that tap other aspects of racial identification or in-group attachment" may indicate that ethnocentrism is a significant predictor of racial residential preferences (p. 403).

In an effort to further evaluate the relationship between respondents' racial identity and their racial residential preferences, my research draws on social psychological conceptualizations of racial identity to sensitize us to the ways in which racial identity is manifested. Racial identity refers to the attitudes and beliefs a person maintains concerning the meaning and importance of race and racial group membership has on their self-concept (Sellers et al. 1998). Social survey researchers use multiple metrics to access blacks' racial identity. Sellers and his colleagues (1998) developed the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), which measures

racial identity in terms of both the *importance* and the *meaning* blacks attach to being black. They measure the importance of racial identity in terms of the racial salience—the relative prominence of being black compared to other aspects of a person’s identity—and racial centrality—the degree that race is a core part of a person’s self-concept. The MMRI measures blacks’ attitudes regarding the meaning they attach to being black. This is measured in terms of their racial ideology—their beliefs and attitudes regarding how blacks should act—and racial regard—their affective and evaluative judgment of their race. When taken together these four dimensions—racial salience, centrality, ideology, and regard—form key components of an overarching belief system.

Although I do not apply the categorization proposed by MMRI, I draw on the conceptualization and framework in my analysis, as it spells out features of racial identity that are relevant when examining the relationship between respondents’ racial identity and their preferences.

### **Sample and Setting**

Respondents came from more than 15 different neighborhoods. For the analysis of respondents living in nonblack neighborhoods, I further divided into three subgroups: Eight people who lived in majority white neighborhoods, eight people who lived in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods (together with one respondent who lived in a majority Asian neighborhoods), and two people who lived in neighborhoods that were racially mixed with roughly equal populations of blacks, whites, and Hispanics. I matched neighborhood areas denoted by respondents to neighborhoods as defined by the New York City Department of City Planning. I then categorized the neighborhoods as black if black people constituted the single largest racial group in the area according to the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Census, and categorized all

other neighborhoods as nonblack neighborhoods. I further defined nonblack neighborhoods as predominantly white or predominantly Hispanic on the basis of their racial composition (*see* Table 5 for neighborhood racial demographics).

The sample included 24 respondents who had recently moved to the city, having lived there on average four and a half years; 31 respondents were native New Yorkers, having spent the majority of their lives in the New York Metropolitan area, often with the exception of time spent away for college. Most respondents rented, but 10 respondents owned their homes. The majority of respondents were unmarried and without children; of the 10 respondents who were parents, six had children who lived with them.

**Table 5. Respondents' Specific Neighborhood Racial Demographics**

	Percent Black	Percent White	Percent Hispanic
<b>Black Neighborhoods</b>			
Newark, NJ	49.8	11.6	33.8
Central Harlem (South)	55.9	16.1	22.8
Parkchester, Bronx	42.8	3.7	38.1
Crown Heights, Brooklyn (South)	62.8	25.8	8.6
Bedford–Stuyvesant, Brooklyn	49.1	25.5	21.3
East New York, Brooklyn (part A)	63.6	1.3	29.6
<b>Nonblack Neighborhoods</b>			
<i>Majority White</i>			
Rahway, NJ	30.9	40.3	23.5
Upper East Side	1.1	87.6	4.6
Financial District	3.2	65.4	7.7
East Village	3.9	65.5	12.4
Staten Island	9.45	64.04	7.4
Gramercy	3.3	73.7	13.4
<i>Majority Hispanic Neighborhoods</i>			
Castle Hill, Bronx	37	2	57.8
Pelham Parkway, Bronx	10.7	36.2	39.4
Mt. Eden, Bronx	30.8	10.92	53.5

The strength of using a qualitative approach is that it adds richness and depth to our understanding residential preferences not feasible in survey studies or studies that use experimental designs relying on vignettes with neighborhoods conditions that do not exist or rarely exist in reality. Although there has been progress to improve the measurement of racial residential preferences (see Krysan et al. 2009), detailed accounts of people's preferences are required to develop a richer theoretical framework concerning not just how a person's race and a neighborhood's racial composition affects where people decide to live, but how people actually go about making real housing decisions and enacting actual preferences. This research complements previous analysis by investigating respondents' perceptions of their neighborhood desirability and assessing patterns in their stated preferences. I asked respondents a series of questions about their neighborhood and their experiences living there. Some questions included the following: How did you decide on this neighborhood? What are some of the factors that you took into consideration and that influenced your decision? What does it mean for you to live in this neighborhood?

## **Findings**

Respondents, across the board, report that their neighborhoods are convenient, affordable, and close to social ties, all characteristics that they find appealing. They report that it is important to live close to work or with easy access to public transportation. Additionally, they mention affordability and saving money, although respondents living in black neighborhoods mentioned these factors twice as often as those living in nonblack neighborhoods. Beyond these general responses, clear and discernable patterns emerge among respondents who live in majority black neighborhoods in contrast to those who live in majority nonblack neighborhoods.

### *Perceptions of Neighborhood Desirability for Blacks living in Nonblack Neighborhoods*

Respondents who live in nonblack neighborhoods associate positive attributes with their neighborhoods and perceive their neighborhoods to be “safe” and “decent” places to live. I find that a respondent’s class position shapes the type of nonblack neighborhood they chose. Both middle- and working-class respondents live in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods, whereas almost all respondents who live in majority white neighborhoods are middle class. Respondents’ reports of what they found desirable (if anything) and the nature of their experience in their neighborhood differed when they lived in predominantly white versus predominately Hispanic neighborhoods.

Respondents who live in majority white neighborhoods tend to live in neighborhoods that are largely upper and middle class. These respondents describe their neighborhoods as “wealthy,” “expensive,” and “classy.” They commented that their neighborhoods were known for their boutiques and luxury buildings. Social prestige was a clearly a benefit of living in such neighborhoods. They did not live in poor or working-class white neighborhoods, so it is not unexpected that they associated high status with their neighborhoods. Only one respondent currently residing in a predominantly white neighborhood had grown up in a predominantly black neighborhood; all other respondents had grown up in predominantly white neighborhoods.

Respondents who live in high-status white neighborhoods placed a premium on lifestyle conveniences, indicating that amenities such as parks and parking are important to them. For example, one respondent noted that she likes being near Central Park because it is easy for her to walk her dog. Pets are an important consideration and previous research has demonstrated that being accommodating to pets, and specifically dog friendliness, is frequently reported as an

amenity favored by the elite (Lamont and Rivera 2012). Respondents living in these neighborhoods also mention that easy access to parking is also an important amenity.

Respondents living in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods did not value any particular neighborhood amenity; rather, they live in neighborhoods with or near people they knew or are related to. For instance, Jennifer, a 23-year-old nail technician, reports that she moved into a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in the Bronx because that is where her live-in boyfriend, who is also her son's father, lives. William, a high school teacher and school administrator with a young son who lives in a predominately Hispanic section of the Bronx, rents an apartment upstairs from his aunt. Being close to family was particularly important for this single dad, who finds it reassuring that he can always call on his family. He also notes that he has strong ties to the neighborhood, having grown up there.

Blacks living in nonblack neighborhoods, whether predominantly white or majority Hispanic, also report aspects of their neighborhoods and experiences that they find less than desirable. These respondents commonly report race and ethnic differences that contribute to feelings of social isolation.

Respondents note that they are out of place in their white neighborhoods because of the dearth of racial diversity. They also remark that neighbors have questioned their ability to afford living in the neighborhood, or seemingly maintain and apply stereotypical notions about blacks. Respondents report that they are highly aware of their race, particularly when they first move into nonblack neighborhoods. For instance, Jasmine, a 30-year-old high school teacher who lives on the Upper East Side, reports that she experienced an adjustment period, getting used to her neighborhood and the underlying racial demographics and dynamics evident there. Jasmine remarks that her token status was highly salient early on, as she states:

The first two months I lived here I was very aware that there were little black(s) or Hispanic(s), or there are lot of Asians and a lot of Caucasians... I was kind of curious to see if it was really as little as I was expecting and it was as little, there were like no black people... I'm always aware that something is different and it's me.

Respondents who live in nonblack neighborhoods are not only aware of the racial composition of their neighborhoods, but they often note that there are few people who look like them. The noticeable absence of other blacks is experienced at times as an elusive dimension and at times an alarming feature of the neighborhood. On the subtle end of the spectrum, respondents note that they are cognizant of linguistic differences, which they see as symbolizing group differences. As Christina, a 30-year-old executive administrative assistant, explains why she felt out of place in her neighborhood: "well, it's predominantly Hispanic in the area that I live in, and, you know, they speak a language that I don't understand. Not to say that I can't learn the language. But it, it can be, there have been times where I have felt ostracized."

Respondents who live in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods experienced cultural and ethnic differences, but respondents living in predominantly white neighborhoods, particularly male respondents, report encountering negative racial stereotypes. James, a 39-year-old firefighter, perceives that his neighbors were initially frightened by him. He suspects that his neighbors judged him along stereotypical lines, assuming that because he was a black man he had "probably been in jail, that he didn't graduate from school, that he didn't work, and would have a whole bunch of women coming in and out of his place." It was not until he disclosed in casual conversation that he is a New York City firefighter that these beliefs were disarmed. Being a firefighter assuaged their concerns, reassuring them that "he's safe" because as he rationalizes, "you can't have a criminal record if you work for them [the New York City Fire Department]." Isaiah, a 31-year-old entrepreneur, also reports that his neighbors judged him disapprovingly and questioned how he could afford to live in his high-end, high-rise apartment

building. They were curious too about how he could afford the luxury car he drove. He thinks that underlying these interactions are stereotypical assumptions that because he is a black man he must be involved in criminal pursuits.

Living in nonblack neighborhoods exposes blacks to racially alienating experiences, consistent with the social costs of being a token. They experienced heightened visibility, social isolation, and negative racial stereotypes. But residing in high-status white neighborhoods also meant easy access to amenities and services that fit their class-based taste and preferences, such as parks, parking, and luxury shops. Likewise, living in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods meant being near family and living in a familiar area.

#### *Perceptions of Neighborhood Desirability for Blacks Living in Black Neighborhoods*

Respondents who live in black neighborhoods perceive them to be desirable places to live because, in addition to affordability, convenience, and social ties, they see features of black neighborhoods that allow them to express their racial pride and in-group affinity. This is particularly articulated by middle-class respondents. Several respondents even admit to restricting their housing searches to only include majority black neighborhoods. They frequently mentioned three factors as underlying their preference for living in a neighborhood with a large black population: (1) racial affinity, a positive regard for black people, and an ideological commitment to racial uplift,<sup>15</sup> (2) a sense of community or membership in a collectivity and a desire for social interactions that acknowledge and affirm that membership, and (3) proximity to black cultural and social institutions and commercial establishments that cater to a black clientele or offer a uniquely black cultural product (such as barbershops, African hair braiding salons, soul food restaurants).

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<sup>15</sup> Lacy (2007) discusses blacks' desire and enjoyment of being in the company of other blacks. This is something that has not been fully examined in previous research.



**(1) Racial Affinity and Racial Uplift.** Respondents report that black neighborhoods offer an opportunity to have interactions with other blacks and that such social interactions affirm their sense of being a part of a symbolic black community. Damon, a 29-year-old Ivy League-educated corporate type, notes about living in Harlem :“I liked the vibe, I liked the community, I liked being around this many black people.” Lori, a 28-year-old who works for a nonprofit corporation, also reports that her decision to move to Harlem after living on the Upper West Side was motivated by her desire to “be black in Harlem.” Kendra, a 28-year-old advertising executive, notes that she is suspicious of black people who do not live in black neighborhoods, believing that it is evidence that “you do not love your people.” Her remark, although somewhat flippant, demonstrates that for her, a black person’s neighborhood conveys important information about their racial allegiances and also conveys racial pride.

Interestingly, several middle class respondents see living in a black neighborhood as a reflection of an ideological commitment, maintaining a moral dimension: they consider it part of giving back, part of their duty to uplift the race.<sup>16</sup> Bryson, a Morehouse graduate and corporate attorney, provided a telling example of how the idea of racial uplift serves as an impetus for why he perceives Harlem as a desirable place to live. He comments that he enjoys living in Harlem and moved there “to live around black people, regular black people.” He then explains that he believes it is important for him to live in Harlem, because as he argues “kids don’t really see a lot of professional black people in the neighborhood.” His is compelled by a sense of personal responsibility to live in Harlem and to “stake it out,” serving as a role model for the youth there.

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<sup>16</sup> Gaines (1996) argues that the “uplift the race” ideology was a set of beliefs held by middle class blacks that espouses principles of self-help and regards education as important to group progress. Furthermore, "uplift signified the aspiring black elite's awareness that its destiny was inseparable from that of the masses" (Gaines 1996:21).

**(2) Sense of Community.** Living in a black neighborhood affirms one's racial group membership, both real and imagined. After growing up in a majority white suburb of Washington, DC, attending a majority white college, and working in the advertising industry, which is known for its lack of diversity, Sharon notes that "I always lived around all white people all the time and it's just nice to be around black people... I like waking up in the morning and seeing black people and you know I like people calling me sister." Sharon goes on to state "It's a sense of community to me. A sense of the older, grandma, grandpa people, I literally look at them like grandma, grandpa status. So, like them, even randomly, inviting me over for Easter, giving me ham. That is so, it is just so communal to me." Whether "fictive kin"<sup>17</sup> or real social ties, having daily interactions with other blacks is important, as these interactions constitute an important means of staying connected and a unique benefit that living in a black neighborhood offers.

**(3) Proximity to Black Cultural and Social Institutions.** Living in a black neighborhood means proximity to black cultural institutions, soul food restaurants, churches, historic sites, and other sites of importance. Longstanding black cultural and religious institutions, as well as black-owned businesses, are seen as unique neighborhood asset. As Lori states, "There are a lot of staples here that I am just close to now. Staples like, the black churches that are here, Sylvia's even though I don't like it. You know, Amy Ruths," popular soul food restaurants in Harlem. These respondents' racial residential preferences are tied to the history and culture of the area. Being part of the neighborhood means being connected to a rich history and having access to well-regarded and recognizable black social and cultural institutions,

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<sup>17</sup> Fictive kin is a term used to describe family-like social relationships, "based not on blood or marriage but rather on religious rituals or close friendship ties (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:189).

whether the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture or the Abyssinian Baptist Church.<sup>18</sup> It also means having immediate access to cultural events featuring black cultural producers that cater to black audiences, such as the Dance Africa festival in Brooklyn.<sup>19</sup>

The concentration of commercial services that cater to black clientele and/or are black owned is also seen as a desirable feature of the neighborhood. Many respondents comment that their neighborhoods are great places to shop for highly specialized goods, such as sneakers. Wayne, a 28-year-old advertising salesman at a major television company, comments that although he does not purchase formal apparel in his neighborhood, he thinks that it is a great place to shop for “urban clothes,” which he explains are sneakers and his “fizz,” an urban slang term to describe baseball caps. Respondents also value proximity to barbershops and hair salons and black-owned companies.

It is remarkable that no respondents living in nonblack neighborhoods mentioned valuing the history or culture of the neighborhood or proximity to cultural institutions, even though some of these respondents live in neighborhoods, such as the Upper East Side, with an overwhelming presence of world-famous institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Respondents who live in black neighborhoods note that although they value aspects of their neighborhood, there are also aspects that they find undesirable. First, respondents note that

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<sup>18</sup> Abyssina Baptist Church was established in 1808 as the first black Baptist church in the state of New York. It has been housed in its currently location in Harlem since 1922. For more information see: <http://www.abyssinian.org/about-us/history/>

<sup>19</sup> DanceAfrica is a festival that celebrates African and African Diaspora culture and dance hosted annually by the Brooklyn Academy of Music since 1977. See <http://www.bam.org/view.aspx?pid=408>

black neighborhoods are highly stigmatized among whites and even among some blacks.<sup>20</sup>

Second, black neighborhoods are seen as lacking in resources and plagued by a lack of diversity of vendors. Finally, in these neighborhoods women's gender and men's class status are made salient in everyday experiences and interactions in uncomfortable ways.

**(1) Negative Neighborhood Stigma.** As I discussed earlier, respondents who live in black neighborhoods associate positive attributes with them, but their associations are often dramatically different than what others think about their neighborhoods. As Dawn, a young woman working in a predominantly white industry, notes about what she associates with Harlem as compared to what her coworkers associate with the neighborhood:

Harlem, you know you think of Harlem Renaissance, and so you think black people. That is the biggest thing. So I was excited to come to visit Harlem and definitely, you find all different kinds of black people, which is nice. I grew up in a pretty white community so I didn't really, I didn't really interact that much with black people on a daily basis, outside of black people from my church. But there's like every kind here so that is cool. But then when you go to midtown, when people like coworkers or people in my industry who don't live in Harlem, it has a, it pretty much has a negative connotation, because everybody is like, it is the "hood." You know, "I'm not coming to visit you!" Which is fine.

Dawn's experience is common. So too is the way she responds, which is a conscious decision to not disclose where she lives to people who might think negatively of her neighborhood or her choice to live there. As she goes on to state, "I don't tell many people where I live who aren't like black or cool."

Sharon, who enjoys the simple pleasures her neighborhood affords, such as being addressed as "sister," also notes that her neighborhood has a bad reputation among her white coworkers. As she states, "They associate it with shoot-em-up city, get robbed, get mugged, 'oh my gosh it's far away.' ... They wouldn't come here unless they had some particular business

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<sup>20</sup> Respondents report that other blacks also had negative perceptions of their neighborhood, but these blacks were mostly out-of-town relatives. Peoples' parents, especially young women's parents, had initial concerns, but often respondents report that this changed once they came to visit.

here.” Likewise, Damon reported that, “I think most of them don’t even know [that I live there]. When I say Harlem they just assume probably a bunch of black people and crackheads running around.” Respondents living in black neighborhoods seldom report that others, particularly whites, see their neighborhood in a positive light. They typically respond to negative neighborhood stigma in one of two ways. First, they mount a defense of both their neighborhood and their choice to live there. Second, like Dawn, they simply avoid disclosing where they live to those who might react negatively.

**(2) Lack of Resources and Services.** Another drawback that residents of majority black neighborhoods mention (N=16 out of 32) is that there are few options for leisure or consumption. Respondents describe two dimensions of the lack of retail and services as being problematic: existing services lacked range, breadth, and diversity; and the products available are of poor or inferior quality.

The lack of diversity and poor quality plays itself out in various domains. Respondents frequently mentioned their options for food, which is particularly relevant because eating is an everyday concern. Many respondents comment on both the lack of restaurants and lack of diversity of restaurants. For instance, Vanessa, an independent consultant, is frustrated that there seemed to be fried chicken takeout spots on every other corner, which she called “nutri-cide.” Respondents complain that they often resort to eating in other neighborhoods because there are so few options close to home. As Tasha, an in-house attorney working in the cosmetics industry, notes, “There’s no Thai restaurants here. Like all of the places where, if me and my boyfriend are like let’s go out to eat, we don’t go out to eat in Harlem. If we go somewhere, we go downtown or to Upper West Side.”

They also note that it is difficult to find quality goods and services. For example, many respondents note that grocery stores sell food that is of poor or inferior quality, such as rotten fruit and vegetables or meat of suspect quality. Consequently, many reported traveling outside of their neighborhood to do their grocery shopping.

Residents also complain about the lack of breadth in other retail spheres, such as the type and styles of clothing available for purchase. Lance, a late twenty-something tax preparer, remarks “I don’t shop in my neighborhood anymore because they don’t, they don’t really offer what I want to buy. I mean the only thing I usually would buy in my neighborhood was maybe a fitted hat... Maybe summertime I’ll shop for a white tee to go to a barbeque or some socks.” Beyond basic goods or “urban attire,” he notes that there are few places in his neighborhood where he can find clothing that suits his taste. He went on to remark that for the type of places he likes to go, the clothing sold in his neighborhood is “unacceptable” and would make him feel out of place. As he comments “the clothes that they sell in my neighborhood is for, you know, basically if you were sitting on, if you’re on the corner.” He continues:

There’s no, no Men’s Warehouse’s. You can’t find a trench coat. You can’t find a nice decent coat that you can, you don’t feel uncomfortable going to work in. If I went to work in anything that they sold in the store, of course I’d be the typical black man.

Lance makes clear that his class-based preferences, which reflect what he perceives is necessary to navigate the sites of leisure and the workplace, cannot be satisfied in his neighborhood. What are available are niche products, such as urban attire, which he believes would affirm negative stereotypes about black men as being criminal or idle. Living in a black neighborhood means that respondent have to travel to other areas to actualize middle-class tastes and preferences.

### **(3) Uncomfortable Experiences**

*The Salience of Gender.* Respondents across the board mentioned negative neighborhood stigma and dearth of services, but not all respondents have the same experiences living in black neighborhoods. For women, their gender is routinely made salient in their everyday interactions on the street, experiences that women who lived in white neighborhoods never reported.

Female respondents reported encountering a variety of catcalls, such as “Hey, Baby, hey Mama, let me walk you”; “How you doing, hello, how are you? Can I talk to you for a minute?”; “Ay, yo!”; and “Hey Chocolate, hey sexy, can I talk to you for a second, can I get your number?” This type of street harassment is commonplace, even everyday annoyances, for most female respondents living in black neighborhoods. They often consider these comments harmless and in most instances they do not feel threatened or that their safety is in question. As Alysha, an ambitious 26-year-old financial analyst, explains:

These young groups of boys, they just get a little reckless and it’s just like not so much fearful that they would hurt me but just I’m coming home from work and I’m tired, please don’t try to strike up a conversation with me and keep it going... like you can bet money that you will walk past them somebody’s got something to say!

Women adopt various means of coping. For example, Sharon comments “In the summer time in front of a big group of guys just standing on the corner I could be a little uncomfortable. It’s like operation ‘turn up the iPod’ (laughs).” Several women report using their iPod as a prop, making them seem unavailable for conversation or engagement. Sharon recalls that she strategically listens to her iPod when walking in her neighborhood in order “to drown out any of the comments that might make me feel uncomfortable or I don’t know how to respond to.” Janae, a freelance producer, reveals that class is entangled in her perception of these interactions. She remarks that if the men who catcalled her were dressed differently, then her reaction would be

different. She admits that although she knows it's "harmless" and would like to be more tolerant, she usually "ends up walking the other way." She goes on to explain that "it is a difference in culture in a way. I didn't grow up around it," implying that she did not share in the interactional norms that deems this type of street harassment tolerable because of her class background.

The gendered nature of interactional norms pervasive in black neighborhoods is palpable in female respondents' experiences. These interactions often make them feel uncomfortable, but not uncomfortable enough to consider moving.

*The Salience of Class.* A minority of middle-class respondents note that their class standing caused them some discomfort. Just as with gender, living in a black neighborhood means being exposed to different class-based interactional codes and social norms. Clothing is an important marker of class status in these settings. The role of dress in differentiating black professionals is most evident for men who each day traveled from their majority black neighborhoods to majority white workplaces. They essentially wear their class status on their sleeves. For instance, Damon says that he feels out of place in his neighborhood "When I go to work in the morning... Because I am a black man dressed up going to work... Like you feel the eyes on you. It's like 'It's not Sunday. What you wearing that for? Got your church suit on Tuesday.'"

For Damon a suit and tie, required to demonstrate ambition and ability in the workplace, becomes a marker of class status in black neighborhoods, eliciting an off-putting feeling that he does not belong.

## **Discussion**

Each respondent cites multiple features of their neighborhood that they find desirable. This was not unexpected, given previous research that indicates that people consider a complex



array of factors when deciding on where and what type of house in which to live (Charles 2006; Ellen 2000; Galster 1988). This research, however, brings to light aspects of black neighborhoods that blacks value and also discusses the nature of their experience in their neighborhood. I find that some blacks consider living in a black neighborhood desirable because it affirms aspects of their racial identity, demonstrating that ethnocentric values do affect how blacks evaluate neighborhoods. By living in a black neighborhood blacks can realize certain aspects of their racial identity. They enjoy the company of other blacks and value the opportunity to have casual social interactions daily. Those who are ideologically committed to supporting black-owned and black-serving businesses also have the opportunity to easily patronize them. Institutions that celebrate black culture are close, so residents can easily attend and enjoy their events. These findings suggest that the in-group preference hypothesis needs to be modified to better account for racial identity and these positive racial associations that blacks have with black neighborhoods.

This research finds little direct evidence for the out-group avoidance hypothesis, as respondents did not explicitly state that their preferences were a response to racism or racial hostility. This challenges arguments put forth by Cashin (2004) and Feagin and Sikes (1994), who posit that blacks suffer from “integration exhaustion” and seek respite in black spaces, particularly black neighborhoods. This sentiment was unreported even among respondents who moved into black neighborhoods from nonblack neighborhoods. However, this is not to argue that living in a black neighborhood did not buffer blacks from racially alienating experiences. Rather, I find that feelings of inclusion and positive associations with black culture and interactions with black people serve as pull factors, compelling respondents to live in black neighborhoods out of a sense of duty and racial pride, more so than to avoid racial hostility.

In addition to demonstrating that race-based preferences influence the aspects of neighborhoods that blacks find desirable, the findings also suggest that blacks live in black neighborhoods despite the fact that black neighborhoods are stigmatized and stigmatizing. Black neighborhoods suffer from what Sampson and Raudenbush (2004) classify as “ecological contamination,” the idea that living in a black neighborhood results in its residents being perceived as “possessing the moral liability of the neighborhood itself” (2004:4). Respondents note that to a large degree the negative views of the neighborhood are seen as applicable to them and negative neighborhood stigma is something that they regularly confront, for instance in their interactions with their whites coworkers. Yet the symbolic value attached to living in a black neighborhood, as evidenced by respondents who seek black neighborhoods because of the sense of community and fellowship and because of their racial affinity and commitment to racial uplift, outweighs the negative neighborhood stigma. Despite the fact that these neighborhoods are perceived as low-status by nonblacks, many respondents note that living in a black neighborhood made them feel “comfortable” or “at home.”

The high regard for communal aspects of neighborhood life challenges the argument that middle- and upper-class blacks would prefer prestigious neighborhoods. In fact, many middle-class blacks live in low-status, stigmatized neighborhoods. This preference, to live around and engage with people who look like them, is driven by feelings of racial affinity and high regard for blacks, which are aspects of their racial identity. Of the measures of racial identity identified in the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, respondents living in black neighborhoods indicate a high regard and ideological commitment to blacks. The meaning they attach to being black is reflected in their residential preferences. It is important to note, however, that although living in a black neighborhood enables blacks to actualize certain race-based preferences, their

class-based preferences are often constrained. Similarly, actualizing class-based preferences imposes a racial cost, exposing blacks to the negative experiences predicted by Kanter's theory of tokenism—heightened visibility, racial stereotypes, and social isolation, which translate into uneasiness where they live.

When it comes to housing, many blacks cannot realize their race- and class-oriented tastes simultaneously. This is an important point that the consumption literature has overlooked. Class-based preferences, defined as tastes and preferences that reflect cultural sensibilities and subsequent practices that result from actualizing these tastes, are contingent on and reflect access to economic resources, for instance shopping in high-end boutiques (Schor 1998). Class differences in consumption preferences have been theorized substantially (Veblen 2006; Bourdieu 1984). I define race-based preferences as reflecting cultural sensibilities embedded in group-specific practices and histories, for instance shopping in a black-owned shop or dining at a soul food restaurant.

Working-class respondents' decisions often reflected financial considerations. However, many expressed overwhelmingly negative evaluation and dissatisfaction with living in nonblack neighborhoods, often based on ethnic and cultural terms. This suggests an underlying preference for neighborhoods with a larger presence of blacks, but because of class constraints they are unable to actualize these preferences.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that many middle-class blacks forfeited their class-based preferences for the amenities available in high-status neighborhoods to enact race-based preferences was likely affected by the fact that few respondents (six out of 55) had children who lived with them. The housing choices of households with children reflect the role these families see neighborhoods

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<sup>21</sup> This is similar to the point raised by Krysan (2002), who argues that neighborhood undesirability is an indicator of racial residential preference.

playing in the socialization of their children and mark an important shift in housing needs and considerations of neighborhood desirability (Shapiro 2004; Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001). Households with children have different ideas of what neighborhood conditions are desirable and what they are willing to tolerate. Alternatively, as Ellen (1996) argues “households without children do not directly consume” neighborhood services such as public schools. Because few of my respondents had children, child-related concerns and preferences did not affect their considerations of neighborhood desirability. In some sense they were freer to enact their race-based preferences.

However, previous scholarship would lead us to suspect that despite concerns related specifically to the presence of children in the household, many blacks may continue to prefer to live in a black neighborhood. As Shapiro (2004) says, “young black families are twice as likely to move to predominantly black areas as they are to move to predominantly white areas, unlike whites, who move to predominantly white neighborhoods” (p. 139). Blacks with children might be expected to behave like those in the work of Lacy (2007), who finds that her middle-class black respondents, most with children, preferred to live in black neighborhoods with residents with similar class standing.

Furthermore, while the choices of single adults are likely to differ from black households with children they are important to examine as recent work by Marsh et al. (2008) indicates that these households constitute a significant contingent of the black middle class. Where respondents are in the lifecycle also has implications, as this can affect their racial identity.

These findings indicate that respondents’ racial residential preference is one thing, but their consequent experience in their neighborhood is another. By examining variation among blacks in their residential experiences, this research reveals that class and gender affect blacks’

experiences in their neighborhoods. Blacks' experiences in both black and nonblack neighborhoods were highly gendered. In every neighborhood context, the experience of being a black woman differed from the experience of being a black man. Black women across the class spectrum residing in black neighborhoods reported that they are subject to street harassment. And middle-class black men reported that their professional status is made salient in black neighborhoods. In contrast, both black men and women living in white neighborhoods find that their race is salient, at least initially. However, black men are subject to negative stereotypes. The idea that black men and women experience neighborhoods differently needs to be accounted for in how we think about neighborhood preferences. This research importantly demonstrates that respondents have to reconcile their positive assessment of their neighborhood with negative experiences there.

## **Conclusion**

My overarching argument is that race affects blacks' preferences and practices of consumption. In the case of considerations of neighborhood desirability, it is important to understand that people attach social and symbolic meaning to where they live. I find that blacks who live in black neighborhoods prefer these neighborhoods because living there helps them to feel connected to other blacks. Similarly, blacks who live in upper-class white neighborhoods also report that their neighborhoods maintain a symbolic dimension that contributes to their perceptions of the neighborhood's desirability, as these neighborhoods bestow prestige. In addition to the social and symbolic value residents attach to their neighborhoods, I find that the racial composition of respondents' neighborhoods also affects the experiences and interactions they have there.

The racial composition of the neighborhood affords them experiences of social and symbolic import, and the racial makeup of a neighborhood is related to what respondents perceive are the benefits and drawbacks of living there. The symbolic dimension that neighborhoods maintain importantly influences how residents perceive the neighborhood and to what degree they find their neighborhood desirable. However, neighborhoods afford their residents a distinct set of experiential advantages and disadvantages. The findings of this research illustrate that middle- and working-class blacks maintain both class- and race-based preferences. However, these preferences operate as competing interests, requiring blacks to choose which to actualize. Furthermore, where one lives is a demonstration of certain inclinations and preferences. Middle- and working-class blacks who live to black neighborhoods indicate a preference that is informed by their racial identity. For them, black neighborhoods maintain a symbolic value that can serve to represent their racial affinity. Blacks' willingness to forfeit their class-based preferences may be a consequence of the value they place on being able to maintain and express their racial identity where they live. Black women value this even as living in a black neighborhood means that the salience of their gender will be heightened. In contrast, respondents living in white neighborhoods are able to actualize their class-based preferences. These respondents may have a greater inclination toward high-status goods, and may be willing to pay for prestige. Their preference for prestige and proximity of amenities requires them to be more tolerant of racially isolating experiences, as blacks residing in nonblack neighborhoods, particularly black men living in white neighborhoods, report that race becomes salient in their interactions and experiences in their neighborhoods. It is also important to note that these respondents report that these racially isolating experiences do not persist over time, which may also make them more tolerable.

Although a neighborhood's symbolic function may be an alluring feature, the racial composition importantly influences how they experience it. The racial and class composition of a neighborhood affects the nature of respondents' interactions and the quality of their experiences there. In nonblack neighborhoods, respondents were made aware of their race and ethnicity, but in black neighborhoods class and gender identities became salient, differently affecting black men and black women's everyday experiences.

This research has implications for research on racial residential preferences, as a major weakness of the literature on racial residential preferences is that it does not address the interaction of class, race, and gender. In the future more thorough accounts of blacks' residential preferences must also address their experiences in their neighborhood and account for how their experiences affect their subsequent perceptions of the quality of neighborhoods. Although whites are often free to enact their race- and class-based preferences, blacks often cannot. When race- and class-based inclinations intersect for blacks with regard to their housing preferences, tension often results as their race and class preferences cannot be realized in tandem.

## Chapter 4

### Where Blacks Work – Dressing for Success

#### *Using Goods to Negotiate Race and Racial Stigma in the Workplace*

In 1981, Renee Rogers sued her former employer, American Airlines, for racial discrimination because of a grooming policy that prohibited employees from wearing an all-braided hairstyle. In deciding the case, the federal district court ruled in favor of American Airlines, arguing that the “grooming policy applies equally to members of all races” and that an all-braided hairstyle was not an immutable racial characteristic, worthy of special protection. The court’s decision in *Rogers vs. American Airlines* established a legal precedent that employers could impose rules and lawfully fire employees who failed to comply with regulations of employees’ appearance, particularly prohibiting black hairstyles such as braids, twists, and dreadlocks. More than 30 years later, this case remains the legal standard, demonstrating that blacks are mistaken to think that there are no consequences for failing to conform to workplace codes of self-presentation, which are legally enforceable even when racially biased or insensitive. The *Rogers* case reveals that blacks can be required to modify their racialized taste and preferences for certain styles of self-presentation and personal grooming to meet workplace standards.

In this chapter, I investigate how workplace conditions affect blacks’ self-presentation strategies, analyzing their dress and personal grooming as a form of consumption practice. I look at how blacks’ perceptions of the salience of race at work and workplace cultural norms influence how and if they feel compelled to change their consumption to heighten their status and offset racial stigma. I find that blacks use consumption objects as means of responding to



racial stigma, but to the extent that this is true it is a reflection of both workplace racial makeup and cultural norms.

Across varied occupations and institutions, respondents report adopting three self-presentation strategies in relation to workplace standards: (1) overcompensating and exceeding workplace standards, (2) meeting workplace standards, dressing in ways comparable to their colleagues, or (3) undercompensating and bucking workplace standards. The relative salience of each of these responses was associated with the racial makeup of respondents' workplaces, and also the prominence of their race and the pervasiveness of racial stigma in their workplaces.

In the following section, I review previous research on cultural norms and status hierarchies evident where people work. I discuss both the cultural and racial dimensions of workplace settings, outlining how clothing and grooming standards are important signifiers of race and social rank. I integrate Kanter's theory of tokenism into my discussion, as it outlines how workplace characteristics can affect blacks' experiences of marginalization. Kanter argues that tokens, numerical minorities, experience heightened visibility, negative stereotypes, and social isolation. I argue that in addition to the racial makeup of respondents' workplaces, blacks' perceptions of their workplaces' racial climate, as indicated by their experiences resulting from their token status, affect their self-presentation strategies.

### **Research on Blacks' Experiences at Work**

Research on blacks' workplace experiences indicates that blacks face barriers to full participation and incorporation in organizational life. Ethnographic evidence suggest that for blacks in corporate workplaces, race remains a "persistent issue," their race being "a conspicuous and observable characteristic that often makes them subject a priori to negative consideration and treatment" (Anderson 1999b:9). Research has found that workplaces are highly racialized: race

affects everything from the opportunity structure (Collins 1997) and how people are evaluated (Greenhaus et al. 1990; Kragier and Ford 1985) to feeling norms (Wingfield 2010). Workplace settings are also places where blacks encounter negative racial stereotypes (Bell and Nkomo 2001; Feagin 2006; Wingfield 2010). Skrentny (2012) argues that institutional and organizational cultures maintain and promote particular sets of racial meanings and race is often embedded in workplace status hierarchies.

Theories that account for experiences of social marginalization in workplace settings focus on two dimensions: (1) the demographic composition of the workplace, and (2) the institutional and organizational culture and status hierarchies. Kanter's theory of proportional representation focuses on the former. She describes the social costs and consequences that result from a person's token status in the workplace—a status conferred on members of a group that constitutes less than 15 percent of the workforce (Yoder 1991). The theory argues that “tokens” encounter “performance pressure,” as a consequence of their obvious “differentness” but also because they are the symbolic representatives of their “type” (Kanter 1977; Yoder 1991; Jackson et al. 1995). Being in the numerical minority, tokens experience heightened visibility, negative stereotypes, and social isolation (Wingfield 2010). Additionally, the racial makeup of a workplace has been demonstrated to matter for several outcomes consequential for blacks' career advancement and personal well-being, including job performance and evaluation, work-related stress, social interactions with coworkers, job satisfaction, and even psychological well-being (Jackson et al. 1995; Forman 2003; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999).

The racial makeup of a workplace importantly influences blacks' perception of the racial climate—whether blacks perceive their workplace to be racially hostile or hospitable. Social psychologists indicate that a social settings' racial demographics signal how salient racial stigma

is for blacks in those settings (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008). Purdie-Vaughns and her colleagues suggest that workplaces with “low minority representation” and “few individuals from underrepresented groups in positions of power” (p. 628) elicit feelings of stereotype threat; stereotype threat defined as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (C. M. Steele 1999; 46).

Additionally, interactional and cultural cues that signal the affirmation or devaluation of social identities are embodied in organizational contexts. When negative, these signals can link “judgments, stereotypes, opportunities, restrictions, and treatments” to a person’s racial identity, making their racial identity salient (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008;615). Purdie-Vaughns et al. categorize these signals as “social identity contingencies,” which call attention to a person’s social identity in ways that are positive and affirming or negative and stigmatizing (p. 615). Depending on the type of cues present, social spaces can be read as identity-safe or identity-threatening. Cues can be institutional and ideological or social and interactional, and multiple cues, sometimes contradictory in nature, can operate simultaneously. Particularly relevant for this research are the cultural cues that indicate negative or stigmatizing social identity contingencies. Although Purdie-Vaugh and her colleagues do not specify how environmental cues are a reflection or indication of cultural understandings, research on specific industries suggest that cultural norms embedded in the workplace can serve to advantage certain actors and disadvantage others (Erickson 1996; Turco 2010).

Research has not yet fully elaborated empirically or theoretically the degree to which cultural norms instantiated in workplace settings have a racial dimension. However, research on educational organizations suggest that non-dominant or “black” cultural capital is not universally

valued in “mainstream” social institutions (Carter 2003). Carter defines non-dominant culture capital as:

A set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understandings, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles. Non-dominant cultural capital describes those resources used by lower status individuals to gain “authentic” cultural status positions within their respective communities (Carter 2003:138).

She demonstrates (focusing on an educational context) that cultural codes embedded in institutional and organizational settings can have racial undertones, and that the expression of race-based cultural preferences and practices is conditional on the cultural and interactional cues embedded in the social context. Additionally, Carter’s work illustrates that social contexts affect the degree that blacks engage in and display non-dominant, black cultural capital, particularly as mainstream racial understandings and meanings are often privileged over black cultural competencies and knowledge bases. Although blacks may engage in both mainstream and racialized practices, they may refrain from demonstrating their diverse cultural proclivities in workplace settings where non-dominant cultural capital is undervalued.

Research contending that workplace status hierarchies and processes of exclusion are a product of factors including societal status hierarchies (Roth 2004; C. L. Williams 1992; Yoder 1991; Zimmer 1988) and workplace cultural norms (Turco 2010) have importantly revealed that the demographic composition of the workplace alone is not determinative of workplace experiences of marginalization. In advancing Kanter’s work, research has demonstrated that the negative experiences conferred by a person’s token status are most relevant for “members of social categories that are of lower status relative to the majority” (Alexander and Thoits 1985; Dworkin, Cahfetz, and Dworkin 1986; Yoder 1991). That is, broader societal status hierarchies mitigate the effects of tokenism. For example, Williams (1992) illustrates that men in

predominantly female occupations do not experience the negative social effects of tokenism.

Turco (2010) extends the debate on tokenism to argue that the experience of being a numerical minority does not always result in social isolation. She argues that the negative consequences associated with being a token are “contingent on the local cultural context” in which the token is embedded (2010:895).

Turco significantly extends Kanter’s theory by demonstrating how organizational culture importantly influences the workplace experiences of numerical minorities. She argues that not all tokens experience the same type of treatment in the same settings, because their treatment is conditional on the organizational culture. She finds that although black men and white women would numerically qualify as tokens in the predominantly white male leveraged buyout industry, women experience the effects of tokenism more strongly than do black men because the cultural conditions of the industry favor men. Turco’s work parallels similar arguments illustrating the importance of social relationships and culture in the workplace, and how together both can reinforce class distinctions and perpetuate inequality (see Erickson 1996). However, Turco’s research does not refute Kanter’s claims about experiences of marginalization that result from social distinctiveness, including experiencing heightened visibility, stereotypes, and social isolation. Additionally, her ability to draw decisive conclusions about blacks’ experiences as tokens is limited by the small sample of black professionals included (10 in total) and near exclusion of black women (only one), which she acknowledges affects her findings. Furthermore, although she indicates that gender for women was comparatively more salient than race, she finds evidence that race still affects black men’s perception of their status and their efforts to manage stigma in the workplace.

This chapter builds on work that argues that both the racial makeup and racial climate of an institutional or organizational setting influence blacks' workplace experiences. In response to the salience of race and pervasive racial stigma, members of stigmatized groups are often compelled to engage in practices to reduce the negative effects of stigma, including managing their self-presentation (Lamont and Crystal Marie Fleming 2005). It is particularly important to investigate the dynamics at play at respondents' workplaces, as research has demonstrated the debilitating effects of negative stereotypes are most evident in contexts where people have a vested interest to perform well (C. Steele 2010). Thus the degree to which blacks perceive the stakes for their personal advancement to be high will affect if and how they respond to racial stigma in workplaces.

Yoshino (2006) argues that racial minorities are expected to "tone down" their race at work, and consequently, they enact race in ways that are acceptable and inoffensive to whites. Bell and Bell's (1990) study of black career-oriented women finds that they deal with workplace pressures that result from being severely in the minority by either assimilating, conforming "to the traditions, values, and norms of the dominant white culture," or compartmentalizing their lives by maintaining "rigid boundaries between the white and black life contexts" (Bell and Bell 1990; 462). Carter (2010) suggests that blacks are often more successful when they employ a middle-of-the-road strategy in settings where non-dominant cultural capital is unvalued. She argues that blacks who demonstrate "cultural flexibility" in educational context are able to more effectively navigate "across different cultural and social peer groups and environments" (p. 1529).

The idea that people consciously manipulate culture, drawing on various tools from their cultural "toolkits" (Erickson 1996; Swidler 1986) while at work is not just a function of race and

limited to blacks, but the idea of navigating two racially distinct social worlds with different social norms and requirements may very well be a more pronounced feature of black workers' lives, especially when they work in environments where there are few other blacks.

### *The Significance of Self-Presentation at Work*

Self-presentation both signals and requires embodied cultural capital (knowledge about things and ways of thinking and doing) and objectified cultural capital (physical and material goods). Clothing and personal grooming practices are important markers of both taste and status (Goffman 1959; Bourdieu 1984), and a person's attire can enhance one's perceived status (Veblen 2006). Hair often serves as a racial marker and an embodiment of racial difference. Personal grooming and how one styles one's hair, particularly for blacks, maintain symbolic and cultural weight (Bell 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Craig 2002; Davis 2001; Greene 2011; Yoshino 2006). Looking the part of a working professional, whatever a person's industry may be, requires acquiring material goods such as clothing as well as participating in practices such as shaving and accessorizing.

Getting dressed and grooming oneself constitute quintessential practices, being both coordinated entities (ways of doing things and knowledge about how things are done) and matters of performance (using material goods as props in regularly enacted behaviors). Looking and behaving professionally, indicating an awareness of "business culture," and demonstrating competence require coordinating tasks and mobilizing consumption objects. How one dresses and manages one's personal grooming are also important in the mitigation of racial stigma. What one wears and how one carries oneself can minimize negative perceptions based on stereotypes, facilitate forming social relationships, and counteract social marginalization and exclusion.

In order to address some of the limitations of previous work in revealing how blacks manage their self-presentation as a response to racial stigma, this chapter investigates the experiences of blacks working across industries and in variety of workplaces, focusing on the expression of their consumption preferences evident in how they dress and style their hair. The objective of the analysis is to interrogate how the racial makeup and racial stigma evident in workplaces affect blacks' workplace experiences and their self-presentation strategies. I also discuss how workplace conditions affect how blacks respond to stigma and the degree to which they express and engage in racialized tastes and practices.

### **Methods**

The aim of this chapter is to gauge respondents' subjective perceptions of their workplaces and to examine the relationship between their evaluations of their workplace context and their preferences and practices evident in their styles of dress and grooming. I treat the workplace as a relatively high-stakes social setting, as the evaluation of one's performance at work is consequential for one's mobility prospects. I asked respondents to describe their workplace and their coworkers. I asked about their experiences and interactions at work and also about workplace norms for dress and personal grooming.

Respondents' workplaces were in various industries. I do not focus specifically on one industry or set of occupations, as the aim of this chapter is to determine the effect and relevance of racial makeup and cultural norms on the self-presentation strategies that blacks adopt across a variety of workplaces. However, this is not to underplay the importance of industry- or occupation-specific cultural dictates in shaping workplace interactions. Yet despite the fact that respondents represented a variety of industries and professions, the strategies they adopt in response to workplace norms are evident irrespective of the industries in which they work or the



dictates of their profession with regard to dress. To illustrate this point further, I draw on the example of two firefighters. In comparison to most other occupations, firefighters are required to adhere to rigid standards and have minimal flexibility in work attire, because as public servants they have mandatory uniforms. Moreover, firefighters are required to assist and serve the public, therefore they engage in a great deal of interfacing with the public. Yet even among firefighters, blacks may place more or less emphasis on their self-presentation in comparison to their coworkers and relative to the rules in place. In fact, both firefighters I interviewed exceed workplace standards compared to their colleagues. One firefighter describes his coworkers' appearance as often appearing "half in uniform" and sometimes sloppily dressed even when in uniform. In comparison, he always has his shirt tucked in and his shoes polished. I refer to this example to illustrate that although important, workplace and occupational standards for attire do not determine how blacks dress for work in comparison to their colleagues, which is the focus of this research. Whether workplace standards are rigid or lax, I am interested in the degree that blacks conform to those standards, irrespective of the organizations' dress code or the dictates of their profession.

My sample included respondents who worked in settings that were both predominantly white (N= 32) and predominantly nonwhite (N=21). I used respondents' self-reported descriptions and estimates of their workplace demographics to determine the category they were classified in. There are obvious limitations to using self-report data; for instance, it is difficult to determine the accuracy of respondents' reports. But it would have proved impractical to collect institutional and organizational data on each respondent's place of work. Instead I referred to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (E.E.O.C) statistics, which indicate that

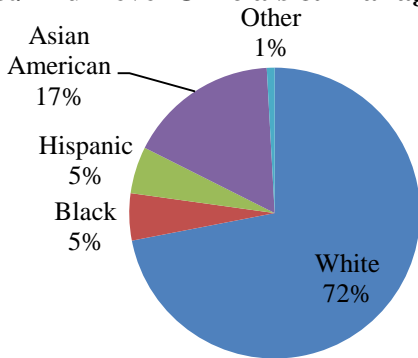
respondents' experiences were relatively consistent with racial statistics for the New York City metropolitan area in various industries.

**Table 6. Respondents' Workplace Demographics (N= 53)**

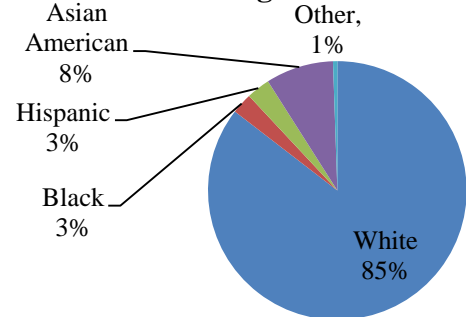
	<b>Predominantly white workplaces (N = 32)</b>	<b>Predominantly nonwhite workplaces (N = 21)</b>
<b>Middle Class (N =42)</b>	28	11
<b>Working Class (N= 14)</b>	4	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	32	21

**Figure 2. Demographic Profiles of Various Occupations, 2010 EEOC, New York Metro.**

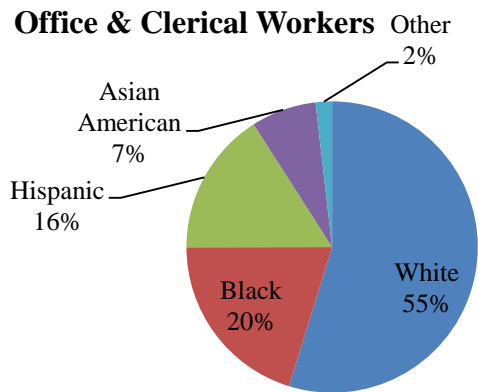
**First/Mid Level Officials & Managers**



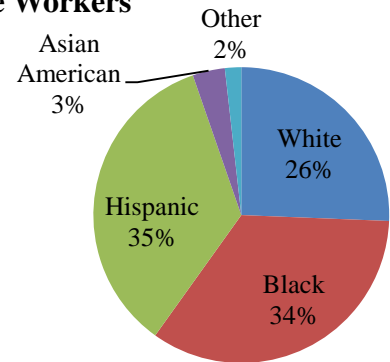
**Executive/Senior Level Officials & Managers**



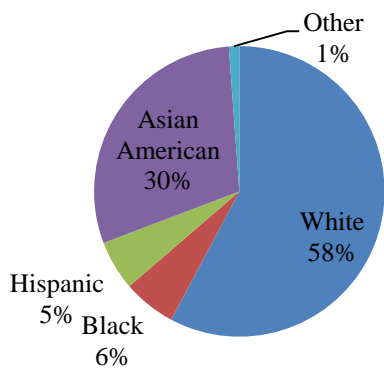
**Office & Clerical Workers**



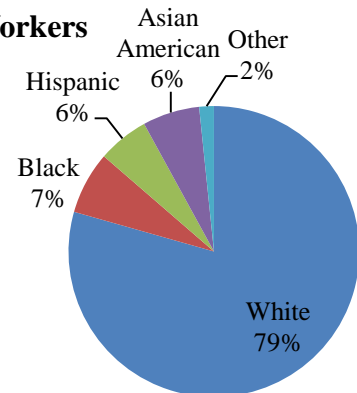
**Service Workers**



**Professionals**

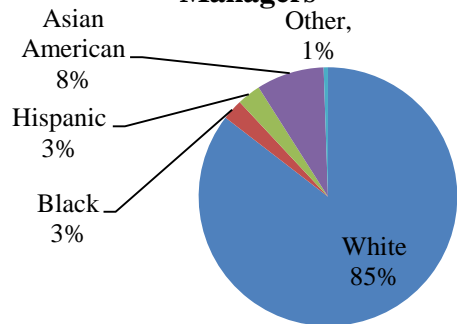


**Sales Workers**

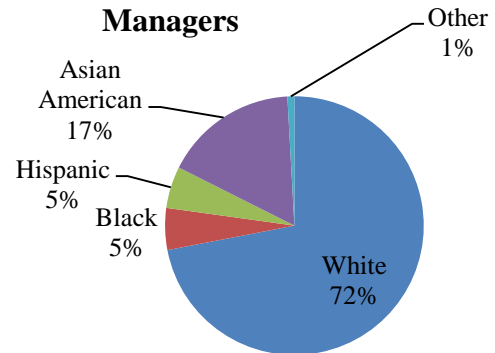


**Figure 2. (Continued) Demographic Profiles of Various Occupations, 2010 EEOC, New York Metro**

**Executive/Senior Level Officials & Managers**



**First/Mid Level Officials & Managers**



*Source:* The figures were created by the author with data from the 2010 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Aggregate Report for NAICS-2 Code by CBSA for the New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA – In the Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services Industries. Available: <http://www1.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/employment/jobpat-eeo1/2010/index.cfm#centercol>

**Findings**

In this section I present an analysis of respondents’ perceptions of their workplaces, discussing the strategies they adopt to manage their self-presentation at work, as well as to what degree they perceive that race is salient and consequential for their self-presentation.

Before delving into the question of how workplace racial makeup and culture influence blacks’ dress and personal grooming standards, it is important to outline the different self-presentation strategies that respondents reported adopting. In response to workplace norms, respondents’ efforts could be classified as **(1) overcompensating**, going above and beyond workplace standards and norms (N = 28), **(2) playing by the book**, meeting workplace standards and managing their appearance in ways that were comparable to their coworkers (N = 16), or **(3) undercompensating**, having the flexibility to do their own thing and indicating greater

adherence to personal standards and preferences than workplace standards or norms (N = 9). By far the most common strategy was to exceed workplace standards and to overcompensate.

I find that respondents' self-presentation strategies are associated with the racial makeup of their workplaces and reflect the degree that respondents experience tokenism and its consequent social costs. Being one of few blacks often elicits experiences of heightened visibility, negative stereotypes, and social isolation, and blacks' experiences as tokens in turn influence their self-presentation strategies. The salience of race and racial stigma also affects respondents' engagement in (or consciously withdrawal from) racialized consumption practices.

#### *The Influence of Racial Makeup of the Workplace on Blacks' Self-Presentation Strategies*

My analysis of respondents' subjective accounts of their workplaces indicates that the racial makeup of their workplaces influences their self-presentation strategies. For the majority of respondents, 28 out of 53, their attire is not simply in accordance with the norms of their occupational setting; rather, they dress and carry themselves to a higher standard. Out of the 28 respondents who adopt the overcompensation strategy, 19, slightly over two thirds, work in majority-white workplaces; in contrast, only two of the nine respondents who felt the most free to dress as they please work in predominantly white workplaces. In the following sections I discuss each strategy—overcompensation, playing it by the book, and undercompensation—as it relates to the racial composition of the workplaces in which they were enacted.

**Overcompensation.** The racial makeup of their workplace influences respondents' self-presentation strategies, as respondents tend to adhere to more stringent, self-imposed standards in workplaces where they are in the numerical minority. Of the 32 respondents who work in majority-white workplaces 21 adopt the strategy of overcompensating. Of the total 28 respondents who adopt the overcompensation strategy, 19 work in majority-white workplaces. A

small fraction of respondents who work predominantly nonwhite environments adopt the strategy of overcompensating (N=9).

Net of the racial composition of their workplace, all respondents in this category were motivated by the idea that if blacks were to succeed they could not be average.

Overcompensating respondents believe that because they are black they need to take measures to exaggerate their competences and professionalism. They do so because they feel that being black they must appear and perform extraordinarily. This is manifested in their perception that blacks, in comparison to non-blacks, have to be “on top of their game,” always well-dressed and well-groomed.

For instance Wayne, a 28-year-old who works in the advertising sales department of a major media company with a workforce that was roughly 50 percent black, remarks that as a black man he feels compelled to achieve near-perfection in his performance and his appearance. His attention to detail in his appearance was evident in his attire the evening I interviewed him. He arrived promptly from work, dressed in a perfectly tailored navy blue suit, a thinly striped white and blue Ralph Lauren dress shirt (which even after a workday had few wrinkles), and perfectly polished shoes. His overall self-presentation was particularly well put together. When I asked if he felt he had to be careful with his behavior and grooming at work, he responded:

Yeah, as a black male, yeah.... You don't ever want to give anyone a reason to just discredit you. Even if that means that you are dressing above and beyond how everyone else is dressing. Even if that means you are taking an extra step in pulling together the presentation or taking an extra step in being creative and going after an untapped market. But I guess that is just part of how I handle my business. Almost to the point of perfection, if that is even possible. You have to put your all into it.

Wayne's comments reveal that even in a diverse workplace, where blacks are overrepresented, the desire to overcompensate may still emerge because it reflects an ideal that blacks must be

exceptional in order to be perceived as credible and professional. Their appearance is one way respondents act on this belief.

Respondents who work in majority-white workplaces, however, further suggest that a double standard exists. Although they feel pressure to be well-dressed, they note that their nonblack coworkers could and often do dress in an average or below average fashion.

Javon, a 32-year-old associate at a private equity firm that employs only two blacks out of more than 100 investment professionals, provides a telling example of this. He notes that he is careful in how he dresses because as he states “I think we [meaning blacks] have to be more proactive.” He notes that his coworkers notice what he wears and according to him they “think I dress better than they do” and “that I pay more attention to it than they do.” When I ask him to elaborate on why his coworkers perceive him as dressing “better,” he explains that he prefers shirts with French cuffs, although that is not the norm at his firm. As he describes, “All of my shirts have cuffs for example. I always wear cufflinks. Some people think that is a bit formal.” But his formal dressing and his belief that blacks have to be “more proactive” in how they dress is a reflection of his fervent belief that “black people have to jump higher, spit farther, run faster.” He views the fact that blacks at his firm are far better credentialed than their white counterparts as further evidence that blacks have to be exceptional while whites can be average.

As he explains:

Javon: All of the black people that have ever worked there have been way more educated. Wwwwaaayyy more prepared than their white counterparts.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Javon: It is because...

Interviewer: Educated meaning the types of schools or the level of education?

Javon: Both. The other black man who is here is also a Harvard MBA. He has a degree in architecture from MIT, a master's degree in architecture from MIT and some other degree. Then myself, and the black man who used to work here, he was a Morehouse undergrad with a MBA from Wharton. Now, none of my bosses, let me think about that, a few of my bosses have MBAs, none of them from top tier schools. One of them from Columbia, so that is not true, one of them Columbia, another from UNC, I think. I guess the point that I'm making is that if you take the credentials of the few black people who have come through here both in the quality of education and the level of education. I have two master's degrees, the other black guy has two masters degrees. I went to Harvard, he went to Harvard. You take that and compare it to the average white professional in the firm and we are VASTLY better educated.

Interviewer: Do you think that matters?

Javon: I think it exhibits the fact that black people have to jump higher, spit farther, run faster.

For Javon, the fact that blacks at his firm have more prestigious credentials affirms his perception that blacks must outperform their white counterparts, an ideal also evident in his self-presentation strategy.

Blacks working in majority-white workplaces, in contrast to those working in majority nonwhite workplaces, indicate a fervent belief that a double standard exist when they compare their self-presentation strategies to those of their nonblack colleagues. Whereas they describe their own clothing as well-tailored, conservative, clean, ironed, and at times formal, they describe their white colleagues as testing the limits by dressing too causally or sloppily, and specifically for women, too provocatively.

William, a 32-year-old, who was one of the only black teachers and administrators at a school staffed by mostly white women, notes that he feels comfortable wearing his hair in cornrows, though he thinks that braids often carry stigma. But he always wears exceptionally "neat" and "nice" looking clothing. He explained that looking "nice" means to "match, be neat, make sure your clothes ain't dirty, make sure your shirt is ironed." He perceives his standard of



dress as different from his white coworkers, who he describes as coming to work wearing “some dingy ass, dirty ass t-shirt, or a sweater with a hole in it. Flip flops.”

Patrick, a 28-year-old analyst at a major investment bank, describes his majority-white office as having a dress code that is “very, very laid back.” He comments that at work “you don’t have to wear a suit, you don’t have to wear a tie. You can wear, you can wear, pretty much a button up shirt, Dockers, they don’t care, or a polo shirt. You know, they wouldn’t care.” Yet he admittedly adheres to a more rigid self-imposed standard, stating “I wouldn’t wear the polo shirt. But I would wear a button up shirt and really nice dress pants, nice shoes. I wouldn’t go that low. Even though a lot of people do it.” He says that blacks have to “look professional all the time” because “at the end of the day you are still black.” As a consequence of his token status, as one of few blacks at his firm, he feels that he must not only adhere to the dress code more stringently than his colleagues, but also adhere to his own self-imposed higher standard. One benefit he reaps from overcompensating with regard to his attire is that he often receives compliments for being so polished. Furthermore, he says that putting together his attire for the day serves both an experiential and an expressive function. For him, being well-dressed is an expression of personal pride, and it’s fun. He says, “I think that it sets me apart from everybody else. Because even at my job now I stand out a lot cause everyone will see me and say ‘Wow, you always wear something nice’ or ‘I like that outfit that you wore yesterday. You know you have a very nice wardrobe.’ It is interesting, it’s cool, it’s fun.” Even though Patrick dresses more formally than his colleagues, as he perceives that blacks must always appear professional, being well put together is simultaneously something that he takes pleasure in, indicating that his consumption practice serves multiple purposes in addition to responding to racial stigma.

Amare, a 30-year-old financial professional working in a majority-white corporate setting, also notes that as a black man, he has to be well-dressed, whereas his colleagues can get away with far more casual attire. As he elaborates:

Amare: I always got to dress professionally, sometimes I don't want to wear a suit, shirt, and tie or things like that but I know that is not going to fly, even though they can do it, I can't do it..

Interviewer: Do they, how do they dress, like in terms of your colleagues?

Amare: Yeah, yeah, yeah, they push the envelope more in terms of casualness. I feel like I can't do that.

Interviewer: What would they wear in comparison?

Amare: Some guys wear like polo shirts. I would never, I would never wear a polo shirt to work. EVER. Hum. Yeah, some guys, take liberties, like, I just can't do that.

Both Amare and Patrick note that being black they feel compelled to dress more formally, in part because they think that whereas it is ok for whites to dress casually, blacks should always be well-dressed.

Alysha, a 26-year-old analyst working at a majority-white investment bank, likewise believes in the importance of being well put together for work. She is adamant about dressing conservatively, refusing to wear anything that might elicit unwanted attention and potentially undermine how her work is perceived, yet she feels that white women can and do "push the limits" in terms of acceptable attire. Although she doesn't think there's pressure from her coworkers, she explains:

Interviewer: Do you feel pressure from your colleagues, or your coworkers to dress a certain way? Or where do you feel that comes from, to not wear anything tight?

Alysha: Honestly, I wouldn't say it is from my colleagues. Because a lot of these young white girls, they push the limits a lot. But I just feel like we have different body types.

Interviewer: Why do you think they can get away with it?

Alysha: One body type, like if you have hips and a behind, I think that's different from when you don't. Like I said I want people talking about my work and not what I look like... I just want things to be a non-issue. I want physical things to be a non-issue. I already am one of the few [black women] on the floor and the last thing I need is to be in some ostentatious color with a low cut and tight.

For Alysha, being that her gender and her race are inseparable, managing the heightened visibility that comes with her token status as a racial minority requires the management of her gender.

Kendra, a 28-year-old account executive at a largely white company, also remarks that she takes extra steps to exceed workplace norms regarding attire, as she states, "I try to dress better on a regular basis." She particular avoids anything tight because as she says "I don't think that is ladylike in a professional setting. That is distracting you from [hearing] what is coming out of my mouth. What is coming out of my mouth should be what is important." In contrast, she feels that her white coworkers are not as concerned about their appearance and that they can also "get away with a lot more" and "may not be called out on it." As black women, Kendra and Alysha indicate that their self-presentation strategies are highly contingent on their gender, but their perception of the importance of dressing conservatively is heightened because of the salience of their race. Being black separates them from white women, as they perceive white women and black women are held to different standards.

Respondents who are the only or one of few blacks where they work tend to exceed workplace norms. However, in both majority-white and majority-nonwhite settings, respondents who routinely dress in ways that go above and beyond formal and informal workplace norms believe that blacks' appearance and performance must be exceptional. The racial composition of the workplace is a significant factor, although not determinative of whether respondents adopt this strategy, as respondents working in white workplaces additionally note that a double

standard exist, such that blacks had to appear polished but whites can appear average without repercussions.

**Playing by the Book: Meeting Workplace Standards.** Respondents in this category tend to dress conservatively and in a fashion comparable to their colleagues, emphasizing adhering to but not exceeding workplace norms about attire. A contingent of 16 respondents adheres to this strategy, 10 of whom work in predominantly white workplaces. There was little divergence among the respondents who choose this strategy. However, one subtle difference emerged with regard to the racial composition of their workplaces: respondents who work in majority-white workplaces perceive that their race is salient and they often take measures to neutralize it. Their self-presentation is one area where they tone down their distinctiveness and indicate conformity. In contrast, the six respondents who adopt this strategy whose workplaces are not majority white do not indicate that their dress serves a race-based purpose, as they just follow the same protocol as everybody else.

For example, Ashlee, who works in a majority-nonwhite department at a major media company, describes how she dresses for work in comparison to her colleagues as “about the same.” In contrast, Shante, a 25-year-old marketing professional who works at a majority-female, majority-white firm, states that “I’m the only black person and that is very common for the industry I work in. So yeah, I try to be, I am extra aware of that, so I just try to blend in as much as possible.” Although both Ashlee and Shante dress comparably to their colleagues, Shante additionally notes that as her race is already salient, her aim is to minimize any additional attention that her dress might attract.

Respondents in this category also note that they determine what is appropriate by observing their colleagues. For example, Kevin, a 27-year-old accountant, one of six blacks in an

office of around 500 people, remarks that he aims to be professional and to meet workplace standards: “I dress to comply with their code, with their professional code.” He calibrates what is appropriate with regard to dress and grooming by observing his white colleagues. For instance, he states that his mustache is OK, because no one has told him it’s inappropriate and several of his white colleagues also have mustaches. Similarly, Crystal, a 29-year-old executive assistant who works for majority-nonwhite firm, notes that she often wears slacks as the dress code is business casual but also wears sneakers too because she does quite a bit of running around. Once she changes into her comfortable shoes, she may continue to wear them even after she returns to her desk. In her assessment of whether this is appropriate, she looks at what her colleagues are wearing. She believes that “it’s not a problem, it’s not an issue” because as she recalls “nobody never brought it to my attention. Many people do it at my job, you know.”

**Undercompensate: Being Free to Be as You Please.** Respondents who undercompensate with regard to their attire do not engage in exhaustive management of their self-presentation. This strategy is infrequently adopted (N= 9), but the respondents who adopt this strategy tend to have workplaces that are majority nonwhite (seven of nine respondents). The respondents in this category who work in predominantly black workplaces note that they are free to dress and style their hair in accordance to their own preferences. For instance, Larry, a research associate at a black cultural center whose employees are predominantly black, laughed when I asked if he ever feels the need to groom himself or keep his hair a certain way for work. He then commented that he had recently grown his hair “really, really high. But that was my choice, I had no problems. You know, no one had any, there aren’t any restrictions as far as that.” Larry also maintains a very lackadaisical attitude with regard to how he dresses for work, as he remarks his only standard is whether what he was wearing is “clean.” His emphasis on

being free to choose is in stark contrast to respondents who engage in overcompensation and indicate that because they are black feel they must dress up.

Kenneth, a 27-year-old who works for a magazine publisher that caters to a black public with a staff that he described as being more than 90 percent black, reports that he feels no pressure whatsoever to dress any sort of way and that rather than managing expectations about how he dresses, at his office “you are essentially just responsible for just doing your job.”

The two respondents who work in majority-white workplaces who adopt this strategy differ from those in majority-nonwhite workplaces in that they emphasize that they did not care about adhering to the standards that exist and are not invested in demonstrating conformity. Damon, a 29-year-old associate in the legal department of a major financial institution that is composed mostly of white women, comments that he does not feel the need to manage his grooming. He wears a beard and acknowledges that is not the norm.

Jada, a 28-year-old marketing manager who until about a month before our meeting was the only black person in her department composed of mostly white women, similarly expresses no need to be conservative in her appearance for work. She describes her workplace as “a very laid-back environment, you can wear jeans, you could dress, you can be yourself.” Despite the laid-back workplace culture she notes that “some of my coworkers are more conservative” in their attire. However, her attitude regarding her self-presentation is more nonchalant: “I wear green fingernail polish. And when I started this job I had a Mohawk, and I wear bright colors. And, you know, my response to them, which I have said, is when my green fingernail polish and my Mohawk stop making you money, and then we could talk.”

### *The Racial Undertones Evident in Workplace Settings and Interactions*

Respondents' dress and grooming practices were influenced by the racial makeup of their workplace. Respondents frequently adopt the strategy of overcompensating in their dress and self-presentation when their workplaces are majority white, whereas respondents who report a freedom to decide for themselves tend to work in majority-nonwhite workplaces. However, there are clearly exceptions, as blacks such as Wayne whose workplace was 50 percent black, also engage in overcompensation, and Jada, whose workplace is nearly exclusively made up of white women, decidedly bucks workplace standards. The racial makeup is an influential factor, but it alone does not account for the strategies that blacks adopt. The salience of race and racial stigma, as indicated in the workplace culture, also affect respondents' self-presentation strategies, and relatedly, their engagement in (or conscious withdrawal from) racialized consumption practices.

The salience of race and racial stigma is associated with the racial makeup of their workplaces, but it is also reinforced through social interactions. As a response to pervasive racial stigma, respondents mobilize consumption objects, as revealed in their self-presentation strategies, but also by their consciously minimizing the display of racialized tastes at work and in their interactions with their white coworkers. Respondents avoid evidencing racialized tastes and preferences, or according to Carter (2003) their "black cultural capital." Instantiating such preferences would amplify the salience of their race and could even elicit negative stereotypes. For example, practices that indicate an affinity for hip hop culture or styles may be seen as discrediting and inconsistent with the professional image blacks construct for themselves at work. But the degree that blacks conceal their race-based cultural proclivities is conditional on the racial climate of their workplace. In settings where race is not salient and racial stigma is not pervasive, respondents do not feel compelled to hide their race-based preferences.

**Workplace Contexts Where Race and Racial Stigma is Salient.** Respondents who work in majority-white workplaces describe their experiences at work as consistent with the indications of tokenism outline by Kanter. As a response to their token status, which they experience at work as heightened visibility, racial prejudice and stereotypes, and social isolation, respondents frequently engage in consumption practices, reflected in their self-presentation strategies to prevent and/or reduce racial alienation.

Blacks are highly conscious of the fact that they are numerically in the minority, and in predominantly white settings they report that their race is not just noticeable but also consequential because of the pervasiveness of racial stigma. In describing their workplaces, respondents whose workplaces are majority white and male reveal that their offices fit the description of a “good old boys network.” They describe their workplaces as being like a fraternity or comparable to the AMC television show *Mad Men*.<sup>22</sup> In addition to being aware of the racial makeup of their workplaces, respondents observe that their white colleagues grew up or currently live in the suburbs and have little experience interacting with blacks in general. Amare describes his coworkers as “middle-aged WASPS” (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants). Kendra talks about a coworker with whom she worked closely on a team project as a representative of “suburban middle America, kind of like he can count all of his black friends on one hand.” Respondents rationalize the management of their self-presentation as necessary because they view their white coworkers’ (and at times clients’) limited interactions with blacks as indications that their colleagues might maintain prejudicial perceptions of them.

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<sup>22</sup> *Mad Men* is an award-winning television series set in an 1960s advertising agency whose racial and gender composition reflects the discriminatory treatment of women and racial minorities consistent with the time period. The firm that is the focus of the show is composed nearly exclusively of white men with white women serving nearly exclusively as secretaries.



Being one of few blacks, there is no hiding race, so blacks in majority-white settings report that they experience heightened visibility. For blacks, responding to the fact that they are obviously different is a burden. Those respondents whose self-presentation style could be described as “playing it by the book” react to their heightened visibility by trying to fit in. For those who adopt the overcompensation strategy, their heightened visibility represents an opportunity as well as a cross to bear. It is a burden to the degree that as a consequence of their heightened visibility they face additional (and often self-imposed) performance pressures. For many this emerges to the degree that they feel, as Kanter (1977) describes, that they are symbolic representatives of their “type.” Respondents substantiate this when they state that as the only black, or one of few, they must represent the entire black race. Relatedly, those who adopt the overcompensation strategy also remark that they cannot make mistakes. Aiming to achieve nearly impossibly high standards surely is burdensome. Yet, respondents who overcompensate also note that they can use their heightened visibility and distinctiveness to their advantage.

Whether maintaining the image of being exceptional or the average Joe, respondents had to also carefully negate any indication that they might be a “typical” black person or engage in behaviors or mannerisms stereotypically associated with blacks. Both respondents who engage in overcompensation and playing by the book report minimizing their race-based tastes and preferences in contexts where race and racial stigma are highly salient. Concealing their race-based inclinations is also a means by which respondents counteract stereotypes and attempt to reduce social isolation by making whites feel comfortable with them.

In general, those who adopt the strategy of playing by the book respond to their heightened visibility by trying to neutralize race and demonstrating conformity to workplace

rules. They prefer to play it safe with their appearance to minimize the degree that their race is noticed.

For respondents who engage in overcompensation, a benefit that comes from being one of few of their type is that they can further distinguish themselves and gain accolades because of the added attention they receive. By overcompensating, respondents signal that they were always prepared. They demonstrate ambition as they report dressing for the job they want, not the job that they have.

Yet for those who engage in overcompensation, being distinctive because of their race often elicited feelings that they must represent the entire black race. Bryson, a corporate attorney, remarks that he is “more aware of being black” and of how he carries himself because he believes that his white coworkers will attribute “what I do to the whole [race of] other black people.” Similarly, Tasha, an in-house attorney working in the cosmetics industry, says she feels that she has to be careful in what she wears to work because she feels that how she is perceived could affect the chances of blacks at her firm in the future. As she explains:

In general being a black woman, I’m careful because I don’t want to be the one to keep them from never hiring another black girl. I want them to be like “she was fabulous”, “she was great,” “we are sorry to see her go.” Because for me at least in the back of my mind you never know how much their perception of you is based on who you are as person, or who you are as, like judgment based on your skin color. So I’m not aggressive, I’m not loud, I’m not confrontational. I’m generally not those things anyway, but I’m also aware, that things that I may not let slide on a personal level, at work I’m just like, its work, I’m going to let that go.

For Robert, a senior associate at majority-white financial institution who works with clients who minimally had liquid assets of over a million dollars and the only black person on his team, his race is salient, affecting how he carries himself at work and also how he thinks about the work he delivers. He feels that he must give 150 percent: “I always go above and beyond to make sure that what I’m delivering is top notch work.” To the degree that he overcompensates with regard

to his dress, it is because as he notes, as a black person “you are a reflection of not just yourself but all of us, all black professionals.” He comments that the same is not true of whites, because “the rules are different” that “if you are white you are not going to be a reflection of all white workers at the firm, but if you are black you certainly can be looked at, and there are [black] people at our firm who are seen as the voice and the face of black employees.”

The idea of being a race representative was also evident in comments made by Jeff, a sales manager at a major insurance company and one of the only blacks in a management position. Jeff likens himself to Jackie Robinson, who had to exhibit exceptional composure in the face of dehumanizing treatment, a consequence of integrating major league baseball. As a result of his role as a race representative, Jeff reports that he and his team, like Robinson, cannot make mistakes. As he states:

If he [Jackie Robinson] was spitting at people who were calling him the N-word, throwing stuff, getting mad at press conferences after the game, yeah, they would have been like “Shut it down,” “No more.” But he had to be quite, he had to take the hits, he had to be docile and be like ok. [So that they would say] “Yeah, look they are not that bad, let them in.” As a team, we have to cross our T’s and dot our I’s ’cause I don’t want anyone, HR, no one saying, oh, coming up with issues about my team.

As the only black manager, he feels pressure to prove himself and thus firmly believes that he should “always have a suit on during business hours” and that it is essential to “go above and beyond” and to “over deliver.”

In addition to heightened visibility, because of their token status blacks who worked in all-white settings frequently reported encountering negative racial stereotypes. Blacks were concerned that negative perceptions about blacks affect how their nonblack coworkers thought about them. For respondents who adopt both the overcompensation and play by the book strategies, how they dress and style their hair is part and parcel of the measures that they take to

counteract negative stereotypes (such as that black men are aggressive and that black women are jezebels) and to prevent social isolation.

Amare, who falls into the overcompensation category, reports wearing perfectly matched attire and shopping almost exclusively at luxury stores and notes that his coworkers recognize his taste for high-end goods. He describes his style as “flashy” and a bit over the top, and as he remarks “you know I do push the envelope, like I do wear a little cuffs, like for instance today,” referring to the red enamel cufflinks that perfectly matched his silk tie decorated with small red squares he wore the day I interviewed him. He states that his colleagues often notice when he wears his Ferragamo shoes and belt. They compliment him: “Oh wow, your stuff must really be expensive or where you buying your clothes from?” But he is also the target of jokes. As he describes, “This one guy, this white guy one time said, ‘your belt should have a party and invite your tie to meet it’” to which he reacted, “So then I thought about it, OK, maybe my tie is a little too short. You know. Let me fix it. You know that is funny, but like, it can hurt your feelings.” For Amare, being well-dressed and wearing high-end brands elicits compliments and teasing, but in both cases it draws attention to things other than negative stereotypes of black men as threatening and aggressive.

When I ask him why his carefully crafted self-presentation matters, he remarks “I don’t want to ever be seen as the overly aggressive black guy. The angry black man or you know like, I don’t want to get stigmatized.” He also manages his emotions while at work in order to prevent being wrongly perceived; as he explains, he tries to “just be low key and never really get too animated, never really too excited, never really raise your voice, because you don’t want that stigma. You know, some of these people have never really dealt with black people before.” He states that his mere presence makes people uncomfortable: “Just the way that they talk around

you, their body movements, like they are uncomfortable. You can just tell. And I know that, like I'm a big guy, I'm a joyful guy. I'm really not that big, I'm only 6 feet tall, 200 pounds. But to a 5 foot 3 inch woman, you can look big and aggressive. You know, so you gotta play it low key." In this instance, Amare refers to his demeanor and composure, but his management of his emotions and overcompensating in terms of his dress are linked to his overarching belief that he must make an effort to not be viewed in a stereotypical fashion. As he states, he just does not want to be "stigmatized."

Additionally, Amare sees his white coworkers' negative perceptions of black men as an important factor he must counteract to prevent social isolation. Consequently, he tones up his taste for expensive labels and tones down his emotions because he perceives that his coworkers have had little interaction with black people. Doing so requires a heightened consciousness and management of self; as he states, "I just know that I have my limitations of what I can do and can say. Where other people would not have to. But I'm ok with that. I work within those boundaries." For Amare, working within the boundaries does not mean being just like everyone else, it means being better dressed than everyone else while also being the opposite of "the aggressive black guy" and "the angry black man."

Respondents indicate that the way they dress is connected to their efforts to form and maintain work-related interactions; by preventing social isolation, they can improve their prospects for future success. For those working in client-based businesses, their appearance was often seen as an important tool they could use to earn their majority-white clients' trust. Darryl, a 28-year-old analyst at a major financial institution who demonstrates overcompensation, thinks it is important to always be well-dressed in order to be prepared for impromptu meetings with clients. His firms' clients were conservative in dress and ideology, and so felt it important that he

also be conservative, at least in appearance. After remarking that he wears a suit and tie every day, he notes “I don’t have to wear a suit and tie every day, I don’t have to wear a blazer every day, but I do it anyway.” He went on to discuss his recent decision to shave off his mustache and goatee. He perceives that doing so will help him appear even more conservative. In accounting for this decision, he explains:

You got to show good face. You never know when you are going to bump into the CEO, number one, and you never know when you are going to have to go talk to clients number two. And you want to be perceived, perception in some ways is reality, so you want to be perceived as the guy that is always prepared always ready to go, he is never sloppy. I’m not afraid to put him in front of a client. He is always dressed.

On the weekend, when Darryl is not at work at his corporate job, he takes on gigs as a hip hop deejay. But he does not discuss this pastime with his white colleagues, because he thinks it might undermine his credibility with his coworkers. Because his weekend pastime is inconsistent with the image he projects at work, he keeps it to himself. While on the weekends he engages his black musical taste and cultural activities, during the workweek he tones up his conformity and projects himself as conservative.

Respondents who work in majority-white workplaces often note that they, like Darryl, maintain a clear division between their professional and their personal lives, because any sensitive or personal information might be perceived more aversively because they are black. For instance, Renee notes that although her Asian colleague talks about her social life, she chooses not to because as a black woman, engaging in certain leisure activities would be perceived negatively. As she explains when asked if she could be herself at work:

Renee: Yeah...I can be myself but I choose not to, you know, I try to separate personal and professional as much as possible.

Interviewer: Why so? Do you feel like that is something that your other coworkers do as well?

Renee: No. (Laughs). Huhm, like my one Asian friend who lives nearby. Like she, she will talk about like her dating life. I, I... I mean she doesn't talk about it with everyone. But she is just very transparent with her personal life and I just choose not to be.

Interviewer: But do you not divulge details because you think it will have a negative ramification or just because you are a private person? What do you think it is?

Renee: I think some of it is that I'm private. But that also not trusting about the workplace, I feel like it could be you know, she is a black woman, and she went to the club on Saturday, whereas one of my nonblack coworkers when they talk about going to the bar, I don't think it is perceived in the same way.

Interviewer: Do you think it is perceived more negatively because you are black?

Renee: Huh, hum. Yeah.

As a consequence of racial stigma, respondents who work in majority-white workplaces demonstrate that their out-of-work consumption preferences are different from the ones they display at work. Whether they engage in overcompensation or playing by the book, blacks who work in majority-white workplaces tend to believe that when they interact with their nonblack colleagues, they should limit the display or engagement of racialized tastes and cultural practices, such as their knowledge of historically black colleges and universities, engagement in black social organizations, experiences living in a black neighborhoods, enjoyment of hip hop, adoption and deployment of expressive interactional and linguistic styles, and display of culturally and racially symbolic hairstyles.

How blacks style their hair, particularly the degree that black women straighten their naturally kinky, curly, and wavy hair, is one area where some blacks modify their racialized preferences to appear more mainstream to whites. Shante, who works at a majority-female, majority-white marketing firm, provides a telling example of this. As the only black woman on

her team, she notes “I just try to blend in as much as possible.” For example, she modifies her hair:

Back when I was in college I wore my hair natural, I had naturally curly, big whatever. Whatever, but I don’t wear my hair like that now. Because that is not completely, that is not really what I see in corporate America. And I notice, even when I was interning, and now that I work, when I wear my hair curly or on the few occasions that I do wear my hair natural, like women in the office are like “Oh, that is different” and then I come back with my hair bone straight, and they are like “Your hair looks so gorgeous today, it’s so great, I love it straight.” I don’t even think they notice what they are saying. So I’m like ok. You love the straight hair what the hell was wrong with my curly hair, you know. But that is something I do.

Vanessa, an independent consultant, notes when it comes to client-facing positions, you have to do whatever it takes to make the client comfortable with you. She explains how one’s hairstyle may affect interactions with potential clients:

They very well may not have a black person working for them that is not their assistant or not the janitor or whatever. And they don’t see black people out in the places they shop, they don’t see them out in the street, they just don’t see black people. If I’m the only black person that you see, humh, and it’s going to make you more comfortable with me if my hair is straight, it’s really nothing you can do. We’re talking about specifically client-based engagements. This is money. I, if you are my client and you need me to look a certain way, you are talking about hundreds of thousands of dollars, I can straighten this [points to her head], how straight do you want it?

Respondents perceive that whites’ unfamiliarity and limited interaction with black people means that whites are unaware and may hold negative views of black culture, for instance as demonstrated in their subtle disapproval of black hair when worn in its natural state. Consequently, blacks often feel compelled to do the extra work to make whites feel comfortable, and in many ways this means conforming to or demonstrating adherence to “mainstream” standards.

Respondents like Vanessa want whites who they interact with at work—whether supervisors, clients, or coworkers—to feel comfortable with them and to not question their competence on the basis of their race or their race-based preferences.



Lisa and Sharon note that they have worn their hair in braids before but would not do so while at work or for an interview. Lisa, a 32-year-old managing partner of a successful startup, says “I’ve had braids in my life. I’ve never had braids in my corporate life.” Part of the rationale is that braids may be seen as unprofessional and elicit stereotypes, as they are viewed negatively as a political statement of nonconformity. Sharon, an advertising professional, explains why she felt that she needed to get rid of her braids when she was preparing for job interviews: “I was thinking that I might look too quote unquote ‘ethnic’ and angry black woman, black power-esque.”

Brittany, a 28-year-old attorney who works for a majority-white corporate law firm, was one of the only respondents in majority-white workplace who wore an Afro hairstyle. She remarks that her hairstyle increases the salience of her race, making her stand out even more: “my hair already makes a statement, I think I already stand out. One I’m black, two I have a little Afro. So I think, I’m noticed and noticeable and I stand out.” She adopts the play by the book strategy and adheres to the office dress code, because as she describes “I mean I have a little Afro [laughs]. I don’t think that is as, I don’t think that is as normal, I guess in the workforce amongst black women,” thus she takes extra steps to dress like everyone else because her Afro hairstyle is so distinctive.

Hair is an important racial signifier, and various hairstyles widely adopted by blacks are imbued with racial meaning. As such, a hairstyle can be an important means through which blacks illustrate their willingness to modify their racialized taste at or for work. Workplace norms are highly racialized, reflected in the degree that blacks perceive wearing their hair in its natural state, unstraightened, or in styles such as braids, locks, or twists to be against the norm. To a large extent Sharon, Lisa, and Vanessa, feel compelled to modify their personal hair

preferences in order to minimize the salience of their race at work. They perceive that by doing so they will make their white superiors, coworkers, and clients feel more comfortable with them, as they signal their ability or willingness to assimilate to racially coded workplace standards.

For most blacks working in predominantly white workplaces, their interactions with black coworkers, irrespective of their status (whether their superiors, colleagues, or subordinates) were often perceived as vastly different in character from those with whites because it was not seen as stigmatizing to display black cultural capital and to express and enact their racialized tastes. Moreover, respondents drew on shared beliefs about racial pride and uplift to forge ties with other blacks at work. As Paul, a strategist for a major health insurance company, notes “we all know each other, we don’t all hang out, but definitely, we are definitely are aware and try to help out each other a little bit more. We just lean on each other.” Renee notes of her black colleagues, even subordinates, that “we are all in this together.” Respondents’ relationships with other blacks were beneficial because they were a means to gather information and strategies for action and also because they provided social support. In essence, nondominant cultural capital and shared ideological commitments among blacks functioned to facilitate “coordination” with other blacks at work and also mitigated the negative effects of tokenism.

Several respondents indicated that they shared with other blacks an ideological commitment to racial uplift and race pride, a belief that was realized in their special efforts to help other blacks succeed. Many black professionals noted that they benefited from the mentorship and support of blacks in positions of influence or themselves served as a mentor to junior-level colleagues. They discussed strategies for being successful in a predominantly white workplace, including the do’s and don’ts of what to wear and how to engage with white coworkers and superiors. Their self-presentation strategies were a reflection of the information

they gained through interacting with more advanced blacks. Blacks mentors and higher status colleges provide importance guidance for other blacks in majority-white settings. Black cultural capital—being able to relate to other blacks—facilitates the cultivation of critical ties to other blacks. Access to black workplace social networks was an important means of being alerted to workplace norms, and it also influenced the strategies blacks adopted.

As a consequence of mobilizing their nondominant cultural capital and drawing on shared understandings, respondents reported having interactions with blacks that were more intimate and personal. Many respondents noted that they discussed personal matters with a greater frequency with their black coworkers and often considered their black colleagues to be friends, hanging out with each other outside of work and at each other's homes. In terms of how they engaged with other blacks who worked in support or administrative positions, they noted that often received special treatment or felt that blacks working in those positions were proud of them. Although Amare notes that he feels compelled to make his white coworkers feel comfortable with him, he feels that the support staff see him as “a brother doing it.” In this regard, interactions with black coworkers also provided them with relief from maintaining a picture-perfect polished workplace front.

Although respondents' relationships with their black coworkers were often defined by the sharing of information and social support, they were at times defined by social distancing. A minority of respondents reported that they tended to avoid engaging with black subordinates. This process was evident from both sides of the coin. Respondents who had more conflict-ridden relationships with black subordinates often noted that they perceived that their black subordinates thought they were uppity. Jeff notes that a clique composed of black administrative

assistants, mailroom attendants, and security guards perceive him as “bourgeois, acting white. Not keeping it real.” Consequently, he avoided mingling with the “black clique.”

**Workplaces Where Race Is Not Salient.** When blacks work in environments that are majority nonwhite, racial undertones concerning their dress and behavior are not salient. Respondents whose workplaces were majority nonwhite were the most likely to indicate that their self-presentation caused no problems for their ability to forge ties with coworkers and to move up the organizational ranks. To the extent that they emphasized their self-presentation, they did so to convey authority and gain respect.

For instance, Heather, who works at a large government office and supervises a staff of largely black and Hispanic women, notes that she maintains a certain appearance to distinguish herself as an authority figure. She explains that she “always” feels like she has to be careful about her dress and self-presentation “because I’m young, you know? It’s—I may be putting it more—putting more on me than they are, but wanting them to not think of me as their child or their homegirl all the time, though I’m cool. But taking me seriously and [as a] professional.” Heather maintained a professional front not because of racial stigma or as part of an effort to counteract pervasive stereotypes, but to maintain boundaries with those whom she supervised.

Similarly, Brandon, who works as a store manager at a national chain’s flagship store and supervises a largely minority staff, explains that he tries to avoid wearing casual footwear in order to distance himself from the sales associates who he manages. As he describes:

Brandon: I try not to wear sneakers. I mean, our days are very, are very long. I work minimally nine hours a day, and it’s walking around a huge store all day, and that gets a little, you know, a little hard on your feet, but I wear like loafers or comfortable shoes. I think that that-

Interviewer: And why not sneakers?

Brandon: Well, managers really get frowned upon when they wear sneakers. Some of them do, but you typically want to, want to set yourself aside from associates, so-

Interviewer: Why do you think that's important to set yourself aside from the associates?

Brandon: Well, so they, first of all, so they have something to attain to. They can look at managers and be like, all right, that's, they're professionals, they're a little bit different. Also, you don't want them to feel like they're on your level as far as the, the talk, the respect level, where you want them to have a little bit of respect for you, I guess.

Even though Brandon dresses to distinguish himself from his staff, he does not impose rigid boundaries to completely separate his personal life from his professional life. Unlike those who work in settings where race and racial stigma are highly salient, he describes times when he has dropped by his workplace even though he is off the clock: "I've come to work in street clothes sometimes, like when I'm off and I have to do things, I come in street clothes." He notes that it is not an issue that his employees have seen him dressed in urban attire. For Heather and Brandon, workplace status hierarchies are reinforced by workplace dress norms. As supervisors, Brandon and Heather aim to project seriousness and to garner respect, but this is not related to racial stigma.

For blacks, the display of preferences and engagement in practices that constitute black cultural capital heightens the salience of their race. As such, respondents report modifying their black cultural proclivities or kept mum about their taste for black culture while at work as one response to cultural cues evident in the workplace. The degree to which blacks express cultural competences or mobilize their racialized preferences was associated with the racial makeup of their workplaces. For instance, most respondents concealed their race-based tastes, for instance to wear their hair curly or in braids, because it might be detrimental for their career advancement, illustrating that workplace cultural norms have a racial dimension. The salience of race and

pervasiveness of stigma are also indicated in workplace cultural norms that are racially imbued. These contextual conditions together influence the degree that blacks engage their racialized preferences at work.

## **Discussion**

Irrespective of the dress codes in place, slightly over half of all respondents emphasized exceeding norms in comparison to their nonblack coworkers. I find that the racial composition of the social context affects if and how they engage in consumption practices as a reaction to the salience of race and racial stigma. Blacks report that they use goods strategically and engage in consumption in response to negative social costs imposed by their token status.

Respondents maintained the idea that their race will serve as a proxy for their abilities and potential. Consequently, over half of all respondents aimed to be better dressed than their nonblack colleagues. When respondents dress more formally and conservatively than colleagues, they display behaviors symptomatic of what Shelby Coffey, the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, calls the “Jackie Robinson syndrome.” Named after the famed first black Major League Baseball player of the modern era, the Jackie Robinson syndrome describes the perception that a double standard exists in which blacks must be “superstars—superior performers—while whites are held to a more average standard” (Shaw 1990). To the extent that they were successful in being seen as exceptional, they attempted to use their distinctiveness to their advantage, to signal ambition and preparedness. However, the strategy of overcompensating also burdened respondents with the tasks of counteracting negative stereotypes, being representatives for their entire race, and feeling pressure to appear and perform at peak levels at all times. Playing by the book, abiding stringently by workplace dress codes with the aim of neutralizing their race particularly when interacting with their white colleagues, was also a means of responding to racial stigma.

Although overcompensation often demands that blacks divorce their personal lives from their work lives to manage their colleagues' perception of them, blacks in more diverse workplaces saw the separation of personal from professional as a means of distinguishing themselves from the people who worked with or under them, not necessarily because of black stereotypes or negative perceptions of black cultural sensibilities. Adopting the overcompensation strategy may cost more and require more diligence and upkeep, but it is also a source of pleasure and can be advantageous. This illustrates that blacks' consumption practices can serve multiple functions simultaneously, even when they are oriented toward minimizing racial stigma. In contrast, blacks who adopted the strategy of overcompensating who worked in majority nonwhite workplaces consciously crafted a specific workplace persona, but the image of themselves that they projected was unrelated to racial stigma and more a reflection of their desire to signal ambition and/or authority.

In only a minority of cases did individuals feel free to be themselves or to loosely conform to professional standards. In most of these cases, blacks worked in majority-nonwhite environments where race was not salient nor was racial stigma pervasive. It is not completely clear what underlies the two respondents who adopt this strategy who work in majority-white workplaces where their race is highly salient. One possible account is that when blacks perceive themselves as having equal or superior status, then they take greater liberties without concern for negative repercussions. For instance, Damon, who attended one of the most prestigious private high schools in a New York City and then attained a degree from an Ivy League university, notes that some of his mostly white female colleagues lack a college education. He describes them in class-loaded terms as "older versions of the people on *Jersey Shore*." He perceives his coworkers as being low status because of their education and class position. Although this is an outlier, it

provides an interesting example of how the underlying status dynamics evident in his workplace may have helped him feel that he could loosely abide by the dress code. That is, given that Damon's educational credentials surpassed his colleagues in both absolute level and prestige, he felt little need to demonstrate or improve his social status by stringently managing his self-presentation or abiding by workplace rules.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I find that a clear pattern emerged in blacks' practices: their dress and self-presentation were shaped by the demographic composition of their workplaces. In majority-white, majority-male workplaces, blacks' self-presentation strategies function largely as a response to their low-status, token position. In short, respondents engage in an assortment of practices to indicate both their knowledge of embodied cultural capital and adherence to the cultural norms of their workplaces. They consciously do so to minimize the social costs imposed by racial stigma and to gain respect. Consumption objects become a means of gaining social legitimacy. In contrast, respondents in predominantly nonwhite workplaces report a greater sense of freedom to decide for themselves how to dress and style their hair. Although respondents across the board emphasize the importance of "being professional," evidencing their espousal of what Erickson (1996) calls a "business culture" (Erickson 1996:221), blacks working in majority-nonwhite settings report that they have a wide range of options for their attire and hairstyle without fear of reprisal.

Respondents noted that they engaged in presentational strategies to appear approachable and to avoid social isolation at work. They do not want to be closed out of opportunities to develop social ties with gatekeepers and power brokers, and they believed that adhering to standards of dress and grooming was an important means of demonstrating their cultural



conformity and negating perceptions of their “differentness.” Respondents indicate that even the content and nature of their conversations with their black coworkers is different than it is with their white colleagues, revealing that blacks refrain from indicating a preference for black cultural competencies around whites. But they also demonstrate the importance of black cultural capital in forming and maintaining relationships with blacks at their workplaces. These relationships are an important way that blacks learn about informal workplace norms and what is and is not appropriate.

Meritocratic workplaces are undermined when blacks perceive that they will be evaluated first on the basis of how they look and perceive that a double standard exists such that they must appear and perform exceptionally but whites can be average. Furthermore, evidence that blacks modify their racialized preferences and tastes in order to seem more approachable or acceptable to whites indicates that blacks have been “permitted entrance, but not full participation” (Zimmer 1988: 65) in majority-white workplaces. Yet the racial makeup and the pervasiveness of racial stigma are central dimensions of workplaces that affect blacks’ workplace experiences and how they adapt to their particular workplace. These contextual conditions determine the extent that blacks maintain separate bi-cultural lives, concealing their diverse tastes, personal dispositions, and styles at work while maintaining them in other spheres of life. This illustrates that there are constraints that restrict blacks from realizing their preferences in the practices they adopt as a consequence of their race. This has implications for research that attempts to account for the relationship between consumption preferences and practices. It indicates that race and social context are mitigating factors that influence the degree that consumption practices reflect consumption preferences.

## Chapter 5

### Shopping While Black in a Consumer Republic

#### *Discriminatory Treatment of Blacks Who Are Trying to Spend Their Money*

The belief that all people are entitled to “equal treatment for equal dollars,” is integral to life in the consumer republic that is the United States (Williams, Harris, and Henderson 2006). As such, every American, regardless of race and class, is presumed to have the right to consume without restriction. The nature of this widespread cultural frame heightens the importance of examining blacks’ experiences of racism in retail and leisure settings. As blacks’ ability to freely engage in the public sphere, particularly to perform the role of consumers, is connected to notions of their citizenship (Cohen 2003; Weems 1998), the degree to which blacks can freely engage in the marketplace is indicative of the degree to which they are included (or excluded) from American society more generally.

In this chapter I examine blacks’ experiences as consumers. To ground my discussion of blacks’ particular experiences within a society characterized a proclivity to consume, I begin with a broad overview of the rise of the so-called the consumer republic and provide a brief review of the historical conditions that impact consumption on a national level in the United states. I then examine how blacks have used consumption as a means to protest racial inequality and injustice. Subsequently, I review the literature on racism in retail settings and other public spaces where blacks spend their money, and I examine previous research that documents and describes blacks’ responses to discrimination in retail settings, including ethnographic studies. I draw upon both empirical and theoretical work to inform my investigation, while engaging in an inductive analysis of the qualitative data I collected in order to arrive at a more comprehensive framework for understanding blacks’ experiences at the point of purchase.

The final section of the chapter I examine respondents' experiences of "shopping while black." I found that while blacks experience discrimination in a wide range of establishments, high-end apparel stores were cited most frequently as hot spots of discriminatory treatment. In most instances treatment was subtle and consisted of being subject to stereotypes: that respondents were likely to shoplift or that they had no money to spend and therefore were not worthy of assistance. In combination with or as a consequence of these negative perceptions, respondents reported being ignored or receiving poor service.

In response to discrimination in retail settings respondents reported engaging in a number of strategies, including (1) leaving the store, (2) proving they were customers worthy of service, and (3) speaking out and up when they felt they had been treated unfairly. I systematically examine of patterns of responses across respondents to address how race, class, and gender together affected the types of discriminatory treatment faced by respondents' and the responses they adopted. I conclude by discussing the implications of racial discrimination in retail settings and argue that race remains salient in blacks' experiences as consumers. I also discuss what can be learned more broadly about the management of racial stigma from blacks' lived experiences as consumers.

## **Background**

In her detailed historical account of this transition historian Lizabeth Cohen (2003) argues two central conceptions of consumers competed. The first, the *citizen consumer*, called for the enactment of public policies that would protect consumers and limit the power of corporations (Cohen 2003). Government was seen as an important intermediary that had the power to restrict unfair pricing, prohibit the sale of dangerous or substandard products, and outlaw misleading advertising (Cohen 2003). The second, the *purchaser consumer*, asserts that

the role was to exercise one's purchasing power, thereby contributing to the growth and expansion of society. Tied to this idea were the beliefs that every person's well-being could be measured by their ability to procure a certain lifestyle and that equality of access to consumer goods associated with a middle-class lifestyle was essential to achieving and maintaining democracy (Cohen 2003). Cohen argues that, of these two ideological frames, the purchaser consumer eventually won out resulting in the emergence of a "consumer republic" (Cohen 2003).

While equal access to consumer goods is rarely considered by scholars of inequality to be a means of accessing social parity a means of accessing social parity, the equation of social equality with a person's ability to spend money without restriction is a widely shared American value (McGovern 1998; Cohen 2003). Lipsitz argues that the federal government between the late 1940's and early 1950's took a proactive role to encourage (and at times subsidize) household consumption, further supporting for the association between consumption and one's rights and entitlements as a citizen--namely that "democratic access to consumer goods implied a broader democracy of life chances" (1998, p 134). Not only was money held to be a great equalizer, but full inclusion in American society was indicated by the acquisition of material objects. As historian Charles McGovern notes, the "advent of the consumer society" meant the American people began to "equate the consumer with the citizen, a consumer standard of living with democracy, and the full participation in such an economy of spending and accumulation with being an American" (1998:37). McGovern argues that the association of citizenship and one's right to vote, with a person's right to choose what to purchase, was partly a consequence of the work of advertising industry, whose efforts by the 1930's served to link "ideas of freedom, sovereignty, and rights with consumption" (1998:46). He finds that a "major thread of the political language of advertising was its equation of democracy and social equality" and that

consumption was used as both “a symbol of American social democracy and the engine of social equality” (p 46).

As American society emerged as a consumer republic, blacks utilized societal narratives about the role of the consumer to protest racial inequality, according to Cohen, who explains how the idea of the citizen consumer was elicited by blacks when they demanded opportunities for economic advancement and fair treatment (Cohen 2003). On a collective level black communities used their purchasing power for political ends, boycotting stores, movie theaters, and other public venues that maintained discriminatory policies (Cohen 2003), and they called on fellow blacks to “withhold the dollar to make the white man holler” (Kusmer and Trotter 2009:364) and developed the catch phrase “don’t buy where you can’t work” (Weems 1998:57; Cohen 2003:174). As early as the 1930’s blacks insisted that local retailers, who received black patronage, not only treat blacks with respect but also create economic opportunities for blacks in the way of jobs (Weems 1998).

The rise of the second wave consumer movement, that of the purchaser consumer, allowed blacks to make a new set of demands. With the passage of legislation on both a local and national level outlawing segregation and making discriminatory treatment in public places illegal, blacks were free from Jim Crow era policies that restricted their right to consume. As Title II, Section 201, of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, reads:

All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation, as defined in this section, without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin (Weems 1998:69).

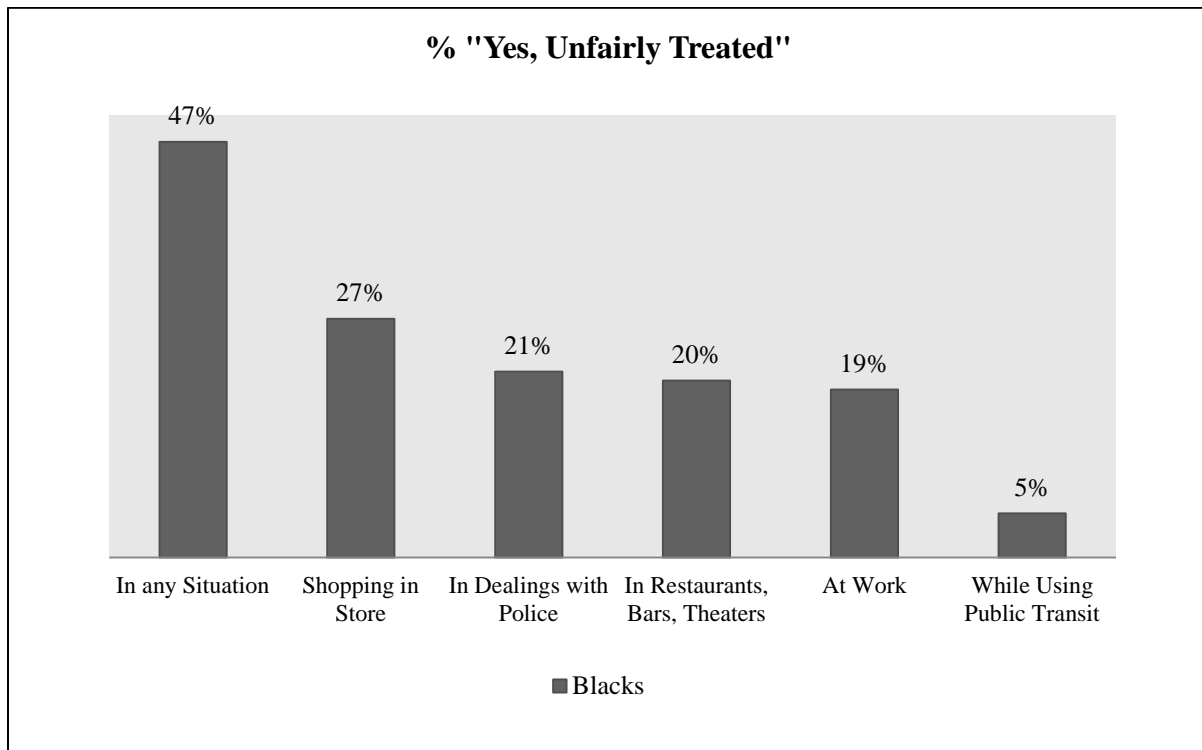
The passing of the civil rights legislation affirmed blacks’ belief that they “had to be treated with respect wherever they spent their money” (Weems 1998:69).

Yet the era of the purchaser consumer created a paradox. The focus on consumption as a means of citizenship placed emphasis on blacks' freedom to engage in the marketplace, rather than on gaining opportunities to earn economic capital, which participation in market-based consumption requires. While blacks secured the right to operate freely in the "consumer republic," their new rights did little to improve their economic position and arguably further affirmed the economic order from which they were excluded. As Cohen (2003) states: "Articulating black discontent in the language of liberal struggle to pursue individual rights in a free capitalist marketplace and then successfully securing those rights, . . . only reinforced the legitimacy of the capitalist order as a way of organizing economic life" (2003:189). In fact, the emphasis on fair treatment in the marketplace ignores other ways that the marketplace operates to exclude marginalized populations--for instance, retailers participating in place discrimination, by enacting different policies in black neighborhoods (i.e., not accepting checks as a form of payment in black neighborhoods, (see Columbres 2002:233), or avoiding black neighborhoods all together. During the mid-1950's there was a vast exodus of retail establishments from downtown shopping districts just as blacks were gaining the right to engage in consumption in previously segregated venues. Many retailers began the process of suburbanization, moving from downtowns to suburban malls, where high levels of segregation once again created barriers for blacks as consumers (Cohen 1996).

Despite both the prevailing national creed linking consumption with citizenship and democratic principles and the passing of civil rights legislation that guaranteed blacks the right to shop, the experience of "shopping while black" or "consumer racial profiling," remains quite pervasive (Ainscough and Motley 2000; Austin 1994; Lacy 2007; Lamont and Molnár 2001). "Consumer racial profiling" is defined as the "differential treatment of consumers in the

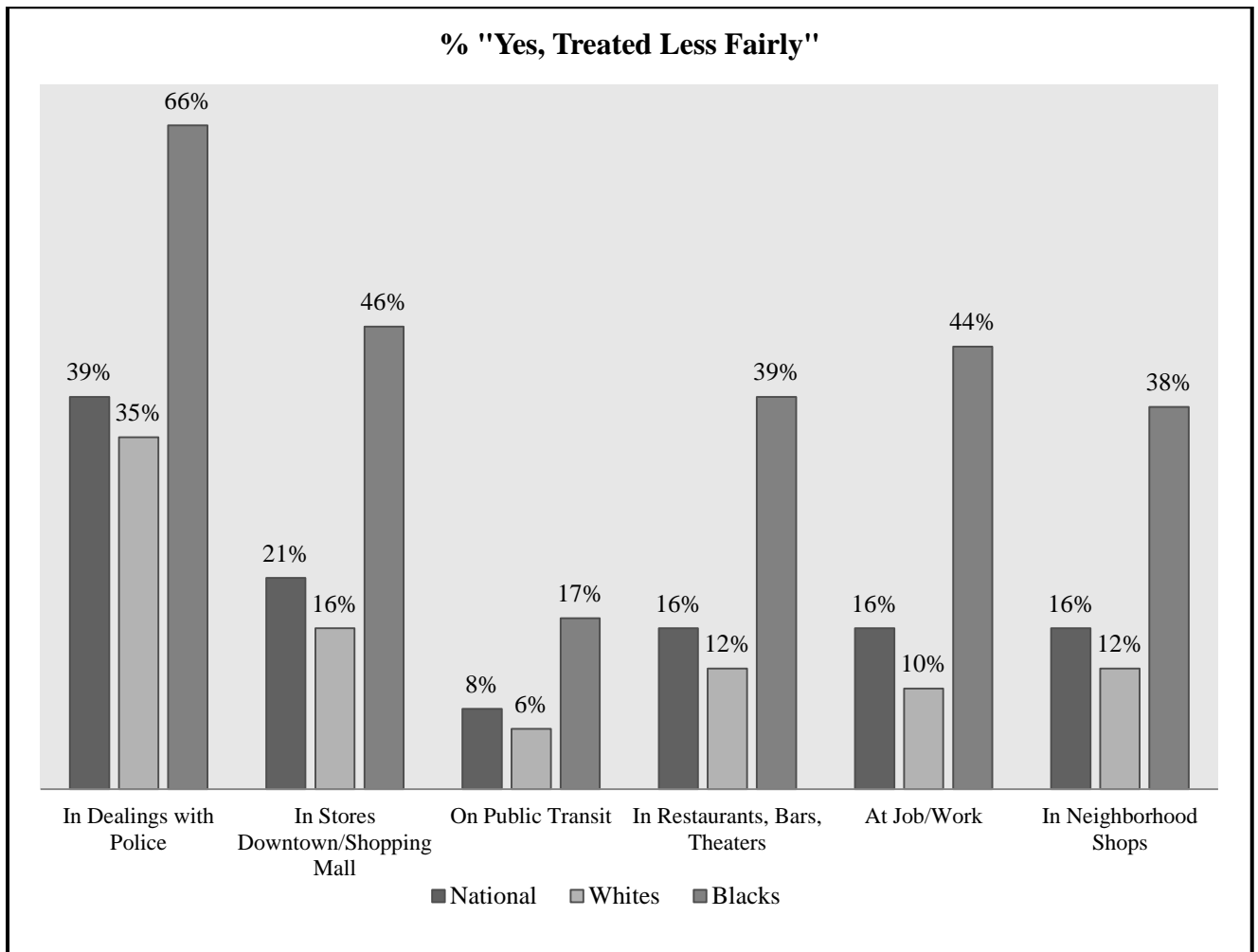
marketplace based on race/ethnicity that constitutes denial of or degradation in the products and/or services that are offered to the consumer” (Harris, Henderson, and Williams 2005:163). A 2001 Gallup Poll indicates that when blacks are asked about their personal experiences of discrimination and where they are treated unfairly, the experience they mention most frequently is shopping in a store (Gallup Poll Social Audit 2001) (see figure 3). Additionally, 46 percent of blacks surveyed perceived that blacks as a group are treated less fairly in downtown stores or shopping malls, the second most cited context, only preceded by perceptions of unfair treatment in interactions with the police (Gallup Poll Social Audit 2001) (see figure 4).

**Figure 3. Blacks Perceived Unfair Treatment in Selected Situations within Last 30 Days, 2001**



Source: Gallup Poll Social Audit. 2001. “Black-White Relations in the United States 2001. Update.” Washington, DC: Gallup Organization.

**Figure 4. Are Blacks in Your Community Treated Less Fairly than Whites in Select Situations? – 2001**



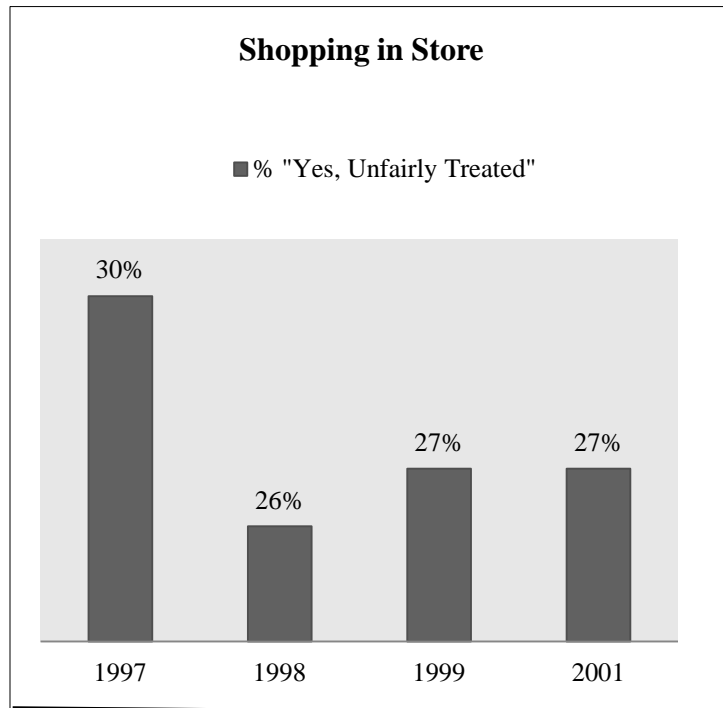
*Source:* Gallup Poll Social Audit. 2001. “Black-White Relations in the United States 2001 Update.” Washington, DC: Gallup Organization

Nearly a one-third of blacks polled in 2001 reported having experienced unfair treatment while shopping due to their race, a figure that remained relatively consistent between 1997 and 2001 (see figure 5). Drawing from a victimization survey, Gabbidon and Higgins (2007) find that blacks were ten times more likely to report having experienced consumer racial profiling than



non-blacks. While collectively held societal values suggest blacks' inclusion in the consumer republic, blacks' experience in the marketplace evidences their continued exclusion.

**Figure 5. Blacks Perceived Unfair Treatment, Shopping in Store Trend 1997-2001**



*Source:* Gallup Poll Social Audit. 2001. "Black-White Relations in the United States 2001 Update." Washington, DC: Gallup Organization

Previous research has identified two types of discriminatory treatment blacks encounter: (1) being provided with no service, being ignored, or receiving poor service, being treated rudely or discourteously (Gabbidon and Higgins 2007; Schreer, Smith, and Thomas 2009) and (2) being subject to racial profiling,<sup>23</sup> including being followed or subject to excessive surveillance (Lee 2000; Asquith and Bristow 2000; Feagin 1991; Austin 1994; Schreer et al. 2009; Crockett et al. 2003; Gabbidon and Higgins 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Racial profiling is defined as "equating race with crime and using it in lieu of probable cause" (Schreer, Smith, and Thomas 2009).

Beyond blacks' self-reports of discriminatory treatment, researchers have found additional evidence that blacks' are more likely to be perceived as shoplifters because of racial bias and prejudicial attitudes held by retail sales staff and the public at large. Asquith and Bristow (2000) found that study participants asked to describe a typical shoplifter identified racial minorities as more likely to be shoplifters. In an audit study, other researchers found that black customers were more likely to arouse suspicion and to be treated accordingly: specifically, blacks testers were followed around and monitored at a higher rate than comparable whites (Schreer et al. 2009). Criminologists have found that even trained observers display racial bias, using race to identify potential shoplifters "despite intensive training and specific instructions to ignore shopper demographic characteristics in selecting potential or probably offenders"(Dabney et al. 2006:665–666). Undoubtedly, racial bias against blacks in retail settings operates on both a conscious level and subconscious level (Dabney et al. 2006). These findings are all the more discouraging when we recognize that, while shoplifting poses a serious problem for retailers (Gabbidon and Higgins 2007; Dabney, Hollinger, and Dugan 2004), blacks are not more likely than other racial groups to shoplift and that behavioral variable are far more powerful predictors of which customers are likely to shoplift than are demographic variables such as race or gender (Dabney et al. 2004).

Previous research has also found that discriminatory treatment in retail settings occurs in a diverse range of settings. Researchers have documented discrimination at convenience grocery stores (Brigham and C. B. Richardson 1979), record stores (Ainscough and Motley 2000), high-end clothing stores (Schreer et al. 2009) and car dealerships (Ayres and Siegelman 1995).

Addressing how blacks respond to such racial discrimination in retail settings, research has provided both empirical and theoretical insights. These are briefly reviewed in the paragraphs that follow.

Drawing from an economic perspective, Hirschman (1970) hypothesizes that consumers generally respond to service failure by (1) exiting (leaving the site), (2) voicing disdain (complaining or filing a lawsuit), and (3) demonstrating loyalty (accepting and continuing to purchase from the retailer). He argues that the exit strategy is the favored “paradigm of problem-solving” in the U.S. context (1970:107). While Hirschman’s framework of exit, voice, and loyalty does not specifically address blacks’ response to racial discrimination, nor was it developed to account for unsatisfactory experiences specially in retail contexts, it provides a conceptualization of people’s responses to dissatisfactory market experiences that is theoretically useful. In fact, the framework proposed by Feagin (1991), based on his empirical investigation of blacks’ encounters with discriminatory treatment in public places, suggest that blacks employ responses consistent with those identified by Hirschman. Feagin argues that blacks employ four different types of responses to discriminatory treatment in the public sphere; (1) withdrawal, (2) resigned acceptance, (3) verbal or physical confrontation, and lastly, (4) seeking legal recourse. To the extent that blacks engage these strategies when they shop, suggest support for the claim that blacks face additional barriers to realizing and enacting their consumption preferences in practice.

To date, Crockett, Grier, and Williams (2003) provide the most comprehensive typology of discriminatory treatment encountered by blacks in retail settings and of blacks’ general responses. In their exploratory study based on the experiences of small sample of ten black men, they found that respondents explain racial discriminatory treatment as a consequence of

pervasive negative stereotypes and statistical discrimination, a form of racial profiling. They emphasize that the overall marketplace experience of black men is shaped by their presumed “consumer inferiority”(Crockett et al. 2003:2) and that black men adopt a range of coping strategies. They describe these strategies as either problem-focused, directly confronting the discriminatory actor or speaking out about the discriminatory episode, or emotion-focused, emphasizing self-control and emotional restraint and management (Crockett et al. 2003). Additionally, they found that their respondents saw “status oriented consumption as key to combating stereotypes about their presumed low status” (Crockett et al. 2003.:2). The authors, however, argue for the limited effectiveness of “status markers” and propose that store personnel may easily reinterpret status markers and account for them in ways that are consistent with racially biased views (Crockett et al. 2003:2). They also acknowledge that attempting to use goods to counteract the negative effects of race is a short term solution to a chronic problem, a problem whose negative emotional, psychological, and health related consequences result from the cumulative and recurrent effects of discriminatory treatment.

In their discussion of “modalities and tools” that blacks draw upon when they encounter racial stigma, Fleming et al. (2011) hypothesize a range of responses including “confronting stereotypes and prejudices; avoiding conflict by molding one’s self-presentation so as to prevent discomfort in others; offering concrete proof of equality (e.g., through competence or the display of expensive consumer goods); and asserting cultural membership, feelings of self-worth and even superiority over dominant groups” (401). In their effort to determine the relative salience of various modes of response and the tools blacks employ when they encounter racial stigma, Fleming et al. found evidence of two central means of dealing with racism: “confrontation” and conflict deflation (406), of which the former was more prominent. Yet because both Feagin

(1991) and Fleming et al. (2011) do not focus or examine the dynamics at play within particular contexts, nor do they make clear to what degree blacks' responses represent their generic orientations or to what extent the responses they report are applicable in different contexts, their findings have limited applicability, particularly as they do not account for the interaction of race and gender, or that of race and class.

In this research I aim to overcome the limitations of previous work, first by focusing exclusively on blacks' experiences in retail settings, thereby confining the scope and nature of targeted discrimination to a specific context. I build from the earlier frameworks of blacks' responses to racial stigma and discriminatory treatment presented by Feagin (1991), Fleming et al. (2011), and Crockett et al. (2003), but use an inductive approach to analyzing interview data in order to identify categories of blacks' responses to discrimination in retail settings that reflect strategies used "on the ground." It is my goal to ensure that these categories analytically useful for further research, to identify additional patterns evident in interview responses, and to further differentiate the responses to discrimination in retail settings along class and gender lines.

A great deal of ethnographic and qualitative research suggests that both gender and class are important factors dictating blacks' practices in the marketplace. Researchers have consistently found that men are more likely to be suspected of shoplifting and that men report having experienced racial profiling in retail settings at higher rates. Crockett and his colleagues' (2003) study of a small sample of black men suggests that gender may very well be a factor influencing how blacks respond to racism in retail settings. They argue that while some men choose to address or report discriminatory sales staff or a store's security personnel, many men choose less confrontational responses to avoid affirming negative stereotypes about black men's aggressiveness and to minimize the emotional and psychological toll of the discriminatory

incident (Crockett et al. 2003). The study's conclusions are necessarily circumscribed because the researchers did not include a sample of female respondents. However, given the pervasiveness of the stereotype of black men as threatening, it is safe to anticipate that black men may face gender-specific stereotypes and subsequent discriminatory treatment, and may adopt different strategies to offset the stereotypes. One contribution of my research is the explicit examination of gender influences the types of discriminatory treatment that blacks encounter and how gender affects how blacks respond to such treatment.

With regard to class differences, ethnographers, qualitative researchers, and historians alike have argued that, as a consequence of racial alienation and racial stigma, middle-class blacks believe that their self-presentation is an important determinant in how they will be treated in public ( Higginbotham 1993; Austin 1994; Lamont and Molnár 2001; Lacy 2007; Anderson 2011). Fleming et al. (2011) identify managing one's self-presentation as a form of the conflict-deflating response to discrimination, and Lacy (2007) illustrates the myriad of ways upper-middle class blacks create "public identities" based on their class standing in an effort to avoid racial discrimination. Lacy found that respondents "dress with care" and are always mindful of their self-presentation because they anticipate they will be treated badly and have "unpleasant" shopping experiences if they are dressed casually (2007:75). Through their clothing they demonstrate their "respectability to white strangers" and "signal that they 'belong' in the store" (p 75). Further, while whites may similarly "portray distinct identities as a way of signaling social position" (p 39). Lacy argues that "blacks who have 'made it' must work harder, more deliberately, and more consistently to make their middle-class status known to others" (p 3). In this way the use of goods and the act of consuming becomes a strategic, conscious activity, and "effortful accomplishment"( Holt 1995:1). Anderson (2011) also contends that middle-class

blacks maintain what he describes as a near obsession with their dress when traveling through the public spaces. He argues they have a preference for expensive, high-end goods that clearly convey their class status both as means of differentiating themselves from poor blacks and preventing discrimination. While not explicitly conceptualized as discrete responses to discrimination in public sphere, Anderson nonetheless makes several points with regard to blacks' responses to discrimination in the public sphere. For one, he argues that middle-class blacks "do not lash out in response but constantly behave and present themselves in accordance with middle- and upper middle-class propriety" (Anderson 2011:231), implying that class is an important determinant of the types of strategies blacks adopt. Second, he argues that when middle-class blacks encounter negative experiences in public and leisure settings they avoid returning and actively report to friends and family whether an establishment is friendly to blacks. While informative, the evidence Anderson cites is not connected to a theoretical explanation of the underlying social mechanisms that inform and shape blacks' marketplace experiences and their encounters and responses to discriminatory treatment in retail contexts.

Through examining blacks' experiences across class and gender lines with discrimination in the marketplace, this chapter builds off previous research on "shopping while black." By utilizing inductive analysis of qualitative data, it produces a more comprehensive framework for understanding retail racism, including a systematic examination of the type of discriminatory encounters blacks' report having in retail settings and of the spectrum of blacks' responses.

## **Methods and Sample**

The goal of this chapter is to gauge how race impacts respondents' experiences while shopping. In-depth interviews were conducted to gain detailed accounts of middle- and working-class blacks' experiences of discriminatory treatment in retail settings. Respondents were asked

about their interactions with store staff and to recount if ever they had experiences of differential treatment while shopping that they perceived to be a result of their race. They also were asked to describe their responses to stigmatizing and discriminatory treatment in retail settings. From these self-reports emerged a typology of discriminatory encounters and respondents' range of responses that I have outlined below.

There are obvious limitations to using self-reported data when researching discrimination, as it is difficult to determine the accuracy of respondents' reports, particularly of incidents that may have occurred years ago. Nonetheless, in order to compile a comprehensive list of types of experiences, I did not place a boundary on when respondents' discriminatory encounter occurred. Accessing perceptions of discriminatory experiences over time is an important means for gauging what typical discriminatory encounters entail and the following findings are a first step toward developing a schema of typical responses to such treatment, even if respondents' subjective reports of their experiences cannot be triangulated.

## **Findings**

The pervasiveness of discriminatory, anti-black treatment in retail settings was startlingly evident, as 44 out of 51 respondents (86 percent) reported having at least one discriminatory encounter while out shopping. The high rate at which respondents experienced discrimination allowed for an analysis not only of their individual experiences, but also of patterns that emerged across respondents. This section provides a brief overview of (1) the sites respondents reported discriminatory treatment, (2) the type and nature of the discriminatory treatment, and (3) the strategies they used to respond to discrimination.



*Sites of Discrimination*

Respondents identified a great variety of retail establishments as sites of discrimination by including drug, clothing, furniture, and electronic stores. Retail districts mentioned included upscale shopping districts in New York City, where high-end goods are sold and many luxury department stores are located, including Fifth Avenue, Madison Avenue, and Columbus Circle/59 th Street. The majority of respondents who disclosed specific sites where they were subject to discriminatory treatment mentioned clothing stores and all of the clothing stores, mentioned were places where luxury goods were sold, for instance, Brooks Brothers, Brioni, Neiman Marcus, Salvatore Ferragamo, and Hermes. They also mentioned specialty boutiques that sell expensive goods as discriminatory sites.

*Types of Retail Discrimination*

Respondents’ experiences of discrimination can be categorized in three ways. First, respondents reported encountering the assumption that because they were black they did not have any money to spend and were therefore unlikely to make a purchase. Second, respondents reported being treated as though they were likely to steal something, evidenced by their being subject to additional surveillance and security measures. Finally, they reported receiving no service, being ignored, or receiving poor or inferior service, such as impatient or discourteous treatment.

**Table 7. Types of Retail Discrimination Reported by Respondents**

Type	Gender				Class				TOTAL (N=44)	
	Female (N =24)		Male (N= 20)		Middle Class (N = 34)		Working Class (N=10)			
Shoplifter or thief	15	63%	11	55%	19	56%	7	70%	26	59%
Black and broke	11	46%	13	65%	17	50%	6	60%	23	52%
Poor/ No service	14	58%	9	45%	18	53%	5	50%	23	52%

**Shoplifters and Thieves.** The most frequent type of discriminatory experience was suspicion of shoplifting, as reported by 26 of 44 respondents (59 percent). As Sharon, a middle-class advertising professional earning around \$75,000 annually, notes “Because I’m black, they think I’m going to try to steal something.” Similarly, Lamar, a banking VP, notes that when he is in a store he is careful and conscious about the placement of his hands. He operates with the objective “to never make it look like I’m stealing” because as he notes that as a “young African American male, people will generally follow you around. It gets to be such a problem sometimes, and ... I’m extremely conscious of where my hands are while I’m in a store.”

As a result of this pervasive negative perception blacks indicated a sense of heightened visibility at times when they shopped. Respondents believed they were subject to unnecessary surveillance, and reported being “watched a little harder” (Antoine, a firefighter) and “stared at” (Jabari, a social worker) and in addition to being closely monitored they were often followed around. Yet being subject to careful surveillance was differentiated by respondents from receiving a salesperson’s helpful attention. As Lisa, a managing partner of a successful startup, notes, sales staff may be “following you but not asking if you need help.”

Respondents were not only subject to the watchful eye of sales staff but they also reported being subject to additional security practices by security personal—that is , having their bags checked or being asked for identification when paying with a credit card . As Amare, a professional in the finance industry earning over \$100,000 a year, reported, whenever he goes to the luxury Italian fashion house Ferragamo, which has historically specialized in leather goods, ), “The security guard—it’s like him and I are holding hands. Like he’s on me.” Furthermore, respondents note that while they are subject to intrusive surveillance measures, white customers are free to come and go and shop as they please. For instance Adam, a library technician who

together with his wife earn close to \$90,000 a year, describes an experience where he was exiting a store and was searched:

Adam: “I went to Best Buy and I was getting a GPS, and then my wife asked me to get a—get her the Wii Fitness, so I got that. Anyway, to make a long story short, I paid and when I was checking out, you know, there was a person at the door who said, “This way.” I guess one of the doors wasn’t working. So she asked to see my receipt. I showed her the receipt. Then she asked to see my bag and she just goes in my bag and she’s looking all around, you know, in my bag, so it’s just like—you know, like what is she doing? You know, she looks at the receipt, and she looks in the bag, and she gives it back to me, and gives me back the receipt. And then at that moment a white guy walked through the door, and it went beep-beep-beep, and she saw him go ahead. And it was just like the weirdest shit. So I was just, I guess I was—

Interviewer: So she didn’t check his bag?

Adam: No.

Interviewer: Or receipt?

Adam: No.

For Adam, this was an unsettling experience of differential treatment based on race. While in many instances respondents were uncertain whether race alone accounted for the poor treatment they received (something discussed in greater detail below), racial discrimination became undeniably apparent to respondents when they could compare their treatment to that of white shoppers.

**Black and Broke.** The second most frequently reported type of discriminatory treatment or prejudicial attitudes was the assumption that respondents had no money to spend and were not going to or could not afford to make a purchase. That is, as Damon, a corporate professional working at a major Wall Street bank notes, retailers assume that “I don’t have the money to be shopping where I’m shopping” because he is black, considering he earns around \$150,000 a year. Indeed, 23 of the 44 respondents noted they experienced this negative perception at play.

Brandon, a manager of a flagship retail store who earns an income of \$72,000 a year notes that he often feels “judged” by the sales people who work at the Shore Hills Mall, a high-end mall in New Jersey. As he goes on to explain, “I feel like in people’s minds, they’re already predetermined who has money, who doesn’t have money, just by looking at them.” He notes that once, while shopping at Louis Vuitton, one of the world’s most well-known luxury brands (Roberts n.d.), the sales staff “looked down on me when I walked in. So, um, I got the sense that they kind of judged me by my appearance and didn’t think I had money.” Damon, describing what it is like for him when he shops at a high-end boutique in the Greenwich Village,<sup>24</sup> that sells few items “under 120 dollars,” says the staff “always treat you as if you’re only browsing. You’re never buying.” Likewise Patrick, an analyst for a major financial institution, tells of having his right to consumed questioned while shopping in Paul Stuart, a luxury men’s clothier, where his right to consume was questioned: “It is a very expensive store and they, they look at you like, What are you doing here?” Daniel, a training specialist for a medical firm, notes that when he shops at Saks he believes that the sales people are thinking “look at this African American buying stuff that he probably can’t afford.” A single man, earning around \$100,000 a year, Daniel can afford to shop at Saks. Wayne, an advertising salesman at a major media company, finds that in many sales staff seem to conclude, “Oh, he’s not going to buy a damn thing. He can’t afford anything in here.”

At times prejudice is subtle, but respondents also reported encounters in which sales staff verbalized their disdain. Several noted that the sales staff further indicated their underlying assumption that respondents did not belong in the store by “telling you the price of something before you asked for it” (Lisa) or being directed to the sales section without them asking

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<sup>24</sup> The Greenwich Village is also a neighborhood in New York City known for its eclectic mix of boutiques and specialty shops as well as national and international brand stores.

(Damon). Additional examples include occasions when sales staff explicitly expressed their prejudicial assumption. For example, Darryl, an associate at an Investment Bank, describes an experience when the salesperson made his opinion known to him. As he explains:

I walked in and then I asked the guy like how much something was going to cost. And I thought it was too expensive so I was, nah, nah, I'm not--. And I was like cool about not wanting to buy it. And the guy replied, oh, you knew you weren't gonna buy this before you even asked me. Or like, you knew you didn't want to buy this anyway. And I was kind of like, excuse me? But he didn't want to say nothing else. So that's how I knew it was more like a racial slur.

Similarly, Sharon described an instance when a sales person told her that she need not try on a dress because of its \$800 price tag. As she describes:

I was in Cache and the lady just straight up told me, like I don't think you should try that on, because of how much it costs. Basically, the dress was \$800 dollars. She was like, "yeah, I don't think you should try it on. It's \$800 dollars". And I was like, I want to try it on, thank you. So already making assumptions from that. And that was clearly a race thing to me, because other people were trying stuff on and it was the same price, and I didn't hear her say that. So that was clearly race thing to me.

**Poor Service or No Service.** Lastly, respondents describe receiving poor service or no service at all. As one respondent, Javon, a senior associate at a private equity firm who earns in well in excess of \$100,000, says, "They either ignore you or they go out of their way not to ignore you." Respondents report encountering sales staff that were not friendly, who do not acknowledge or greet them upon entering the store, who did not offer assistance or ignored respondents' request for assistance, or who contrarily were overly attentive to the point of quasi-harassment. Unpleasantness was often indicated subtly, for instance, by tone of voice. Javon reported that he avoids a particular store, because of the poor treatment he received there. As he describes: "It's the way they look. It's often the fact that it takes them forever to, to greet you or to ask you if they can help." Jeff, a sales manager at a large insurance company, also reports a time when he was "ignored":

I was walking around and trying to get help, like “excuse me, could I —” “Oh, I’ll be with you in a second,” and then you see them helping someone, then someone else comes over and asks them a question, and they help them... Like just people were sort of, didn’t care.

Poor service also can be rendered even after a purchase has been made. For instance, Tasha gave the example of needing to return something and being subject to suspicion because of her race. As she remarks: “If I go to return something, I know that like, I need, I just feel that I need to have my receipt or I need to have my, like I need to be a little bit tighter, just because people might be like, well did you wear it already? Did you buy this here? Like that kind of thing.”

While three different types of discriminatory experience were reported, it should not come as a surprise that the categories operated in tandem. In fact, over half of respondents reported experiencing multiple types of discrimination simultaneously. For instance, respondents might be both ignored by sales staff and followed around by store security. As a consequence of discriminatory treatment, respondents reported feeling uncomfortable, frustrated, and displeased by unpleasant experiences shopping. Adam notes that when he is followed around and constantly watched, “it makes you not want to spend your money [at stores] where you have that happen.”

### *Responding to Retail Racism*

In response to discriminatory and discomfoting experiences, respondents report engaging in the following strategies: (1) leaving the store and refusing to make a purchase (2) “showing and proving,” a strategy that included taking proactive steps to demonstrate that they can afford to shop wherever they might be, and reactive steps, such as making a purchase just to prove that they can afford to purchase the store’s merchandise. Additional proactive steps included building ties with sales staff, demonstrating brand loyalty, and avoiding stores that were

not in their price range. A final strategy respondents reported was (3) speaking up and out. These strategies generally parallel those found in previous research, but they also provide insight into a more extensive typology, thereby adding to and elaborating on frameworks proposed in previous research and developing a more comprehensive schema of the strategies blacks employ when responding to discrimination in retail settings

**Leaving the store or refusing to make a purchase.** The most frequently cited strategy, used by 22 out of 44 respondents, was leaving the store or refusing to buy something. This response is comparable to Hirschman's (1970) *exit* strategy and Feagin's (1991) *withdrawal* strategy, and also falls under the conflict-deflating strategies identified by Fleming et al.(2011). In a sense, respondents were waging individual-level, single-instance boycotts. As Darryl notes in a matter-of-fact fashion: "For the most part, I mean, I walk in, I stand still for a few minutes. If I need service and I stand still for a few minutes and I don't get service, I'll leave." Tasha similarly reports of her refusal to spend money in places where she receives poor treatment. As she describes shopping in a high-end mall in Boston, "I'd go in stores in Copley Place,<sup>25</sup> and they would completely ignore me. Of course I was like, well I'm not buying anything. Like you need to treat me right if you want my money."

**Show and Prove.**<sup>26</sup> The second most frequently mentioned strategy was to "show and prove" with 17 of the 44 respondents indicating that they drew upon this strategy. This response encompassed both proactive and reactive steps taken to demonstrate that respondents had money to spend. This strategy differs from those described by Feagin (1991) and Hirshman (1970), but parallels claims made by Lacy (2007) regarding blacks' creation of public identities, and to the

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<sup>25</sup> Copley place is a high-end mall located in Boston, MA.

<sup>26</sup> "Show & prove" is an attitude particularly pervasive among the Hip-Hop generation as identified by George (1999).

conflict-deflating mode of response depicted by Fleming et al.(2011). Respondents who adopted this strategy remarked that they took a wide array of proactive steps to “show” that they were customers worthy of being well treated.

One response indicative of this strategy was to look the part, as Christina, an executive administrative assistant acknowledges, when she says she takes care to “look as if I have a lot of money.” For her this meant dressing in pearl earrings, a coat with fur cuffs, and dress slacks. Vanessa, an independent consultant, notes that she also dresses the part: “I like to prevent against poor service. If I’m ever out shopping and I pretty much, I’ll know I’m gonna be out shopping because I hate it so much, if I’m ever out shopping I will take—I will try to look like I belong to be shopping there.” When asked to elaborate on what looking like she belonged entailed, she explained “Maybe wearing something a little more designer. Having on really fabulous shoes. Just being more high-end in general.” Similarly, several male respondents noted that being “suited up” or, for women, being “all done up,” while shopping was advantageous, often though not always buffering them from discriminatory treatment. Vanessa, when asked if her race ever comes into play when she is out shopping, recounted that she never wears black:

Vanessa: Oh, absolutely. I no longer wear black.

Interviewer: You no longer-

Vanessa: I don’t wear black.

Interviewer: Why not?

Vanessa: Because people think I work there. A lot of the department stores you have to wear all black... I was actually like in Bergdorf’s one day in a suit just on my lunch break from work and I got in an elevator and these other two women got in an elevator and one of them was like, oh, do you know where the bathroom is? I was like, oh, no, I don’t. And then she gets irate and she’s like, oh, my gosh, how come you don’t know where the bathroom is? And I was like, I don’t know.

Interviewer: Why do think they assumed that you worked there?-



Vanessa: And then the other one, she was like she doesn't work here. So I was like, oh. 'Cause I'm black.

Similarly, Robert notes that wearing a suit often resulted in an irritating interaction with other customers who assumed he worked at the store. As he explains when asked if he has ever had ever been discriminated against while out shopping:

Oh yeah. I've gotten followed. I've gotten, Do you work here? Especially if I'm like suited up on a day, and I may like go out after to buy something. You know, Do you work here? Um, it's like, Ah, I'm wearing a suit and I happen to be shopping. No, I don't work here. But... so I've gone through that.

Being black in a high-end store is associated with occupying a low-status position, and being dressed in a suit offered Vanessa and Robert no protection from this association.

Another proactive response used by two of the respondents, also a form of the show and prove strategy, was to demystify themselves as strangers by building relationships with sale staff. The logic behind this strategy is that shopping consistently at a particular store or with particular sales staff you negate the stereotypes that the shoppers are unwilling to spend money or unable to afford to purchase goods. By building personal relationships and a history of transactions they demonstrate that they are worthwhile customers to serve. While this was not mentioned as a popular response, it was mentioned explicitly as a strategy adopted by frequent shoppers. For instance, Jada, a television marketing professional, notes that the service she receives is an important part of her shopping experience, and if she receives poor service even after she has engaged store personal, she will leave the store. But she also says she has not encountered poor treatment recently, in part because, as she explains, "when I go places, I build relationships with the people who[work there], like if I'm going to shop there a lot, because for me, the service is just as important as the product I'm buying." Tasha also notes that being a cardholder gives her leverage in case there is issue:

Tasha: I will say I do tend to shop places where I'm a cardholder. So I will buy something Chanel from Saks before I go to Chanel and buy it, cause I feel like it gives me a little more leverage, cause I can be like, I'm a cardholder, I've been a loyal customer since whatever year.

Interviewer: More leverage if you have a problem?

Tasha: Yeah, if I have a problem. Like okay, like I am a cardholder. Like I've always shopped here. You can pull up my card savings. You see the amount of money I spend, like something like that. Also—keeping it 100 percent honest—sometimes I don't have the money for everything, so I'll be like, I'll put this on the Saks card and I'll pay it off in the next three, four months. So that too. But I do think it gives you a little bit of leverage if I am... treated differently.

Both Jada and Tasha evidence a proactive stance taken in order to buffer them from discriminatory treatment and limit the fallout they are treated poorly. Similarly, William, a high school teacher and one of the seven respondents who could not recall a time when he was subject to discriminatory treatment, attributes his lack of exposure to discrimination in retail settings to the fact that he shops where the sales staff know him. As he explains: "In the stores that I go to, I'm pretty consistent. I get, like, items for my son. I pretty much go to the same three or four stores that I've always been going to. So, um, they know me."

Another proactive response mentioned by respondents that falls under the category of "showing and proving" was the active avoidance of window shopping. When respondents went out to shop, they intended to buy something and did not go where they could not afford to make a purchase. Jada describes her shopping trips as operating with a mission. As she states: "When I shop, I go where I know I'm going to get something. Even if I don't know what I'm going to get. It isn't even about, like, I don't just, like—like I don't window shop on Madison Avenue just for the heck of it." Coming from a slightly different angle, Amare says he is always nice to sales staff and respectful, especially of their time. He says: "Definitely try to be respectful. I say please and thank you. And I don't waste your time. My aim it not to waste your time. I'm not gonna

make you go look for something when I know I'm not gonna buy it. If I go in there and I want to see it, I'm interested. If it doesn't fit or whatever, that's another story." Melanie, an administrative assistant, reflects a similar respect for the sales staff's time but notes that her respect is not necessarily acknowledged. She describes shopping at a particular store always with the goal of making several purchases, but sales staff nonetheless often treating her as if helping her would be a waste of their time. As she notes: "They don't ask you if you need help, because I guess they figure I'm just coming in there to BS or waste time and to window shop." But, as she goes on to say, "When I go, I don't window shop... if I'm going in the store, I'm coming to buy something." Melanie further elucidates that she hates shopping and shops just a few times a year, so when she does shops she makes quite a few purchases. In all, 7 out of the 44 (16 percent) respondents noted that they quite consciously shop with a purpose and avoid places where they cannot afford to shop because they don't want to confirm the idea that because they are black they cannot afford to purchase the store's merchandise.

Beyond their efforts to "show" that they had money to spend, respondents also engage in efforts to "prove" it. One reactive iteration of the "show and prove" strategy used by respondents entailed actually buying something with the intention demonstrating that they were able to, even when they did not need or want the item. As Lisa puts it: "I felt like I've made a purchase that I didn't want to make, just to prove a point." Damon provides another example of this response, describing an instance when he was shopping for his wife at BCBG, "a premier American fashion brand." Apart from the \$150,000 that he earns annually, together with his wife have a household income of \$230,000. The saleswomen, he says, was giving him "the hardest time" and he felt perceived by her as "a big, imposing black man." He says: "She's probably, like, What is he doing looking in here for?" because "She didn't pay me any mind. She was, like, giving me

the cold shoulder.” Damon was eventually helped by another sales woman, though he noticed the other saleslady “peeping” as he continued to shop, “like, this guy isn’t really going to buy all those things, right?” When he went to the counter, the following interaction with the unhelpful sales woman transpired:

She’s like, So which items are you keeping? I’m like, All of them. And she was kind of looking at me. And so I give her my credit card to pay. I didn’t sign the back. So I always wait to see whether or not people ask... I know she’s definitely going ask to see, you know, my ID. And of course, that was the first thing she did. She’s like, Oh, can I have identification please? I was like, yeah...So I walked out, and I just, felt at least a little bit better about myself. It was bad, because I didn’t need to spend the kind of money that I spent, but at the same time I was just like, I showed her not to front on anybody. You never know who it is that’s walking in your store. You don’t know who they represent, who they are, what they’re coming from.

When I asked him, if that is something he typically does he said that it depended on his finances but that:

There are times when I’ve done it, and, you know, I’ll regret it, and say, like I know I really didn’t need that, and I’m not even sure if that person remembers me. But in my mind, I kind of say to myself, maybe they won’t treat the next guy that looks like me that way. So maybe if I go back in there next time, they might hop to and say, Oh, how’s it going? You know, and treat me a little different.

By making a purchase, or in Damon’s case several large purchases, respondents hope to disprove negative stereotypes of black consumers, and they hope their actions will discourage sales staff from treating other blacks poorly in the future.

**Speaking Up and Out.** The last strategy, used by 7 of the 44 respondents to combat racism in retail was to speak up—to ask and subsequently to speak to someone in charge (e.g.,

the store's manager)—or to speak out, by directly confronting the sales staff or customer at fault.

Tasha describes her willingness to speak up as follows:

Oh, I'll call the manager in a second. When I was in Boston in Copley Place, I called the manager in at Neiman Marcus...[and said] I am in this section. Three of your people are sitting at the register talking, and I need help and no one's come up to me. And they wrote me a letter, like they were so apologetic, and blah blah blah blah blah. So I mean, I am, like I will talk to someone.

While some respondents sought out people in positions of authority, others directly confronted the sales staff, often making flippant remarks or explicitly demanding the sales staff stop treating them in a discriminatory fashion. For instance, Monique, a hair stylist, describes her approach to poor service and discrimination:

If I go into the store and nobody helps me, I'm the girl that stands in the middle of the store and says, Hello? [loud voice] If I feel like I'm being followed—I did have a lady that was following me around the store once, and I looked at her and I said, Do you need something? And she's like, Um, well I was just trying to make sure you don't need help. I said, Well just say that. There's no need to follow me around the store. I've got money. Then I didn't buy anything, simply based on the fact that I was being followed.

For most respondents, however, speaking up and out did not result in a matter being resolved satisfactorily.

Respondents also found intolerable being treated disrespectfully by fellow customers, such as when white customers cut the line. Amare notes that while he might excuse a security guard for following him around—because “it's his job” and, as he says, “I don't want to make a fuss out of it, you know? Especially if the security guard's black, because I'm saying he has to eat. You know, like I'm never gonna like look down on somebody for making a living” —he doesn't tolerate customers jumping the line. As he says his response to that offense is typically:

Yeah, excuse me, I was next. And I'm a little bit too big and aggressive to let that happen to me. You know? But as far as security guard following me, I won't say anything because I understand that's his job, and it is what it is. But nobody skips me, you know;

like I'm not going to let anybody slight me, or anybody who I'm with. That's just not happening.

Respondents who resorted to speaking out or speaking up perceived that they were treated in a less than dignified fashion, in addition to merely receiving substandard service, and this elicited a verbal response. Yet no respondents took the matter any further, indicating that physical confrontation or "seeking legal recourse" may be rarely used responses (c.f. Feagin 1991).

### *The Elusive Nature of Discrimination in Retail Settings*

Taking legal action was likely an uncommon response because the discriminatory treatment that most respondents were subjected to was quite elusive. As Angela, a corporate attorney, remarks, while explicit discrimination is easy to detect, discriminatory treatment in retail settings is usually not overt. As she notes:

I think most of the time it's not explicit. It's just, people aren't paying attention to you, you know. And you could say, it's, you know, it's race, or you could say, you know, maybe sometimes they're having a bad day. But I don't think they're having a bad day every single time it happens, so I think at least some of the times it happens, that race is part of that equation. But if something happened that was, like, more overt, then you know.

Respondents are well aware of the ambiguous nature of discrimination and the subtle manner in which they might be treated differently. Angela goes on to note that even if you are treated courteously, sales staff may still hold prejudicial attitudes and there is little recourse or protection from others' negative views. She says:

I feel like people can have stereotypes, but like if you walk into a store, I think sometimes people discriminate against you by, like not acknowledging your presence or thinking you're going to buy something. But I think sometimes people—even if they think that—they'll still like, you know, maybe greet you and say hi and treat you nice, even though in the back of their mind they're thinking, Okay, there's a black person not going to buy anything. And if I see something I like, I buy something, and then that shows them that, you know, hey, maybe next time I shouldn't make the same assumptions.

Even after describing an incident as discriminatory, respondents then indicated that it was difficult to know for sure if racial prejudice underlay the encounter.

While the subtle nature of discrimination often made it difficult to discern whether a salesperson was having a bad day or if race is at play. The presence of racial discrimination was more easily identified when blacks observed whites being treated preferentially. For instance Alysha, an analyst at an investment bank, recalls an interaction with a sales woman at Neiman Marcus:

This woman just was not helpful, and I thought she was just an unhelpful salesperson. But then I would see like, you know, fill-in-the-blank white girl comes in, and she's just like, oh I'll get you this, Oh I'll get you that, you know, as opposed to the one time, Oh you need any help? You know, and she wasn't as doting as she was for this other person. And so I don't know if that was race. I don't know if that person's a frequent buyer, but I would say that was the one time I was just like, wow.

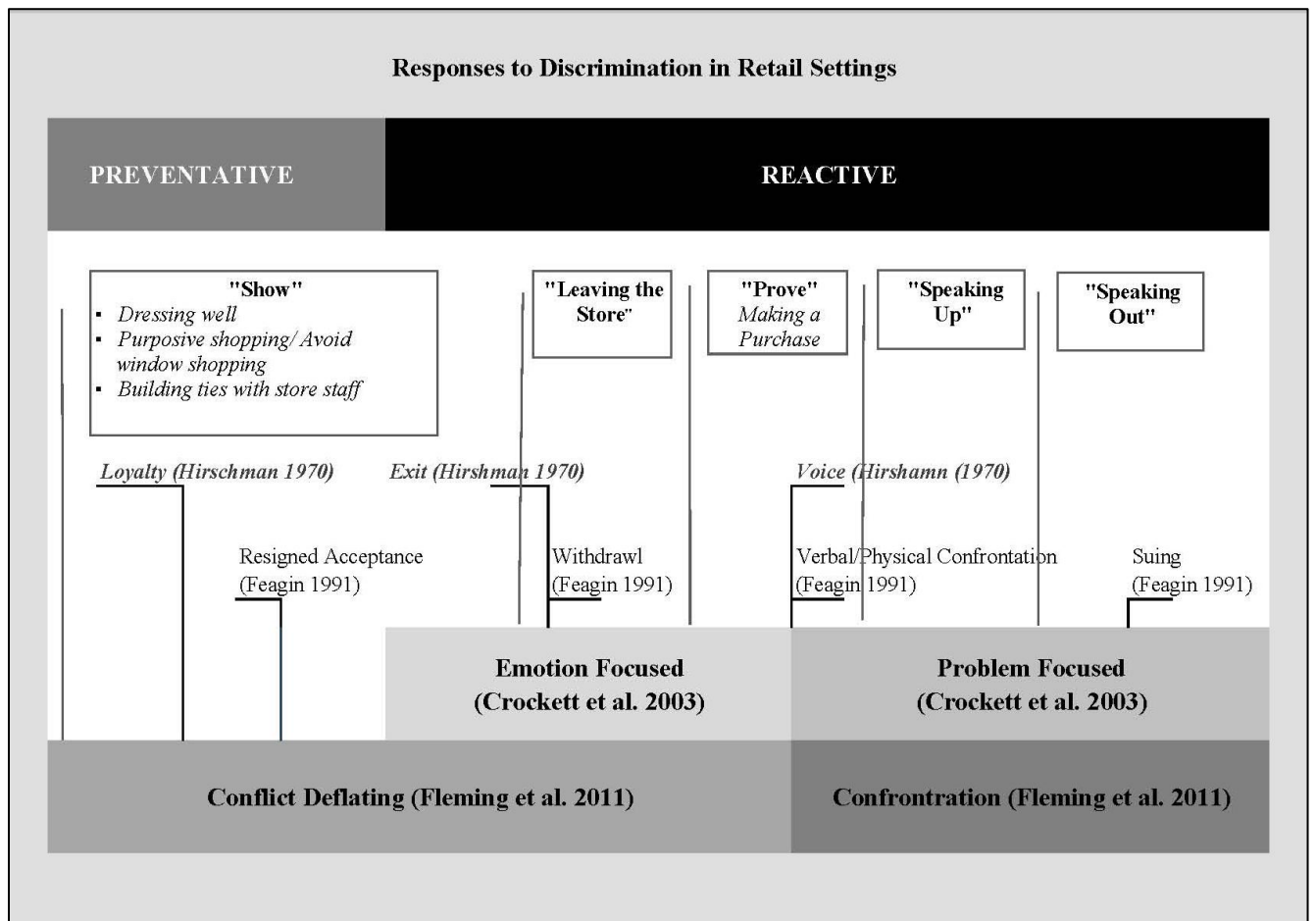
Race was most obviously at play when respondents had a point of comparison, such as observing a white customer receiving superior service, yet even in those instances respondents were uncertain whether race was solely responsible for their poor treatment.

Respondents also perceived that factors other than race, such as age and whether they were shopping alone or in a group, impacted how they were treated. However, the most frequently mentioned additional factor was how they were dressed. Nine out of forty-four respondents who were subject to discriminatory treatment stated that they believed that their dress influenced how they were treated. Even those who did not report having discriminatory encounters believed dress to be an important factor in the service they received. Nonetheless, only three respondents mentioned that they attempted to modify their self-presentation when they shopped; the rest said it was more important to be comfortable or shop when it was convenient for them, and they did not believe it was worth the effort to dress up.

## Discussion

A central contribution of this chapter is outlining a more extensive typology of the strategic responses blacks adopt as a consequence of encountering discriminatory treatment in retail settings (see figure 6). In the following section I discuss how the results of this investigation align with and extend previous work.

**Figure 6. Responses to Discrimination in Retail Settings**



As outlined in figure 6 there is a great deal of overlap between previously conceptualized responses to discrimination and the results of this study. The findings illustrate support for Hirschman's (1970) categories of exit, voice, and loyalty, Fleming et al.'s (2011) confrontation



and conflict-deflating strategies, Feagin's (1991) withdrawal and verbal/physical confrontation responses, and Crockett et al.'s (2003) emotion-focused and problem-focused responses.

Extending previous work, the results of this study indicate that the responses adopted could be further conceptualized as preventative and reactive and may be useful in analyzing blacks' responses to discriminatory treatment in other settings. Previous work has not fleshed out the distinction of proactive versus reactive responses. Often the preemptive steps blacks take in order to limit their exposure to discriminatory treatment in retail settings are overlooked, but also overlooked is the degree that responses tend to be individual or collective. This research finds that respondents overwhelmingly adopted individual level responses to discriminatory treatment, a topic discussed at length below.

Additionally, as evidenced in this study and in others, there is a broad spectrum of responses that blacks employ when faced with discrimination; however, the results of this study indicate that in retail settings some responses were more salient than others. Among respondents in this study the most frequently employed response was to exit. Confrontational responses, speaking out or suing, were rarely used, suggesting that these responses in retail settings are chosen only after careful consideration or constitute extreme measures that only a few blacks will and do employ. Additionally, in contrast to findings of ethnographic research, dressing up to shop was also rarely cited practice. While blacks were conscious that how they dressed would impact how they would be treated, most did not think it worthwhile to invest the time and effort. As Curtis, a political staffer, notes, although you might be treated unfavorably because of your race if and “when you come in—when you're going in to Bergdorf's with sweatpants on”—but that does not change the way he dresses when he shops there. As he says, “I don't really care

about what I'm dressed like when I'm not trying to make a power move or something . . . I just dress for comfort. I'd wear slippers to Bergdorf's to buy whatever I'm looking for."

Finally, in direct contradiction to Anderson's (2011) observation that blacks are hypersensitive to racial discrimination in public settings and are likely to perceive that any instance of poor treatment or service in public as discriminatory, respondents in this study indicated careful assessment of the causes of discriminatory treatment and were even hesitant to describe an encounter as racially discriminatory. It is worth repeating that respondents described their encounter of racial discrimination in retail settings as being elusive in nature—descriptions that are in line with theories of contemporary racism that conceive of racial discrimination as hidden and unspoken yet embedded in the social order. (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Bobo 2009; Massey 2007).

Yet beyond the spectrum of possible and observed responses, important patterns emerged across respondents. First, subtle class and gender differences were evident in terms of the types of discriminatory treatment respondents reported encountering and their responses. Second, in accounting for discriminatory treatment, respondents often provided individual-level rationales rather than blaming their negative experiences on institutional or organizational policies or practices. Finally, respondents' responses were contingent on individual actors, and not seen as collective responses or to be collectively oriented. Analyzing these responses reveals a significant, if qualified, insight into the effectiveness of such individual efforts.

### *Class and Gender Differences*

While the results of this research are not generalizable, they are suggestive. They suggest that not all blacks encounter the same type of discrimination in retail settings and blacks'

responses to discriminatory treatment potentially reflects an intersection of both their gender and class position.

With regard to the type of discrimination they face in retail settings, a smaller proportion of black women than of black men reported encountering the perception that they had no money to spend because they were black. This was particularly true for middle-class black women. In fact, 67 percent of middle-class black men reported encounters where they perceived that store staff believed they were unable to buy something, in comparison 37 percent of middle-class black women. This finding suggest that middle-class women may be better able to convey their class standing to sales staff. Also, a slightly higher proportion of working-class respondents (60 percent) than middle-class respondents (50 percent), reported encountering the negative perception that blacks are unable to afford goods, and members of the working class reported at higher rates that they were subject to the stereotype that they were potential shoplifters.

With regard to gender and class differences in how blacks respond to discriminatory treatment, middle-class black women were the least likely of all groups to report exiting the store when they were treated unfavorable. Additionally, more middle-class women used the show and prove strategy. Together these findings suggest that middle-class women might feel more entitled to favorable treatment when compared to other blacks and they may suggest that middle-class women experience shopping as requiring more effort because they are more likely to adopt a wider range of strategies, including a mix of preventative and reactive strategies, than are working-class respondents or even middle-class black men. A larger fraction (60 percent) of middle-class men reported simply exiting the store; only 42 percent of middle-class women adopted this strategy. A larger proportion of middle-class black men also reported avoiding stores that were out of their price range, compared to middle-class women, though actively

avoided window shopping; was a strategy that both genders of the middle class reported at a higher rate than members of the working class.

Of all groups, a smaller fraction of working-class respondents used the “show and prove” strategy, and no working-class blacks made a purchase to prove a point. This suggests that to show and prove requires or reflects middle-class sensibilities and, to some extent, that the response of making a purchase is class-contingent. Obviously, the “show and prove” strategy is more available to middle-class blacks who have discretionary income to carry it out

#### *Discrimination at the Individual vs. Institutional Level*

In accounting for discrimination in retail settings, respondents cited many potential causes, few of which include institutional or store level practices or policies; instead, they overwhelmingly elicit individualistic accounts of discrimination. Respondents place blame on individual store personnel; for example, that a sales person is “ignorant,” “irrational,” or “having a bad day.” They attribute negative perceptions of black shoppers to individual-level bias and racial prejudice. However, closer analysis reveals that respondents perceive that stores, and consequently their personnel, do market to an ideal customer type, however, this hardly ever comprises of black shoppers.

Javon hints at this when he explains why he does not like to shop in Paul Stuart. As he explains, “They really do make me feel uncomfortable as a black man. And I think it’s also because I’m—they figure their style and the price points are not for young people, they’re not for black people. So that’s one place I don’t enjoy.” Amare makes a similar point in a more explicit fashion. He says, “Their typical client is not me. You know, I’m not their typical clientele... You got a 25-year-old black man in there, and its like, this stuff isn’t even geared for him. You know?” Respondents provided evidence additional evidence that stores visualize ideal customers

when they account for sales staff, who working on commission, target white customers while ignoring them.

It is important to note that it is not only black Americans who are excluded from or made to feel unwelcome in U.S. retail venues. Zukin (2004) argues the “homeless, young, or dark-skinned” consumers are those who are perceived as least desirable and who are “subject to additional surveillance” (29). Yet to the extent that a racial hierarchy exists, blacks’ position on it might require additional efforts to overcome discrimination in ways not needed by whites and other consumers. For example, even though, as Zukin argues with regard to shopping in high-end stores, “most of us wouldn’t even try to go into a shop that doesn’t hang price tags on its goods—and if we do try to go in, we dress differently for the encounter” (29), indicating that status enhancing strategies used by respondents in this study may also be employed by whites or other marginalized groups. Such strategies are less likely to succeed for blacks if sales staff operates with a racialized ideal consumer in mind. Not only does this state of affairs contradict notions of equal treatment for equal dollars, but it emphasizes the existence of a racial hierarchy and blacks’ placement at the bottom of it.

### *Individual vs. Collective Level Responses*

This chapter provides evidence that while blacks’ have an arsenal of strategies, both proactive and reactive, which help them to respond to discriminatory treatment in retail settings, these strategies almost exclusively individual-level responses to stigma. Only to a small extent can it be argued that respondents’ reactions had a collective dimension—yet that dimension is worth noting. When Angela and Damon indicated that they adopted the “show and prove” strategy, for example, it was with the hope that their response would elicit better service in the future for themselves and other black shoppers. They made a purchase with the goal of

contradicting the negative perception that blacks have no money to spend. As Damon notes, “I kind of say to myself maybe they won’t treat the next guy that looks like me that way. So maybe if I go back in there next time, they might hop to and say, Oh, how’s it going? You know, and treat me a little different.” Respondents also related their experiences to their rights as citizens and to the struggle that others have endured to ensure that they have the right to shop freely. Similarly, respondents who speak up or out hope that calling attention to prejudicial treatment will educate sales staff or make them aware of their inappropriate behavior. However, even when a response has a collective element, that is in so far as it is enacted to benefit a larger symbolic community of blacks, respondents almost unanimously placed the blame for the discrimination on individual actors, ignoring and thereby not confronting potential institutional or organizational level practices or policies.

## **Conclusion**

Blacks’ constitute a sizable consumer pool, with a projected buying power of \$1.1 trillion in 2012 (Packaged Facts 2010). Blacks’ collective buying power will continue to grow as more blacks enter the ranks of the middle class. Yet nearly 50 years after the passage of the 1964 civil rights act, blacks still experience discriminatory treatment in retail settings. The chapter points to three central takeaways. First, despite the fact that blacks spend more money on apparel than whites (Consumer Expenditure Survey 2008), the majority of blacks have encountered discrimination in retail settings. Discrimination is, in fact, pervasive in the retail sector, meaning that black consumers face added challenges when attempting to engage in consumption and the marketplace functions as another institutional context in which racial hierarchies are upheld and white privilege is affirmed. Furthermore, a disjuncture exists between the reality on the ground

and national claims that consumption is a sphere where there is “equal treatment for equal dollars.”

In fact, democratic notions of freedom to spend without constraint are clearly not upheld for blacks, a fact that elicits a larger question about blacks’ place in society. If as Zukin (2004) argues “shopping forces us both to take account of our place in society and to imagine what it would be like to rise above it” (2004:29), then what does it mean that blacks still remain at the bottom of the customer hierarchy and that, irrespective of their earnings, it is assumed that they cannot afford to be shopping where they are shopping? While consumption scholars like James Twitchell argue that shopping is a pleasurable activity and a leisure pursuit, one wonders to what extent this holds true for blacks who are subject to additional surveillance and often must confront negative racial stigma in the marketplace.

Second, this research shows that blacks are exposed to an array of types of discrimination, all of which are subtle in form and may be difficult to detect. While not exhaustive, the aforementioned typology—being stereotyped as criminal and poor and being provided with sub-par or inferior service—evidences that the nature of discrimination in retail settings is experienced as interpersonal and interactional. These findings have implications for legal reform, particularly as a large proportion of all respondents reported encountering discriminatory treatment, yet none took legal action. Suing as a response to discriminatory treatment was a measure that no blacks in this study reported utilizing—possibly prudently, given that research on instances where blacks have sought redress for discriminatory treatment using legal means has indicated that there are limits to legal recourse. Particularly, as none of the discriminatory treatment blacks frequently encounter would compel restitution under the current civil rights laws. Furthermore, as retail settings are not explicitly indicated as places of “public

accommodation” according to Title II (b) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Harris et al. 2005, p 165)<sup>27</sup> there is little protection for blacks who are subjected to these small-scale discriminatory encounters<sup>28</sup>.

Additional research is needed to further elucidate the prevalence of discriminatory treatment of black shoppers. Survey methods, rather than qualitative interviews, are likely to give the greater insight into the likelihood that blacks will encounter discrimination treatment every time they go shopping. Future research should also investigate where and how the strategies used by respondents in this study to counter discrimination are learned, and why they are adopted.

Blacks continued exposure to differential treatment in retail settings calls into question the extent to which blacks are included in the “consumer republic” and whether they are entitled to and experience equally the right to shop. The contradiction between collectively expressed U.S. values and the perennial nature of anti-black sentiments in retail settings is one reason that it is important to investigate blacks’ experiences with retail racism. Additionally, because retail settings are microcosms of the larger public sphere that blacks transverse daily, it is important to continually investigate blacks’ experiences and interactions there. Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997) indicate that, despite a clear shift in stated racial attitudes on many levels, anti-black

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<sup>27</sup> Citing Title II(b) of the 1964 Civil Rights Act as the law that defines what constitutes a place of public accommodation, Harris et al. (2005) point to the following: an “establishment that provides lodging to transient guests,” such as a hotel or inn, any “facility principally engaged in selling food for consumption on the premises,” such as a restaurant, and any “place of exhibition or entertainment,” such as a theater or sports arena (165).

<sup>28</sup> While what people experience as discrimination spans a wide range of treatment, what courts define as discrimination is quite narrow (Harris et al. 2005). At present blacks are only guaranteed protection in two instances: (1) when they are prevented or prohibited from making a purchase, which is understood as limitation on their ability to enter into a contractual relationship or to purchase “personal property” due to their race; (2) when a discriminatory incident occurs in “retail stores that contain eating establishments” or another place included under public accommodation portion of the civil rights act (i.e., hotels, restaurants, etc.). Thus federal law does not protect racial minorities from discriminatory treatment in the majority of retail settings. When firms are sued for discriminatory treatment, they often settle or resolve claims of discrimination out of court, which as Harris et al. argue, “enables defendants to shield themselves from greater scrutiny and bad publicity” (165), but does little for legal reform.



sentiments and beliefs remain pervasive. Similarly, Feagin (1998) notes that “the micro-level events of public streets are not just rare and isolated encounters by individuals; they are recurring events reflecting an invasion of the micro-world by macro-world of historical racial subordination” (p 292). By examining blacks’ experiences “shopping while black,” I hope to have highlighted the ways in which the micro-world and macro-world intersect in retail settings and markedly change blacks’ experiences as consumers.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

Mobilized to improve blacks' mobility prospects and to facilitate their way of life, consumption preferences and practices are constitute socially and symbolically significant cultural and material resources. In accounting for blacks' divergent spending, as they allocate a higher fraction of their budgets to spending in sectors such as personal care, apparel, and electronics, scholars, ranging from economists to ethnographers, have argued that blacks are more likely to be status seekers and their spending reflects their quest for status. In accounting for blacks' consumption, this explanation only touches the surface. In this dissertation I have extended an alternative account. I employ a comprehensive conceptualization of consumption to permits an analysis of the multiple dimensions and functions consumption goods serve, and address the impact of marketplace discrimination on blacks' experiences as consumers.

Race, a product of one's racial identity and experiences of racial alienation, has an abiding influence on blacks' consumption preferences and practices, however dimensions of social settings determine the means by which race structures blacks' consumption. Race is a mitigating factor that imposes certain requirements and restrictions on black consumers that inevitably differentiate black consumers' motivations from those of other groups. However, as blacks use goods to counteract racial stigma and/or to express or affirm their racial identity, their consumption practices are often driven by conditions evident in the social context in which their practices are enacted. As such, blacks necessarily have to maintain a heightened consciousness about how and when they used consumption objects to be perceived as acceptable and respectable. For instance, the self-presentation strategies respondents adopted at work and the

degree they expressed and enacted their racialized tastes and practices, were conditional on their workplace racial climate and racial demographics.

Consumption is externally motivated to the extent that it is modified as a response to the conditions of the social context. But blacks' consumption is also internally motivated, as blacks use goods as symbolic communicators of their racial identity. Each chapter of this dissertation examines blacks' consumption in a different social sphere to illustrate how dimensions of the social context influence how race affects blacks' consumption.

Whether at work or at home in their neighborhoods, in social settings where race is highly salient, blacks often have experiences indicative of their token status. That is, they endure heightened visibility, encounter negative stereotypes or prejudicial views, and are socially isolated. However, not all social settings are characterized by pervasive racial stigma. In majority blacks' social spaces, and even in interactions with other blacks in majority white settings, blacks do not report having to use consumption objects to respond to racial stigma. Blacks also feel less pressure to conceal their racialized preferences when in the company of other blacks. This is an important indication that upwardly mobile blacks often exhibit cultural flexibility as they traverse through social spaces with cultural norms and codes of conduct that have racial undertones.

In comparison to whites, blacks are often cheated of the full perks and benefits that come with living in a Consumer Republic. First, they perceive that they are not free to engage their race-based cultural dispositions in certain contexts, for instance, while at work when their workplaces are predominantly non-black. In other social spheres their race and class-based preferences are at odds, for instance, with regard to their neighborhoods. Respondents, such as Tasha, a 28 year old Harvard trained lawyer, indicate that they forfeit their class-based taste in

exchange for the opportunity to enact their race-based inclinations. As Tasha describes having to go outside her neighborhood to actualize her taste for Thai food, however, she lists all the reasons she “loves” living in Harlem despite the inconveniences it imposes on her ability to realize class-based taste and preferences:

There’s no Thai restaurants here. Like all of the places where if me and my boyfriend are like, let’s go out to eat, we don’t go out to eat in Harlem, like we go somewhere, we go downtown or to Upper West Side. We don’t go out to eat here. There are definitely things that are lacking but with that said... I really love living here. I love living in the black neighborhood. I love going through the C-Town and they’re playing Beyoncé and songs, from, that I like, songs that I sing along to like—and then I feel just like a certain sense of... I don’t know, like—pride cause there’s so much history here... When I walk down 125th Street and I’m like this is, this is one of those streets that everyone knows. Nationwide. If you’re black, you’ve heard of 125th Street. You’ve heard of Sylvia’s Soul Food and that’s around the corner from my house and the Apollo Theatre is around the other corner from my house, so those kinds of things... I love the spirit of it. When Obama was elected it was a party in the streets and we were playing drums and it was so much fun and like when Michael Jackson died and people were partying, literally celebrating his life in front of the Apollo Theatre. It’s just those things that you just, it’s that soul, that you just don’t get anywhere else, that if I lived in Chelsea—and then there’s also, there’s community. Like there’s a man who plays the Cassio keyboard on Lenox right up the street, Lenox between 126th and 125<sup>th</sup>. Every day he says good morning to me, every day. In Chelsea, the bums wouldn’t speak to me... there’s a sense of community even though it’s the doctor and the drug dealer, but they both know each other and say like “what’s up?” when they pass on their way to wherever they’re going.

This duality, of having middle-class sensibilities—Tasha’s wanting a Thai restaurant nearby, together with race-based sensibilities—her sense of racial pride that is attached to living a black neighborhood and her appreciation of the enactment of group specific norms, as Tasha describes of strangers greeting one another on the street, separates black consumers from whites and other groups.

Blacks express racialized tastes in order to preserve a sense of distinctiveness and in their everyday practices they can construct symbolic unity with other blacks. Embedded in their preferences and practices are codes and cultural understandings that carry particular racial meanings. In this dissertation I reveal that blacks’ use of goods is not used to reaction to negative

racial stigma, but consumption objects also play an important role in forming and sustaining intra-racial relations. Even to the degree that blacks use consumption goods to heighten their status, they are not just keeping up with Jones, but also with the Johnsons, and they admire and aspire to be like Oprah, the Obamas, and Jay Z and Beyonce.

But unlike instances where ethnic and national identity are tied to consumption, for instance, in the case of gastronationalism, negative perceptions of racialized taste and practices are not considered by blacks in this study to be “assaults on heritage and culture” (DeSoucey 2010). Blacks in many instances modify or conceal their race-based preferences because displaying or engaging them would heighten the salience of their race. For instance, while in workplace settings, blacks’ practices with regard to how they dress and style their hair, do not necessarily reflect a sincere and deeply embedded commitment to a particular style; rather, their practices are often modified in accordance with environmental cues that signal to them that their race is highly salient and consequential for their advancement. While racialized practices, for instance, being a hip hop deejay on the weekends, may be stigmatizing or discrediting in one social setting, in another that same practice might be valorized as a symbol of one’s racial identity, heritage, and culture, in addition to being a valid form of leisure.

There are several implications of this work that are relevant for the study of blacks’ contemporary experiences and the study of consumption. First, this research reveals that blacks are highly conscious of their race and the consequences of how their race might be perceived. This sheds light on the contemporary experiences of blacks, but also on the elusive nature of modern forms of discrimination. Second, it indicates that for blacks their preferences are not always reflected in their consumption practices as a consequence of their race.

To the first point, in instances where blacks in this study encountered retail racism, they indicated a careful assessment of the causes of discriminatory treatment and were even hesitant to describe an encounter as racially discriminatory. Their experiences lend credence to scholars who propose theories of contemporary racism that conceive of it as subtle and barely discernible, yet deeply embedded in the social order (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Bobo 2009; Massey 2007). Additionally, this research demonstrates that blacks employ a wide spectrum of responses in anticipation and response to racial discriminatory treatment, specifically in retail settings, which not only differentiate them as consumers, but illustrates that blacks encounter stereotypes that reflect both their race and gender, e.g, black men being perceived as aggressive and more likely to have criminal tendencies than black women. For blacks with money to spend, their money is still seen as not as good as that of whites, which indicates that despite a widespread national culture of consumerism, blacks who outspend whites, are far too often the recipients of inferior treatment and service.

In summary, by analyzing blacks' tastes and dispositions, and their everyday rituals and routines, evident across contexts, two things become clear regarding the relationship between blacks' consumption preferences and practices: (1) their practices are necessary adaptations to environmental cues which signal to them whether or not their race is highly salient and consequential in their achieving a particular end, and (2) their preferences are not always linked to their practices due to constraints they experience because of their race, including racial discrimination and pervasive negative stereotypes.

While exceptionalism, in dress, demeanor, and performance, symptoms of the "Jackie Robinson Syndrome," is the most frequently used self-presentation strategy in workplace settings, blacks in this study report that using consumption objects to signal their status was

uncommon in low stakes settings, i.e., retail shops. Even though respondents indicated that the way they dressed impacted how they were treated when they shopped; as even those who did not report having discriminatory encounters believed dress to be an important factor in the service they were provided when they shopped. Of the forty-four respondents who were subject to discriminatory treatment, nine stated that the discrimination they experienced was heavily influenced by how they were dressed. Yet only three respondents mentioned that they attempted to modify their self-presentation when they shopped; the rest said it was more important to be comfortable or shop when it was convenient for them, and they did not believe it was worth the effort to dress up. While blacks were conscious that how they dressed would impact how they would be treated, most did not think it worthwhile to invest the time and effort. Even as blacks are constantly aware of their status and prejudicial perceptions of their racial group, they are not at all times willing to invest time and monies to proactively manage racial stigma.

While collectively held societal values suggest blacks' inclusion in the consumer republic, blacks' experience in the marketplace evidence their continued exclusion. The ineffectiveness of using goods to counteract stigma is evident in the extent that blacks continue to encounter stigma for instance in retail settings. As Crockett, Grier, and Williams (2003) suggest "status markers" are limited in their capacity to change one's perceived status as status markers can be reinterpreted such that they are consistent with racially biased views (Crockett et al.2003:2). That is, a high status good may not confer status for black people in the same ways that it does for a white people.

E. Franklin Frazier (1962) argues that blacks prioritize consumption at their peril. He argues that this reflects a short-sighted goal, of amassing material possessions to signify the acquisition of a middle-class lifestyle, even though doing so might worsen blacks' economic

position, as it diverts energies and resources from increasing real wealth and true economic power and influence. The never ending and insatiable desire for goods, which would be suggested by the relative status model, would also predict the relative salience of materialistic values. The prevalence of materialistic values arguably could undermine collectivistic ideals that exist within the black community, evidenced by linked fate and racial uplift. However, the reverse too may be true. That is, blacks, who subscribe to collectivistic principles of linked fate and racial uplift, might behave differently than similarly positioned whites, if they place a high value on “giving back” as a sort of duty to the race. Their use of consumption objects might tend toward collaborative rather than competitive functions relative to other groups. Yet this is an empirical question that future research must answer. While the degree that race impacts middle and working-class blacks’ material aspirations remains a question, as evidenced in this dissertation, race structures their consumption preferences and practices, impacting their daily routines and rituals, as well as their marketplace interactions.



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**APPENDIX**

**Table 8. Profile of Study Respondents**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Class</b>
<b>Adam</b>	M	35	High School	Library Technical Assistant	\$25000 to 49999	working class
<b>Alysha</b>	F	26	Bachelor's	Finance Analyst	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Amare</b>	M	30	Bachelor's	Finance Liaison	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Amber</b>	F	32	Master's	School Recruiter	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Angela</b>	F	28	J.D.	Corporate Attorney	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Antoine</b>	M	36	Bachelor's	Firefighter	\$75000 to 99999	working class
<b>Ashlee</b>	F	28	Bachelor's	Human Resources	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Brandon</b>	M	28	Bachelor's	Manager of Retail Store	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Brittany</b>	F	28	J.D.	Attorney	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Bryson</b>	M	-	J.D.	Attorney		middle class
<b>Carl</b>	M	27	Associate's	Door Attendant	\$25000 to 49999	working class
<b>Christina</b>	F	30	High School	Administrative Assistant		working class
<b>Crystal</b>	F	29	Master's	Executive Assistant	\$50000 to 74999	working class
<b>Curtis</b>	M	34	Bachelor's	Director of Community Relations	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Damon</b>	M	30	Bachelor's	Tax Preparer	\$25000 to 49999	middle class
<b>Damon</b>	M	29	Bachelor's	Associate in Legal Department	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Daniel</b>	M	35	Bachelor's	Training Specialist	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Darryl</b>	M	28	Bachelor's	Bank Associate	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Desiree</b>	F	29	Bachelor's	Marketing Professional	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Eric</b>	M	27	Bachelor's	Director of Strategy	<i>Info. Missing</i>	middle class
<b>Erica</b>	F	29	Bachelor's	Membership Manager	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Heather</b>	F	29	Bachelor's	Deputy Director	\$75000 to 99999	middle class
<b>Isaiah</b>	M	31	Bachelor's	Entrepreneur	\$100000 +	middle class

**Table 8. (Continued) Profile of Study Respondents**

<b>Jabari</b>	M	<i>Info. Missing</i>	<i>Info. Missing</i>	Job Counselor	<i>Info. Missing</i>	working class
<b>Jada</b>	F	28	Bachelor's	Marketing Manager	\$75000 to 99999	middle class
<b>James</b>	M	39	Bachelor's	Firefighter	\$75000 to 99999	working class
<b>Janae</b>	F	32	Bachelor's	Freelance Television Producer	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Jasmine</b>	F	30	Master's	Teacher	\$75000 to 99999	middle class
<b>Javon</b>	M	32	Master's	Associate at Private Equity Firm	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Jeff</b>	M	28	Bachelor's	Sales Manager	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Jennifer</b>	F	23	Trade School	Nail Technician	<\$24999	working class
<b>Kendra</b>	F	28	MBA	Account Executive	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Kenneth</b>	M	27	Bachelor's	Advertising	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Kevin</b>	M	27	Bachelor's	Accountant	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Lamar</b>	M	34	<i>Info. Missing</i>	Banking VP	<i>Info. Missing</i>	middle class
<b>Larry</b>	M		Bachelor's	Library Tech	<i>Info. Missing</i>	working class
<b>Leah</b>	F	32	Bachelor's	Analyst for Government	\$50000 to 74999	working class
<b>Lisa</b>	F	32	MBA	Managing Partner	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Lori</b>	F	28	Bachelor's	Recruiter	<i>Info. Missing</i>	middle class
<b>Marcus</b>	M	30	Bachelor's	Director of Nonprofit Org.	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Melanie</b>	F	27	High School	Administrative Assistant	<i>Info. Missing</i>	working class
<b>Monique</b>	F	34	Trade School	Hair Stylist	<i>Info. Missing</i>	working class
<b>Nate</b>	M	33	Bachelor's	Parole Officer	\$50000 to 74999	working class
<b>Nicole</b>	F	31	Bachelor's	Broker Contract Specialist	\$25000 to 49999	working class
<b>Patrick</b>	M	28	Associate's	Finance Analyst	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Paul</b>	M	28	Bachelor's	Health Care strategist	\$75000 to 99999	middle class

**Table 8. (Continued)****Profile of Study Respondents**

<b>Renee</b>	F	32	MBA	Digital Marketing Professional	\$75000 to 99999	middle class
<b>Robert</b>	M	28	Bachelor's	Bank Associate	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Shante</b>	F	25	Bachelor's	Marketing Professional	\$25000 to 49999	middle class
<b>Sharon</b>	F	27	Bachelor's	Advertising Account Manager	\$75000 to 99999	middle class
<b>Stacy</b>	F	28	Bachelor's	Advertising	<i>Info. Missing</i>	middle class
<b>Tasha</b>	F	28	J.D.	Asst. Marketing Manager	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Tatiana</b>	M	25	Bachelor's	Senior Banking Analyst	\$50000 to 74999	middle class
<b>Vanessa</b>	F	29	Bachelor's	Consultant	\$100000 +	middle class
<b>Wayne</b>	M	28	Bachelor's	Advertising Sales	\$25000 to 49999	middle class
<b>William</b>	M	32	Master's	School Administrator and Teacher	\$75000 to 99999	middle class