

How to Convince a White Realtor You're Middle Class

Black people expend daily energy to counteract racial stereotypes and get fair treatment.

By Karyn Lacy

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When the front desk clerk at a Portland, Ore., hotel told Felicia Gonzales, a black woman, that guests were required to sign a two-page “no party” agreement in order to check in, she thought the request was so strange that she decided to sit in the lobby to see if white guests were asked to do the same. They weren’t.

Ms. Gonzales filed a lawsuit last month, saying in the complaint that she had a “sense of increased vulnerability, and feelings of racial stigmatization” as a result of the hotel’s actions.

The public learned about Ms. Gonzales’s experience because news sites reported on the suit. But often the exclusion of black people from participating in society on equal footing happens quietly. I study race and race relations for a living, and I’ve long known that strategizing about ways to avoid or counteract discrimination is an energy-draining task, and for too many, it’s part of everyday life.

When I talked two decades ago with more than 50 middle-class blacks who lived in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, I learned that their awareness of racial stereotypes led them to take on what I call “public identities” — meaning, they would strategically deploy cultural capital, including language, mannerisms, clothing and credentials — in ways that brought their middle-class status firmly into focus. From their experiences attending integrated high schools, many of these people had come to believe this was key to managing racism in interactions with white people. They hoped it would tip the balance of their public interactions so that class would trump race and persuade white people to treat them fairly.

This is an idea related to “code switching,” a term used to describe the temporary shift from black English to standard English that some black people use to signal their appropriation of white, middle-class norms. But the public identities of the middle-class black people I studied involved more than language: They spanned everything from dress to conversation topics to the small details of workplace conduct.

As one of my subjects, Charlotte, put it, black people “have two faces. So you know how to present yourself in the white world and you present yourself in the black world as yourself.”

There’s good reason to believe that the public-identity behaviors I identified are as central a part of black middle-class life as ever. In a 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center, black respondents were more likely than any other racial group to report that they felt people were suspicious of them (65 percent), that people acted as though they were not smart (60 percent), that they were treated unfairly in hiring, pay or promotion (49 percent) and that they had been unfairly stopped by the police (44 percent).

In my research, several subjects told me that because of their awareness of the associations many make between black people and poverty, when they went shopping, they deliberately wore clothing that they hoped would convince white store clerks that they were not poor. To avoid being treated as potential shoplifters, they told me they would eschew attire that was at the time associated in the popular imagination with black culture — like oversize gold earrings, baggy jeans and designer tennis shoes.

One subject, Philip, told me that he would go as far as to wear a suit. His belief was that when he was dressed as a professional, whites saw his class status first and responded to him as a member of that social group. Once he began to make purchases, he hoped that additional signifiers such as the kind of credit cards he carried and his ZIP code would assure store clerks that he was a member of the middle class.

Another subject, Jared, had a similar theory. “When you’re out in the world, you can be wearing grubbies, and you’ll be perceived a certain way if you’re black,” he said. He told me he imagined white people operated under a different public dress code: “If you have money, it’s O.K. to wear rags.”

Michael, a corporate manager, reported that he asserted his class status at work by refusing to answer his own telephone, always allowing calls to go through to his receptionist. He believed that taking on administrative tasks would reduce his social status in the workplace to that of a subordinate and leave room for his colleagues to see his race before his class and treat him with less respect.

The people I spoke to said they paid a price when they failed to perform these public identities. Once, dressed in sweatpants and a baseball cap, one of my subjects, Lydia, decided to view a model home. Right away, the real estate agent asked if the house was in her price range. Lydia knew that preapproval was not required for a tour and suspected that, because of her casual clothing combined with her race, the agent had mistaken her for a poor person who couldn't realistically make an offer. After learning the asking price, which was in her range, Lydia took charge of the interaction, putting on a public identity in the form of demonstrating assertiveness and knowledge of the market. "Basically, I told her I'll take a look at the house and I'll let her know when I'm finished," she explained. And she did.

Lydia's experience echoed those of other house-hunting middle-class blacks who told me that they relied on firm language and knowledge of the market to manage interactions with white realty agents, hopeful that if they conveyed that they were informed and authoritative, they would be seen as members of the middle class and treated with respect.

Lydia wanted a home with a fireplace and she got it. However, she and other middle-class blacks I spoke to had no way to systematically assess how their housing searches compared with those of their white counterparts. While these interviews took place some time ago, and much has changed in the country since, black people have just as much reason to worry today. Decennial audit studies conducted by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as an investigation conducted in Long Island and published by *Newsday* in 2019 (in which black and white trained testers using comparable financial identities visited the same real estate offices) have uncovered overwhelming evidence of housing discrimination against blacks, decades after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 made the practice illegal.

The people I talked to tended to focus more on their success in managing public interactions than they did on what these efforts cost them in time, energy and emotions. But engaging public identities exacts a psychological toll, as one study participant hinted when she described "a relaxed day" at work for her as one during which she didn't have to care what white people thought. And it's worth mentioning that while my research focuses on middle-class black people, there's no doubt that black people of lower socioeconomic status who can't tap into these public identities have daily encounters that are even more unfair and demoralizing.

The humiliation that Ms. Gonzales says she endured at the hotel and that many endure every day cannot be resolved by anti-discrimination legislation alone. Racism and stereotypes persist alongside the desire of black people to be treated as well as whites — so the exhausting work of performing public identities will persist, too.

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