

# FOREWORD

For nearly a decade, Tod Hamilton has creatively applied rigorous statistical and demographic methods to high-quality national and international data to compare black immigrants and natives with respect to their socioeconomic status and health. His conclusions and the research behind them are clearly and persuasively laid out in *Immigration and the Remaking of Black America*. The book offers a comprehensive methodological and theoretical framework for understanding the integration of black immigrants into the United States. In so doing, it sheds important light on the ongoing importance of race in the American stratification system.

Since 1960, the number of black immigrants living in the United States has grown from around 125,000 to some 4.1 million persons. Foreign-born blacks now comprise about 10 percent of the U.S. black population, and their children make up 16 percent of black births in the United States. Beginning in the 1980s, studies revealed that black immigrants outperformed black natives on most indicators of social and economic achievement. These achievement gaps led some observers to attribute the lagging achievement of native African Americans in the post-civil rights era to a weakness of cultural norms that encourage work, effort, diligence, planning, and sacrifice. These values were assumed to prevail in the majority-black societies from which most immigrants emigrated. Obviously, the thinking went, if black immigrants did better than black natives, the difference could not be attributed to racial prejudice and discrimination. Since both groups shared similar racialized characteristics (for

example, darker skin shade and hair texture), the explanation must be a cultural one.

Unsurprisingly such cultural claims were vigorously contested, contributing to a divisive debate about the importance of context versus culture, structure versus agency, in accounting for racial stratification within the United States. Until recently, opposing viewpoints were typically argued in the absence of sound research. Drawing on and expanding upon prior research, Hamilton offers instead a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis and understanding of black immigrants and their performance in the U.S. political economy. His approach begins with the observation that immigration is inevitably a selective process, a fundamental truth that, surprisingly, is all too often elided in scholarly and policy debates. The debates often degenerate into invidious comparisons between black immigrants and African American natives that lead to victim-blaming conclusions about the “cultural” causes of black disadvantage in the United States.

The people who depart the nation of their birth and relocate to a foreign country necessarily constitute a very select subset of the origin population. They are decidedly not a representative cross-section of a country’s inhabitants. To model and accurately understand what happens to an immigrant group within the social and economic structure of a receiving country, one first needs to understand the process by which the immigrants were selected (or selected themselves) to leave their country of birth. Voluntary migrants virtually by definition are selected on the basis of unobservable characteristics such as ambition, risk-taking, endurance, and willingness to work, as well as on the basis of observable characteristics such as age, gender, health, and education. The selection of involuntary migrants depends on the reason for their coerced departure. People fleeing an environmental disaster that affects an entire population will be more representative than those escaping political or religious persecution, since the nature of the selectivity then depends on the nature of the persecution.

However migrants might have been selected to depart, the direction and degree of their selection must be assessed relative to the social and economic composition of the origin society. Among voluntary migrants, a modest level of education in the country of destination might indicate a high level of education in the country of origin. As

a result, simple comparisons of the effect of education on earnings between immigrants and natives may overstate the influence of education among immigrants, since twelve years of education is likely to signal a much higher level of attainment in the home country than in the United States.

In addition, any analysis of the effect of immigrant selectivity requires serious attention to what the native-origin comparison group should be. If immigrants are selected on the basis of ambition, risk tolerance, and willingness to sacrifice, then representative samples of the foreign-born will reveal less about their “culture” than about the degree and nature of the selective process that brought them into the country of destination. Moreover, the degree and nature of immigrant selectivity is ultimately filtered through some receiving nation’s immigrant admissions system.

Across nations, admission systems establish the criteria by which some immigrants are permitted to enter as legal residents with full rights, others are admitted as legal temporary workers with limited rights, and others are turned away, never to be observed in the country at all—or perhaps observed only as unauthorized migrants with very constrained rights and possibilities. Depending on how they emerge from any particular admission system, immigrants enter the receiving nation’s social and economic structures, which in turn penalize or reward the selected characteristics in diverse ways.

In his book, Tod Hamilton develops a comprehensive model that explicitly recognizes processes of immigrant selectivity, attempts to measure and control them, and only then seeks to interpret intergroup differentials to understand any achievement gaps that remain between black immigrants and natives. He offers the first real attempt to elaborate an empirically and theoretically guided framework for the analysis of immigrants within a receiving society, and he makes good use of his framework to derive empirically defensible conclusions about how race and nativity operate within America’s system of social stratification.

In addition to recognizing the core importance of selectivity in determining outcomes for black immigrants in the United States, Hamilton also takes into account the effects of arrival cohort, period of observation, and origin-country characteristics. He then draws upon these considerations to identify an appropriate reference group for immigrant-native comparisons. The resulting model achieves three

specific aims: it provides a framework for understanding disparities between African Americans and black immigrants; it pieces together a detailed portrait of inequalities among blacks; and it shows how the growing number of black immigrants affects black-white disparities.

In the book, before applying his analytic framework, Hamilton sets the stage by offering a detailed descriptive analysis of the growth and diversification of black immigration since the 1960s. He then reviews prior research on social and economic disparities between immigrant- and native-origin blacks; pointing out the limitations of this work, he identifies three factors that may help to resolve the seemingly contradictory findings: the very different contexts within which pre- and post-1965 black immigration occurred, the changing selectivity of black immigration over time, and the wide variation in origin-country circumstances.

Given the inevitable selectivity of human migration, he argues that the overall African American population is not the proper reference group against which to compare the performance of black immigrants. Instead, he focuses on black internal migrants (those who move within the United States), who are similarly selected on the basis of observable and unobservable traits that promote movement. He shows that, like immigrants, native-born black movers display better labor market outcomes than nonmovers. Indeed, outcomes for black movers are quite similar to those observed for black immigrants, suggesting that it is *migrant selectivity* and not immigrant culture that accounts for immigrant-native performance differentials among blacks in the United States. However, these differentials were not present during the first four decades of the twentieth century and only emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He concludes that reductions in racial discrimination enabled by civil rights policies were a necessary condition for the emergence of the immigrant-native differentials we observe today.

Hamilton's comparison of employment trajectories across different arrival cohorts finds that over time black immigrant employment rates have converged with those of black movers and whites. His analyses likewise reveal no differences in homeownership between immigrant and native blacks in the early twentieth century, but differential rates by nativity among blacks living in the United States today. Although upon arrival rates of homeownership for immigrant blacks are *lower*

than those of native blacks, over time they rise and eventually come to exceed those of native blacks. At the same time, however, they never reach or exceed the rate of white homeownership, indicating the likely persistence of racial discrimination in housing markets.

With respect to health, black immigrants display a better profile upon arrival than either black movers or nonmovers. The health of both native black movers and native black nonmovers is always worse than that of whites, but the health of most black immigrant groups is similar to or better than that of white Americans, indicating strong positive selection on the basis of health. Immigrant health tends to deteriorate, however, as time spent in the United States increases.

With respect to rates of marriage, native blacks are less likely to marry than whites irrespective of their mobility status. In contrast, black immigrants have much higher marriage rates compared to black natives; the marriage profile of African immigrants is similar to that observed for whites.

Rates of intermarriage between native blacks and whites remain quite low compared with Hispanics and Asians, and black immigrants who were unmarried at the time of arrival have even lower intermarriage rates with whites than black natives. Instead, black immigrants tend to marry conationals, suggesting mate selection on the basis of common culture and languages. Nonetheless, black immigrants are more likely to marry native black Americans than native white Americans, indicating that race continues to be a salient barrier to black-white marriage in the United States. Among black natives, movers are more likely to marry whites than nonmovers are, consistent with the view that black movers are positively selected on a range of observable and unobservable characteristics.

In the rigor of its analytic model and the clarity of its conclusions, *Immigration and the Remaking of Black America* constitutes a tour-de-force climax to Hamilton's long record of first-rate sociological and demographic research on black immigrants and natives in the United States. The book not only documents how black immigration is reshaping black America today, but also reveals the continuing power of race as an influence on the social, economic, and health status of all those who trace their origins to Africa, regardless of where they were born. In the end, Hamilton marshals convincing evidence against the argument that the relative success of black immigrants compared to black

natives somehow reflects the favorable influence of Caribbean or African culture and the weakness of African American culture, underscoring instead the continuing salience of race as a structural barrier to advancement in U.S. society.

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