Toward a Minority Culture of Mobility: Immigrant Integration into the African-American Middle Class

Orly Clerge*
Department of Sociology, Yale University

Abstract

Two important social transformations have occurred since the 1960s: the rise of the Black middle class and the influx of immigrants from Latin, America, Asia and Africa. The cultural and economic outcomes for first– and second-generation Black immigrants are often linked to the Black poor/underclass. However, we understand little about the ways in which the Black middle class is a potential pathway of integration for immigrants. This paper reviews the sociological debates on the socioeconomic incorporation of immigrants and the racial and ethnic relations of new and old African-Americans. It discusses the important contributions of minority culture of mobility hypothesis for class-based theories of immigrant integration. We draw from the literature on social stratification, race relations and immigrant incorporation in order to chime in on the conversation about how becoming socially mobile in America may mean having similar social experience as the African-American or minority middle class. The paper also suggests ways to better analyze the relationship between identity, integration, space and generation in minority incorporation.

Two important social transformations have occurred since the 1960s: the rise of the Black middle class and the influx of immigrants from Latin, America, Asia and Africa. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2012), the immigration population totaled approximately 40.8 million, accounting for 13 percent of the overall US population. Between 2000 and 2010, the foreign-born population increased by 31.2 percent, more than three times faster than the US-born population. Second-generation immigrants, too, have dramatically increased. Among children under 18 years, 24.8 percent have at least one parent of immigrant origin compared with 13.4 percent in 1990. The majority of the immigrant population originates from Latin America and the Caribbean (54.2 percent) and Asia (29.2 percent). In light of these population shifts, there are two theoretical and empirical issues at hand in sociological literature. Despite the recent advancements in our knowledge of the socioeconomic and political lives of the African-American middle class, we understand little about (i) how the Black middle class serves as a model of integration for immigrants of color and (ii) the contemporary ethnic heterogeneity that exists among the Black middle class.

This increasing ethnoracial diversity within populations, as well as the emergence of a minority middle class, calls for a reconfiguration of the ways in which we imagine the complexities of social mobility and incorporation for people of color. This paper's goal is to revisit Neckerman, Carter and Lee's theory of the minority culture of mobility (MCM) by merging the literature on the African-American middle class and immigrant integration. This paper will synthesize and bring up to date what we know about how middle-class minorities experience their economic inclusion yet racial exclusion and how the African-American middle class is a key group for understanding how these experience play out in everyday life.

In an in-depth study of the African-American middle class in Chicago, Pattillo-McCoy (1999) noted that middle-class Black immigrants will have different orientations to their class

and racial status compared with middle-class African-Americans. Understanding the similarities and differences between middle-class African-Americans and other foreign-born ethnoracial groups is interesting for several reasons. First, foreign-born Blacks (as well as Latinos and Asians), for example, began migrating to the United States in large numbers after the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act opened up American borders to hundreds of thousands of immigrants. In order to capture the changes occurring as a result of this influx of immigrants, scholars increased research on these communities, noting that they were changing existing race relations (Alba and Nee 2003; Foner 1987; Kasinitz, 1987, 1992; Massey and Denton 1993).

The American economist Thomas Sowell (1978) noted that West Indian migrants fared better than African-Americans in terms of income, educational attainment and entrepreneurship practices. His findings helped construct West Indians as the "better Blacks" or 'exceptional'. This perspective fueled conservative criticisms of Affirmative Action policies and created strong political divisions. The general idea behind West Indian exceptionalism was that Black social mobility was not hindered by racism. West Indians, too, were Black but were faring better than African-Americans. West Indians were said to have a superior culture and work ethic compared with native-born Blacks, leading to their better socioeconomic outcomes. This belief implied that the lack of social advancement among the Black community in England and the United States was more about their cultural inadequacy than the structural racism, which organized American social relations.

In a theoretical piece published in the Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies, Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) argue that Black immigrants are a growing part of the African-American middle class (Neckerman, Carter et al. 1999; Rogers 2006). They put forward the minority culture of mobility hypothesis, which asserts that the African-American middle class is missing in theoretical frameworks of immigrant assimilation. The scholarship on West Indian immigrants and their relations with African-Americans continues to rely on the following assumptions: (i) native-born Blacks are always low income and hinder their own social mobility because they are culturally deficient (Moynihan 1965; Sowell 1978); (ii) the blocked mobility of Blacks is caused by their individual behaviors and decision making as opposed to structures of racism and inequality; and (iii) immigrant incorporation into Black America leads to an underclass status (Portes and Zhou 1993). However, studies have shown that ¾ of Blacks in the United States live outside of poverty and underclass conditions (Pattillo 2005; Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

We will explore the current state of these issues in literature on immigrant social mobility, race and class stratification. This review's goal is to revisit Neckerman, Carter and Lee's minority culture of mobility as an outline for the theoretical possibility. We have yet to explore empirically how the African-American middle class is a viable social group that immigrant groups will become more socially and culturally similar to as they ascend the American class ladder. This paper will consolidate existing perspectives on this topic in order to analyze the experience of minority mobility and the overall representation of Blacks in America today. Lastly, this paper will provide suggestions for increasing the scope of the minority culture of mobility hypothesis for future research on this topic.

Pathways of integration and mobility

Today's immigrants are unambiguously phenotypically different from the European immigrants of the 18th and early 19th centuries. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act lifted the 40-year ban on immigration, and to the surprise of policy makers and laymen, it opened America's doors to the most racially diverse immigrant stock in its history. Because America imagines itself as a White nation, the increased diversity of immigrant groups has created bright social boundaries

that separate immigrants from the native born along racial, ethnic, class, linguistic and religious lines (Alba 2005). As demographics in the previous section described, this has also ethnically diversified the native-born Black populations. How are immigrants, particularly Black immigrants, and their children experiencing socioeconomic integration?

Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) posit that one likely pathway of integration for Black immigrants and other immigrants of color is into the minority middle class. They believe that socially mobile immigrants of color today will adopt a minority culture of mobility (MCM), which helps them navigate economic mobility and racial exclusion. This is disparately different from the older arguments of classical assimilation, which posited that integration into the American middle class occurs when an immigrant group becomes socioeconomically and culturally similar to the White middle class (Park, Burgess and McKenzie 1925). Neckerman, Carter and Lee advocate for the recognition of the minority middle class in general and the African-American middle class in particular. This was an attempt to refine the popular contemporary perspective on immigrant integration, segmented assimilation theory.

Segmented assimilation theory states that immigrants will follow three pathways of incorporation: (i) they will integrate into the *White middle class* and experience upward mobility; (ii) they will reside among and identify with the *poor Black underclass* and experience downward mobility; or (iii) they will form their own *ethnic communities* and experience socioeconomic mobility, albeit limited cultural integration (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). SAT has made important contributions; however, it emphasizes the middle class standing of White Americans while overlooking the class diversity of the native-born African-American population. SAT neglects the cultural variation as well as the class diversity that exists among native-born minorities. Immigrants are left with three options: attempt to integrate with the White middle class, which, despite recent discourses about America being a post–racial society, is exceptionally difficult because White racism continues to keep minorities, especially Blacks, at a safe social and spatial distance (Bonilla-Silva 2009, 2012; Logan 2011). The second option is for immigrants to assimilate into the Black underclass and experience downward mobility. The third pathway is mobility into their ethnic groups' middle class.

Segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993) proposes that Blacks, for example, integrate into different segments of American society because integration into the White middle class is unavailable to them. Therefore, they will integrate into either their own ethnic group or the African-American underclass. Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999), on the other hand, believe that integration into the African-American middle class and the adoption of an African-American culture of mobility is a likely path that should be further explored by immigration theorists. They argue that there is no acknowledgement of the ways in which contemporary racial and ethnic immigrant groups may become similar to the African-American middle class, leaving us with a large gap in our knowledge of how immigrant and Black communities may work.

African-American and other minority groups are constructed as being a part of the urban poor when demographic data demonstrate that that is only part of the story (Pattillo 2005, Landry and Marsh 2011). In 2012, the majority of the African-American population (62 percent) lived outside of poverty (see Figure 1). Scholars are bringing our attention to the presence of African-Americans and other racial minorities in the service lower class, working class, middle class and upper class (Dhingra 2007; Gregory 1999; Itzigsohn 2009; Oswald 1999; Vallejo and Lee 2009). An increasing number of Blacks and Latinos are in middle-class occupations, marking the increased occupational and class differentiation of these minority groups (Alba 2009).

Some may wonder how a socially mobile immigrant group may become similar to the African-American middle class. This may seem particularly unlikely if one focuses on the

	African America	Black Immigrant
Total Population	25,554,024 (89.7%)	2,908,991 (10.3%)
Median Family Income	$36,000	$45,013
Median Household Income	$41,000	$52,000
Lower Middle Class (%) ($30-$49,999)[1]	19.8	17.2
Middle Middle Class (%) ($50-$99,999)	28	30.7
Upper Middle Class (%) ($100,000+)	14	21
Some College (%)	30.5	26.7
College (%)	16.8	28.2

Source: Current Population Survey (2012). Class categories adopted from Lacy's (2007) *Blue Chip Black: Race, Class and Status in the New Black Middle Class* definitions of lower, middle, and upper middle class blacks

Figure 1 Socioeconomic characteristics among Blacks by nativity (2012).

tensions, which exist between ethnic and racial groups (Lee 2002; Kaufmann 2003). Also, prior literature has noted that middle-class Black immigrants and non-Black racial groups distance themselves from native-born Blacks. For example, middle-class West Indians do not identify as Blacks in order to demonstrate that they are "different" and "better" than African-Americans, who they see as being low income and status deprived (Waters 1999). However, the African-American middle class is a viable pathway of socioeconomic and cultural integration for immigrants of color. Despite how immigrants may feel toward one another, the structural realities of racial discrimination and class inequality mark their social experiences and interactions, causing them to use their identities and resources to offset the racial and class disadvantages, which they face.

Similar to the minority culture of mobility framework, the mainstream assimilation perspective argues that the downward assimilation of second-generation minority immigrants emphasized in segmented assimilation research is overstated and presents a distorted depiction of how immigrant youths are experiencing mobility (Alba, Kasinitz and Waters 2011). While studies argue that minorities and immigrants today are "downwardly assimilating" and are largely worse off than their parents (Haller, Portes and Lynch 2011; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly and Haller 2005), the second-generation immigrants in New York are inserted into various segments of the American class structure (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Mainstream assimilation posits that segmented assimilation underestimates the fluidity of racial boundaries and the changing economic structure that immigrants are experiencing. The ability of many minorities and immigrants to benefit from the Civil Rights Movement and gain access to previously exclusionary White spaces of work, learning and residence calls for a comprehensive look at the complexities of immigration today.

Revisiting segmented assimilation: the minority culture of mobility

In order to address this theoretical gap in the segmented assimilation literature, which is discussed in the new assimilation and mainstream assimilation framework (Alba 2009; Alba,

Kasinitz and Waters 2011; Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Perlmann, Waldinger et al. 1996), Neckerman, Carter and Lee have proposed the minority culture of mobility (MCM). MCM is defined as a constellation of cultural beliefs and behaviors, specific to the minority middle class and absent from the White middle class. MCM provides a set of tools for managing economic assimilation and mobility in conjunction with the persistent racism and group disadvantage that accompany being a person of color and middle class in America. MCM is more appropriate for immigrant groups who have remained in the United States for a significant amount of time. New immigrants are believed to have dense social ties with their ethnic group, and remain in occupations within the ethnic economy and neighborhood, therefore forming ethnic communities. However, over time, these ties with the ethnic group wane as immigrants seek work, school and/or social activities and consumption outside of their ethnic community (if language permits and ethnoracial discrimination lowers). MCM provides insight into the cultural and social shifts that occur to an immigrant group once they move away from their immigrant community and access middle-class lifestyles.

Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) argue that the African-American middle class, for example, is an invisible yet key group that immigrants will have as a model for managing their insider/outsider social position in everyday life. Neckerman, Carter and Lee state

> It is because the minority middle class has long coped with such barriers that its experiences might be relevant. Just as immigrants might borrow oppositional culture from poor inner-city minorities, we suggest, they might also borrow cultural elements from the minority middle class (p. 946).

They challenged the segmented assimilation's theoretical framing of African-American lower-class, ethnic communities and White middle-class behaviors as having "oppositional," "resourceful" and "mainstream" views, respectively. Research has demonstrated that Whites participate heavily in drug use, underperform in school and have oppositional attitudes toward mainstream conformity (Kasinitz 2008; MacLeod 1987). Yet, adversarial behaviors are continuously attributed to African-Americans. They are often constructed in the American popular imagination as coming from the 'iconic ghetto' (Anderson 2012) and living on the margins of American society. But the minority middle class is thriving and cannot elucidate how race and class work in America today.

As Black immigrants enter into the middle class, they are a prime example of a group that will become increasingly similar to their proximal hosts, middle-class African-Americans. Black immigrants have a sizeable middle class, with the majority occupying lower and middle middle-class positions like African-Americans (see Figure 2). However, Black immigrants have a higher percentage of their population in the upper middle class (21 percent) than African-Americans (14 percent). The Black immigrant population has a sizeable middle-class population, with a median household income of $52,000 and 28 percent of the population holding at least a college degree. These social and economic indicators suggest that the Black immigrant middle class has many similarities to the African-American middle class.

In terms of social experience, Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) use the Black middle class as a departure point for theorizing the distinctive problems that arise for middle-class minorities. Because of the realities of racial exclusion and class inequality, the minority middle class must negotiate interracial contact with Whites and interclass relations with lower-class co-ethnics strategically. There are "competing demands of the White mainstream and the minority community which place real social stressors on middle class minorities" (p. 949). In interactions with Whites in schools, neighborhoods or work, the minority middle class exercises particular identities and practices, which are embedded in the larger ethnoracial minority culture. These identities are responses to the social conditions experienced by immigrants who have spent a

	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian
Total Population	28,463,015	163,894,049	36,583,515	12,432,956
Median Family Income	$37,002	$63,550	$39,500	$65,606
Median Household Income	$42,000	$70,003	$46,420	$75,000
Lower Middle Class (%) ($30-$49,999)	19.5	17.4	23.9	14.1
Middle Middle Class (%) ($50-$99,000)	28.2	32.9	30.7	31.7
Upper Middle Class (%) ($100,000+)	14.7	29.7	15.5	35.7
Some College (%)	30.1	28.8	22.1	20.7
College (%)	18	30.8	12.1	46.2

Source: Current Population Survey (2012)

Figure 2 Socioeconomic characteristics by race and ethnicity, United States (2012).

significant amount of time in the United States. A "racial learning" takes place over time in conjunction with economic mobility, which sets the minority middle-class immigrant group in a peculiar position, sometimes creating competing insider/outsider identities. As stated in race-class debates about the allegiances of the Black middle class, race or class (or even ethnic) identity becomes salient, in particular social settings.

Middle-class African-Americans experience the following social problems in interactions with the White world: conformity to White middle-class norms, overt and covert racism and prejudice, the psychological burden of being the "token" minority, isolation, and the glass ceiling in the workplace (for more citations, see Feagin and Sikes 1995). In interclass interactions with the lower class, middle-class minorities must adopt identities and practices to manage their relationships with lower-class co-ethnics. For example, African-Americans are more likely than their White counterparts to have lower-class African-American neighbors, family members and associates (Landry and Marsh 2011; Massey and Denton 1993). While the minority middle class may experience support and reverence from lower-class co-ethnics because of their economic achievement, they deal with interclass social problems in a minority community, which encounters significant racial boundaries to achieving middle-class status. Some of these problems include managing contentious relations with lower-class co-ethnics who are jealous of one's achievement, responding to accusations of "acting White," balancing demands for financial assistance and figuring out methods to use their status to improve the conditions of their communities (Hine 2003; Landry and Marsh 2011).

The minority culture of mobility hypothesis enhances the explanatory power of segmented assimilation by accounting for middle-class native minority groups in the assimilation process. Strategic assimilation, too, serves to improve upon segmented assimilation theory. Strategic assimilation, a concept put forward by Karyn Lacy in her provocative text *Blue-Chip Black*: *Race, Class and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (2007), frames the ways in which middle-class Black adults work and reside in predominately White spaces yet cultivate and maintain sociocultural ties to other Blacks. In essence, strategic assimilation is both an act of happily participating in Black life and a culture, and it is also a necessary strategy for Blacks to operate

successfully in mixed and separate racial worlds. Using segmented assimilation as a departure point, Lacy posits that the Black middle class has their own distinct assimilation pattern and incorporation experience into the American mainstream. In essence, there is an African-American culture of mobility, which strategic assimilation captures. However, the African-American culture of mobility differs from strategic assimilation in that Lacy emphasizes how class position shapes the assimilation preferences of Blacks. Blacks seek participation in Black life, both as a response to the racial boundaries they encounter in the White spaces they frequent and also because there is pleasure derived from cultural and social ties to the Black community.

While MCM may manifest in similar ways across groups, the culture and social position of a group shapes how members of that group experience interracial and interclass relations and build their identities and practices. In a study of the Dominican immigrant community in Providence, Rhode Island, Itzigsohn (2009) contributes a nuanced perspective to assimilation debates, stratified ethnoracial incorporation (SEI). Stratified ethnoracial incorporation highlights how class stratification and racialization work together to shape the social and economic experiences and outcomes of immigrant groups and their children. SEI emphasizes how racial categories and class status influence the identity formation of immigrants, creating divided incorporation processes among second-generation immigrants. In terms of identities, the Dominican first generation constructs transnational identities. They are connected to their homeland through their identity labels and practices. However, the Dominican second generation's identities are ethnic and panethnic in nature and are influenced by the racial and class structure in the United States. Because of the color line in the United States, the boundaries around ethnoracial identities for Dominican immigrants are strong, leading them to identify more with American minorities than with Whites. Therefore, becoming American for Dominican immigrants means that they are becoming minorities.

Itzigsohn argues that class matters in the integration of an ethnoracial group. Middle-class Dominican immigrants confront a racialized class structure, and their incorporation patterns are more similar to that of African-Americans than Whites. The middle class is conscious of their position as racial minorities. Counter to the predictions of segmented assimilation theory that posit that affiliations with a native minorities lead to downward mobility, the Dominican second generation are experiencing intergenerational upward mobility. The middle class criticizes life in America more so than their lower-class peers and also has high future aspirations for themselves and their ethnic group. This marks the interplay between economic integration and social marginalization highlighted in MCM. This is in line with Lamont's (2000) work on lower-class African-American men who are more likely than middle-class African-Americans to buy into mainstream ideas about meritocracy, individualism and morality. Therefore, the stratified ethnoracial incorporation model refines segmented assimilation theory by taking the class differentiation and native-born minority population seriously.

Korean immigrants have a more favorable status in the racial hierarchy than Black and Latino immigrants (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Kim 2003; Lee and Bean 2007). Therefore, the extent to which Koreans and Blacks and Latinos encounter racism and conformity to Whites will differ; in turn impacting the type of cultural tools, they adopt to navigate this boundary. Furthermore, ethnic group matters. Among Latino immigrants, for example, Cuban immigrants have higher incomes as an overall group than immigrant groups such as Mexicans, who are less occupationally incorporated (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Therefore, the interclass boundary management is likely to be more salient among Mexicans than among Cubans because of their propinquity and higher frequency of social contact with low-income Mexicans in their families and communities (see Vallejo 2008 for discussion of 'enduring familiarity of poverty' for Mexican individuals).

What groups may experience MCM versus mobility into the White middle class? One can imagine that groups who continue to experience racial boundaries (those who are unable to pass because of their skin color and physical features or who are low income) will experience MCM. They will interact with the mainstream in similar ways as Blacks. However, Bonilla Silva and others have argued that the United States will be a tri-partite racial system where Blacks will be at the bottom, honorary Whites will be in the middle and Whites will remain at the top. Minority groups that represent "honorary Whites" (Asian or light skin Latinos who are more affluent) are likely to experience less racial boundaries in everyday life than Blacks and darker skin Asians and Latinos. This suggests that they will follow a pathway into the White middle class, albeit limited, because of the continued significance of race. The experience of non-Black immigrant minority groups will be more favorable than Blacks. However, their minority status vis a vis Whites limits their full integration into Whiteness. As a result, racial and class boundaries and MCM will be relevant to their social experience.

Therefore, how immigrants talk about who they are, behave in certain contexts and make decisions about their lives will begin to look similar to Blacks in the middle class. This may occur because they confront similar boundaries and also because they are up against similar challenges and social problems such as tokenism, glass ceilings, exclusion from Whites, and being targets of the state and policing practices as middle-class Black. In order to rise above these challenges, they will take on social, economic and political strategies in order to cope with these structures of inequality. For example, they may choose to live in neighborhoods that are racially integrated as opposed to predominately White to bypass racist encounters. These strategies may become a part of a groups' culture and shared understandings. Therefore, it may have cultural outcomes. In the next sections, we will explore the state of the African–American and Black immigrant middle class.

Ethnicity and class: Black community transformed

The African-American middle class is a relatively understudied group compared with lower-class African-Americans. Understandably, much of the sociological work on America's Black population emphasizes the social exclusion of poor or working-class African-Americans in inner city areas. However, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s created a political rupture in domestic and international racial and economic relations (Omi and Winant 1994, Winant 2009). Preexisting structures of racial oppression were challenged, and social policies were created to remedy inequality that kept racial minorities from equal access to education, work, interracial contact and self-determination relative to Whites. As a result, a small preexisting African-American middle class expanded in the late 20th century. While large numbers of African-Americans in the inner city were systematically victimized by deindustrialization, White flight and urban disinvestment (Wilson 1987), many African-Americans were able to keep pace with the new service and financial-based economy. They gained employment in a diversity of occupations outside of the Black community, and a significant Black middle-class population was created (Collins 1983, Lacy 2007, Landry 1987, Landry and Marsh 2011).

Prior to the Martin Luther King era, prominent scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois (1899) and Franklin Frazier (1957a) highlighted that the well-being of the larger African American population was the responsibility of the African-American middle class. They highlighted the bright class boundaries, which organized the Black community. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, the Black middle class largely served only Black neighborhoods because of White racism and exclusion. However, the Civil Rights Movement broke down many legal and social barriers allowing many Blacks to work and learn in predominately White institutions. Since the Civil Rights Movement, literature on the African-American middle class

has emerged from social scientists interested in the racial and class tensions experienced by well-off Blacks in cities and suburbs with sizeable Black populations (Adelman 2004; Alba, Logan et al. 1999; Haynes 2001; Jackson 2001; Lacy 2007; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Taylor 2002; Wilson 1987). The question that is at the heart of this research is whether race or class is the most prominent issue in the everyday experiences and decision making of middle-class African-Americans.

While the class structure of the African-American population was changing in the 1960s and 1970s, Black communities in the United States were also becoming increasingly ethnically diverse. The mass immigration of Blacks from the Caribbean and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s meant that Blacks in cities were both native and foreign born. According to the Census Bureau Reports (Grieco 2009), there are three million foreign-born Blacks in the United States, and their children constitute millions more. The majority of them migrate from Caribbean, Latin American and African countries (see Figure 3). Largely known as West Indians, Black immigrants began to grow in significant number in America's major cities such as Miami and New York (Foner 2001; Kasinitz 1992; Mederios-Kent 2007; Waters 1999), shifting ethnic and racial relations in late 20th century America.

Therefore, studies of Blacks and the African-American middle class in particular should account for the ways in which new and old African-Americans grapple with racial and class boundaries. The emergence of the African-American middle class and the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of the overall Black population have mandated an exploration of how America's most racially subjugated group navigates the lived experience of social inequality across ethnic lines. Later in this paper, we will discuss how the African-American culture of mobility hypothesis is an important tool for beginning to imagine this less explored integration model.

Framing the African-American class experience

What do we know about the African-American middle class and why is it relevant to immigrant integration? As a result of the breakdown of legal and political barriers to work and housing, the African-American middle class gained access to specialized occupations and suburban housing markets, leaving behind low-income segregated Black neighborhoods for greener residential and suburban areas. The lower class/poor Black population, however, was left without options
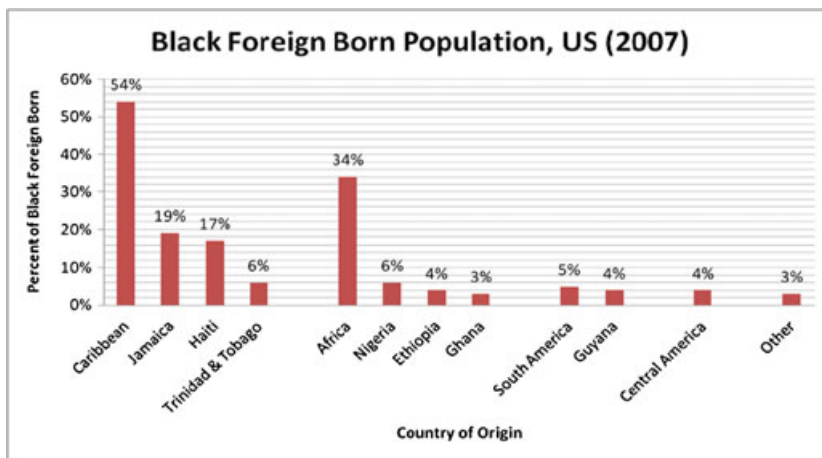
Source: American Community Survey Reports (2009)

Figure 3 Black foreign-born population, United States, 2007.

for exiting the inner city. As the political agenda of the 1970s and 1980s became focused on neo-liberal economic development as opposed to redistribution (Peterson 1981), and service and financial industries became the new engine of the economy, Blacks in the inner city were increasingly isolated socially and economically from the (White) American mainstream. Therefore, the Black lower class has been excluded from accessing work and an acceptable quality of life. Wilson (1987) defines this population as the *truly disadvantaged*.

The African-American middle class, however, has had a different orientation to the changing socioeconomic structure. The African-American middle class has accessed middle-class incomes and lifestyles through the expansion of the public and service sector (Collins 1983; Landry 1987; Landry and Marsh 2011; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). According to the Current Population Survey 2012, the Black middle class largely occupies lower and middle middle-class positions, comprising 47 percent of the overall population (see Figure 1). Their White and Asian counterparts, however, have approximately one third of their populations bringing home upper middle-class incomes.

Black middle-class mobility has relied on political mandates for the inclusion of Blacks in places or work, learning and neighborhoods. Therefore, this population has been built on a fragile terrain. Since the economic recession of 2008, the Black middle class has been affected with unemployment, wage decreases, housing foreclosures and wealth depletion more so than Whites, demonstrating the fragility of this population (Hardy 2012). Therefore, similar to the African-American lower class, a segment of the population can be considered separate and unequal from the White middle class. They continue to be sorted into segregated neighborhoods (Alba, Logan et al. 1999; Logan and Stults 2011) and experience social barriers to full inclusion into America's political economy (Landry and Marsh 2011). Another segment of the Black population, on the other hand, constitutes a bustling middle class, who live in well-off neighborhoods, have strong economic stability and have lifestyle and decision-making patterns similar to their White middle-class counterparts (Lacy 2007; Wilson 1987).

Wilson opened up the discussion of the growing economic differentiation of the Black population in his 1987 seminal work Wilson, 2012. He argued that class was becoming a more important factor in the life chances of Blacks than race was. He noted that the Black middle class was increasing and strategically moving out of inner city neighborhoods for more affluent neighborhoods. This outmigration of higher income Blacks left many low-income Blacks behind in declining inner city neighborhoods. Pattillo-McCoy (1999) argued that race still mattered in the lives of the Black middle class who left the inner city behind, as many continued to grapple with issues of concentrated poverty, low educational attainment among their children and unstable work options. Lacy (2007) has demonstrated, however, that while the Black middle class may preoccupy lower middle-class positions, there are middle and upper middle-class Blacks who live the same lifestyles as White middle-class people. These variable patterns in the economic incorporation and corresponding behaviors of Black middle-class people provide a potential milieu for complex social identities to form. For example, in a study of parenting practices of Black and White children, Lareau finds that there was more variation between Black low-income and Black middle-class parenting styles than between the White middle class and the Black middle class. The measurement of being middle class for Blacks has also been a controversial issue. Studies have operationalized middle-class status differently, causing imprecise conclusions about their stability.

Demographics demonstrate that the Black middle class is thriving, with the majority of the population earning middle-class incomes. Yet it also demonstrates that they continue to have less income and educational attainment compared with other racial groups. For example, in 2012, Black median household incomes were $42,000, which is $28,000–$33,000 less than

Whites and Asians, respectively. This disparity is also experienced by Latinos, whose median household income is $46,420. In terms of schooling, 18 percent of the Black population has completed college compared with 30.8 percent of Whites and 46.2 percent of Asians. Therefore, the Black middle class continues to be bottom heavy compared with other ethnoracial groups, but approximately 15 percent of Black households earn over $100,000 a year, placing them in privileged and advantageous positions.

African-American middle-class identity toolkit

W. E. B. Dubois (1899) and Franklin Frazier (1957b) began unraveling the class divisions in the African-American community in their seminal works. Scholars have since noted that the Black middle class continues to occupy a peculiar social position in American society today. They are never complete insiders of the White mainstream and have conflicted relations with lower-class Blacks because of their economic status. Given this status, the middle class is said to have a "cultural toolkit," which consists of the identities and practices needed to navigate their multiple and challenging worlds. Pattillo–McCoy (1998) argues that the Black toolkit is informed by African-American cultural tenets and informs their everyday social behaviors. Lacy (2007) takes this Black toolkit one step further by describing how the identities and boundary work of different segments of the Black middle class distinguish them from the White middle class and the Black lower class. She argues that middle-class Blacks have a middle-class Black cultural toolkit that reflects their specific class position. The African-American middle-class experience, therefore, provides an interesting entrée into what the social and political struggles of middle-class immigrants of color are like.

   For example, African-Americans in the middle class have a particular toolkit needed to manage the boundaries they encounter in different spheres of life (Pattillo 1998; Lacy 2007). Within this toolkit are identities that African-Americans use in order to navigate problematic interclass and interracial relations. For example, in her study of the Black church's role in community collective action, Pattillo introduces the Black American cultural toolkit, which consists of religious ethos and practices that shape social action in a Black community in Chicago. Pattillo uses Swidler's (1986) definition of the cultural toolkit. Swidler notes that a cultural toolkit not only is about values but also is defined by the "habits, skills and styles that people [use to] construct strategic action" (273) and consists of "symbols, stories, rituals, worldviews which people rely on in order to navigate social, interactional spaces" (273). Pattillo (2007) submits that culture is embedded in social structure and influences social behavior and collective organization. The cultural toolkit is important because it aids us in understanding how social phenomena such as integration and/or isolation are shaped by the social relationships and structures in which middle-class minorities interact with.

   In Karyn Lacy's research on middle-class Blacks in Washington D. C. suburbs, she further develops the Black American toolkit model. She argues that the Black middle class has a specific toolkit that reflects their particular class position. Space and class strata matter to how Black middle-class people understand and invoke particular status-based, racial, ethnic, public and class identities. Lacy's middle-class Black cultural toolkit model, which outlines how specific identities are, responses to their social condition and struggles for power. These are identities and behaviors that help them successfully negotiate social inequality and discrimination and may be relevant for how middle-class Black immigrants in particular and immigrant minorities in general manage their liminal status as included and excluded people in relation to the American "mainstream" and the Black middle class serves an important model to consider in the integration of today's immigrant groups.

Minority culture of mobility: a more holistic approach

While MCM provides an interesting theoretical framework in which to base this study, there are specifications that I would like to add, which may emerge as potentially important analytical issues. First, I submit that space and location matter to the MCM of an ethnoracial group. Recent research has demonstrated that immigrant groups within the first generation depart from inner city settings into outer city and suburban neighborhoods, which have a better social status and standard of living (Massey 2008; Singer, Hardwick and Bretell 2003). Therefore, while the MCM hypothesis is said to not be applicable to new immigrants, the reality of the increased spatial diversity of new immigrants who are moving into urban fringe, suburban and rural areas in greater number (Massey 2008) calls for a reconceptualization of the ways in which new immigrants are immediately encountering interracial contact (or not) in their new destinations.

MCM also could account for the reality that America is becoming increasingly diverse and that the Black/White or non-White/White boundaries are no longer adequate for understanding race relations in the United States (Bonilla-silva 2004). While White racism, "opportunity hoarding" (Massey 2007) and privilege (McIntosh 1986) remains at the center of racial problems in the United States, the increasing "browning" of America has implications for how middle-class minorities experience racial problems. Middle-class minorities will inevitably encounter overt, covert or institutional racism at the hands of Whites. However, minority–minority social and political relations are also fraught with racial tensions (for examples of minority–minority coalitions and cooperation, see Gay 2006; McClain and Tauber 1998) on Black-Latino competition. Middle-class African-Americans may encounter discrimination from Chinese business owners whose racial suspicions cause them to follow Black customers in stores or provide them with poor customer service (Lee 2006). As the globalization of cities continues to increase, middle-class minorities interact within more diverse workforces, neighborhoods and churches. Each ethnoracially integrated institution creates more opportunities for contact with out-groups and the formation of identities to manage prejudice and discrimination at the hands of other minorities.

Lastly, MCM would also be improved if it analyzed how middle-class minorities manage interclass relations not only with the lower class but also with the upper class. In the past 2 years, the social reality of income inequality has moved to the forefront of the American social consciousness. National and global protests have called for the accountability of multi-million dollar companies who contributed to the demise of the economy, the squeezing of the middle class and high unemployment rates. These economic problems have further demonstrated that the middle class sees itself as a distinct group relative to the affluent/rich class in the United States and they have specific identities and practices for managing relations with them.

In Lamont's study of working-class White and Black men in the United States and France, she finds that the working class has particular boundaries that they erect in order to define themselves as morally upright individuals compared with the wealthy. Prasad et al. (2009) find that White working-class voters erect boundaries against who they perceive as the undeserving rich. These boundaries shape people's worldviews and voting behavior. Middle-class minorities may also see upper-class co-ethnics in the United States and their home country in a particular light, which shapes how they see themselves and interact with their social worlds. Therefore, suburbanization, a multi-color racial system and interclass relations with the affluent will enhance the MCM hypothesis' ability to capture how today's immigrants are becoming similar or distinct from African-Americans in the middle class.

Conclusion

The original intent of the Civil Rights Movement was to break down the barriers to social mobility and political inclusion, which strategically excluded African-Americans for over two centuries. Forty years after the Civil Rights Movement, Pattillo finds that there are more Blacks living outside of poverty than within it (1999, 2005), and Lacy (2007) demonstrates that the Black middle class has become stratified in itself. Middle and upper middle-class Blacks experience similar class privileges as the White middle class, as they reside in predominately White neighborhoods and have high paying occupations.

However, the well-off segment of the Black population is often overlooked in research. This oversight is not surprising. Often, sociological research on African-Americans portrays a one-dimensional depiction of their lives. They are assumed to be the locus of adversarial identities and counter-mainstream behaviors such as drug abuse, criminal activity, teenage pregnancy and poor school performance (Lundy 2003; Ogbu 1987, 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993). They are portrayed as either being down and out or living in the inner city with no exit strategies (Massey and Denton 1993) or victims of gentrification (Freeman 2011; Goetz 2011) who are (un)der-employed and crippled in an ethnoracial structure, which places them in last place before the race even begins (Borjas, Grogger and Hanson 2010). They are portrayed as the instigators of countercultural, morally deficient behaviors with little understanding of how structures shape the way they manage everyday life, making ethnographic studies of Black life incredibly valued (Anderson 2003; Duneier 1992; Goffman 2009).

In this review, we have discussed the literature on immigrant incorporation and the African-American middle class in order to build upon Neckerman, Carter and Lee's understanding of immigrant mobility into the middle class. The African-American middle class (and other native-born minority middle-class groups) should be seen as viable groups into which today's immigrant groups will socially, culturally and economically become similar. According to segmented assimilation theory, an immigrant group today will either integrate into their ethnic middle-class group by remaining culturally tied to their ethnic social network, upward into the White middle class, or downwardly assimilate into the African-American urban underclass.

The ethnoracial diversity of today's immigrant population makes access to the White mainstream impossible due to bright racial boundaries. Therefore, today's immigrants of color and their children are left to either remain culturally tied to their homeland and delay becoming American in order to move up the socioeconomic ladder or downwardly integrate into the African-American lower class. The African-American middle class, however, is also a viable pathway of integration yet is overlooked in immigrant incorporation theoretical perspectives. This paper summarizes African-American (minority) culture of mobility argument in order to highlight a discounted and underappreciated group within social scientific work on immigrant incorporation.

This paper has attempted to push forward Neckerman, Carter and Lee's minority culture of mobility hypothesis, which states that today's immigrants will become more similar to native-born middle-class minorities. They argue that the African-American population is a class and culturally diverse group, and immigrants may become similar to different segments of this population as well. The African-American middle class has a cultural toolkit or a set of strategies, which they use to navigate problematic interracial and interclass social relationships. For example, Black immigrants today, too, will have to navigate similar racial and class boundaries, potentially emulating the structural behaviors and belief systems of upwardly mobile African-Americans.

Therefore, the minority culture of mobility is a strong theoretical contribution that allows sociology and the public to observe and respect the diversity and depth of minority

communities in the United States. This paper has also suggested that the minority culture of mobility would be improved if it accounted for the spatial differences, interclass relations with the upper class and racial boundary work between minorities in its frameworks. Moving forward, it will benefit the theoretical perspectives on racial and class inequality and immigrant incorporation to include the trajectories of those who operate between the contexts of ethnoracial exclusion and economic incorporation. Discerning this duality will help us grasp the vast complexity of today's changing ethnoracial structure of the United States and how it is navigated by the different racial groups who have to live within it.

Short Biography

Orly Clerge has research interests in urban sociology, race and ethnicity and immigration/migration. Her recent work has appeared in the *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Journal, where she finds that second-generation Haitian immigrant youths navigate complex racial and class boundaries in addition to their stigmatized ethnic identities. Orly is currently working on a book project that examines the culture of mobility among different Black ethnic middle-class groups. The book proposes that upwardly mobile Black immigrants today experience the same problems around racism and class differentiation as the African-American middle class in their cities and suburbs, creating a convergence among these groups. Orly's research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University and the Society for the Study of Social Problems. She is currently a Postdoctoral Associate in the Department of Sociology at Yale University. She received her B.A. in Sociology from Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts, and she holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Demography from Brown University.

Note

* Correspondence address: Orly Clerge, Department of Sociology, Yale University, 204 Prospect Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06511, United States. E-mail: orly.clerge@yale.edu

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