

# • Chapter 1 •

## Why Study West Indians?

*Why do black immigrants do so much better than blacks who are born in America? It is an unpopular question, but one that demands an answer.*

—“Black Like Me,” *The Economist*, May 11, 1996, 57

NOT long after the United States government released the results of the 2000 census, a headline in the *Boston Globe* proclaimed: “Study Shows U.S. Blacks Trailing.” The article revealed that black immigrants were receiving higher household incomes and suffering less unemployment than U.S.-born blacks (Rodriguez 2002). Two years later, the *New York Times* reported a similar finding in the educational realm: blacks at Harvard and other elite colleges were disproportionately the offspring of foreign-born parents (Rimer and Arenson 2004).

In fact, assertions that black immigrants have more favorable social and economic outcomes than African Americans are old news. For about one hundred years, American journalists and scholars have been rediscovering that black immigrants have stronger socioeconomic outcomes than African Americans. Beyond the truism that Americans have short memories, why does this “discovery” attract so much attention?

There are several reasons. One is that black immigrant success sends the message that racial discrimination is not the handicap that African Americans claim. Black immigrants have dark skin, yet they succeed. As *The Economist* (1996, 57–58) states: “Figures like these suggest that racism does not account for all, or even most, of the difficulties encountered by native-born blacks.” Second, black immigrant achievement sends the message that African American economic shortfalls are the result of African American behavioral shortfalls. As the Jamaican-born sociologist Orlando Patterson (2006) argues, if young African American men are to obtain well-paying jobs, they should begin by accepting the low-wage jobs that black immigrants do. Then they would acquire the skills to move up. In other words, black immigrant success lets whites off the hook and places the responsibility for African American problems squarely on African American shoulders.

This logic leads to the third and perhaps most compelling reason why black immigrant achievement attracts so much attention. If racial bias is not the cause of African American disadvantage, then affirmative action programs are not the remedy. Since the late 1960s, many employers and even more college admissions officials have been complying with affirmative action directives. These directives require gatekeepers to offer more opportunities than they might otherwise extend to applicants from disadvantaged groups. Opponents of affirmative action have advanced a number of arguments to discredit this policy. Black immigrant achievement constitutes one of the most compelling. After all, affirmative action is a program designed to redress the injustices of white racism. But if white racism is responsible for black disadvantage, then why do black immigrants fare so well?

Before moving on, a clarification is needed. Media hype to the contrary, not all black immigrants have stronger outcomes than African Americans. Black immigrants from the Hispanic Caribbean and Haiti do not; black immigrants from Africa do not. The immigrants responsible for the favorable numbers cited by reporters come overwhelmingly from the English-speaking West Indies, that is, from Britain's colonies and former colonies in the Caribbean (Dodoo 1997; Kalmijn 1996; Rong and Brown 2001). This situation is hardly surprising. Though commonly labeled "West Indians," the language and culture of English-speaking West Indians are far more compatible with the language and culture of Americans than are the languages and cultures of sub-Saharan Africans or of non-English-speaking West Indians. Because the great majority of black immigrants are English-speaking West Indians, journalists mistakenly attribute their prosperity to black immigrants as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Limiting the "success" to West Indian blacks does not explain it, however. Although researchers know that West Indians have better outcomes than African Americans, they disagree about why. The explanations offered so far can be divided into three broad categories: culture, selectivity, and favoritism. The first rationale asserts that West Indian immigrants and African Americans differ in values, attitudes, and behaviors. West Indians are diligent, self-sacrificing, and determined; they put a premium on education. African Americans are indolent, self-indulgent, and apathetic; they view schools as institutions of oppression. One justification for these claims is that black Caribbean slaves received greater rewards for their labor than black slaves in the United States. This situation imbued the former with a stronger work ethic than the latter. Another justification is that socialization in an "all-black society" brought advantages unavailable to blacks raised in a

“white-dominated society.” As for education, under British rule it was the primary means for occupational advancement; hence, even today English-speaking West Indians prize degrees (*Time* 1985). Arguments such as these are here considered versions of the “cultural superiority” hypothesis.

The second rationale attributes West Indian advantage to the positive selectivity of immigration rather than to the superiority of culture. Positive selectivity refers to the idea that people who migrate are more capable than people who do not, both in terms of easily measured characteristics like education and in terms of less easily measured characteristics like ambition. C. J. Stevens (2004) puts it this way: “Those who took the time and possibly-extreme risk to leave their home countries and head to new countries naturally have more drive than people who are content to stay in their poor situations.” Thus, not all West Indians are as hardworking as those who move, and movers are more industrious than stayers. This line of reasoning is here called the hypothesis of “positive selection.”

The last rationale denies that there are perceptible differences in the behavior of the two groups of blacks. Rather, white Americans imagine that West Indians are superior to African Americans. Several reasons for this positive image have been proposed; for instance, one idea is that West Indians trigger associations with Britain, a nation that white Americans greatly admire. Another idea is that, in their dealings with whites, West Indians project themselves as “good blacks,” in contrast to African Americans, who are “bad blacks.” Whatever the mechanism, the resulting positive image motivates white American employers to hire and promote West Indians more frequently than their native black counterparts. This third explanation might be called the “white favoritism” hypothesis.

This volume was conceived in the spirit of finding out whether the economic disparities between African Americans and West Indians are primarily a consequence of culture, selectivity, or favoritism. In the pages that follow, these three explanations are subjected to a battery of statistical tests. The results support the conclusion that selectivity is the main cause of West Indian advantage; people who emigrate from the West Indies constitute a positively selected population. Thus, the answer to the question posed by the book’s title is that West Indians are not a black success story but an *immigrant* success story.

Readers will gain a fuller appreciation of these implications if they understand how West Indians became embroiled in the affirmative action debate in the first place. The next section sketches this background, looking first at employment and then at education.

## **West Indians Enter the Debate over Affirmative Action**

Although West Indians began arriving in the United States in the early 1900s, their presence did not spark debate until the 1970s. Three factors converged to put them in the public eye. The first was the effort to enforce affirmative action.

### *Employment*

Although President Kennedy had already issued an executive order mandating affirmative action in 1961, not until 1970 did the Equal Economic Opportunity Commission (EEOC) require most firms doing business with the government to meet numerical goals and timetables (Rose 1994). The second factor was passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act), which greatly increased the number of Caribbean nationals eligible to immigrate legally to the United States. The third factor was the introduction of statistical methods to measure discrimination, coupled with the availability of data on which to undertake those measurements. In 1965 the U.S. Department of Commerce introduced its first “public use sample” of a U.S. census, a set of computer tapes that any researcher could purchase and analyze. Ultimately, these developments converged. Thomas Sowell, an opponent of affirmative action, undertook a statistical analysis of the 1970 public use sample and concluded that West Indians had better job outcomes than African Americans. Interpreting this finding as evidence that whites did not discriminate against blacks, he argued for an end to affirmative action.

To appreciate how West Indian attainment could be put to such use, it is necessary to understand how experts define and measure discrimination. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker (1971) has offered perhaps the most frequently cited definition: the existence of wage differentials in excess of what might be expected on the basis of productivity-related characteristics. However, little progress was made in measuring discrimination until the introduction of multivariate statistical models. One reason was that African Americans tended to be less educated than white Americans. In addition, blacks were overrepresented in the South, a region of limited economic opportunities, and they were less likely to be married (Farley and Allen 1987; Mare and Winship 1991). As a result, it was easy to refute charges of discrimination on the grounds that black applicants had weaker productivity-related characteristics than white.

In 1965 the sociologist Paul Siegel struck a blow at the tendency to blur qualifications and race by publishing a multivariate analysis of black-white earnings differences. According to Siegel, previous attempts at controlling for differences in the qualifications of the two races had not been possible because “prior to the publication of the 1960 Census of Population, simultaneous tabulations of income by education *and* occupation were not available” (Siegel 1965, 42, emphasis in original). Working algebraically from the published figures, Siegel defined “the cost of being a Negro” as the gap between the earnings of whites and nonwhites who had similar amounts of schooling, who worked in similar occupations, and who resided in or out of the South. Before he took these factors into account, nonwhites earned \$2,852 less than whites. Siegel’s analysis attributed 61.5 percent of this amount, or \$1,755, to nonwhites’ shorter schooling, poorer occupations, and propensity to live in the South. The remaining \$1,097 he “interpreted as reflecting the money costs to nonwhites of *discrimination*, though they may to some extent be influenced by quality differences in education or occupation which are too fine to be discerned by our gross measures” (54, emphasis added).

This work has served as the model for numerous studies in what has come to be called the “residual method” of measuring discrimination (Smith 2003). Statistical techniques make blacks and whites “the same” on as many measurable job-related characteristics as possible, and the difference that remains between the two races is interpreted as a measure of discrimination.

There are, however, some obstacles to making people the same on as many measurable job-related characteristics as possible. One year of schooling for a white student may impart more skills than one year of schooling for a black student. This is what Siegel means by “quality differences . . . too fine to be discerned by our gross measures.” Another problem is that many job-related characteristics are unmeasurable, or at least hard to measure. Most data sets do not contain measures of work attitudes, for instance. If black and white workers were “made the same” on work attitudes, would the cost of being black diminish? After all, the cost of being black declines when black and white workers are “made the same” on job experience or on region of residence. What would happen if black and white workers were made the same on work attitudes? Would this adjustment diminish the cost of being black? Would it raise the cost? If so, by how much?

As in the school quality example, the answer depends on how “work attitudes” relate to race. If race has nothing to do with work attitudes—if the proportion of lazy whites is the same as the proportion of lazy blacks—then adding indicators of these characteristics to analyses of economic outcomes would have no effect on the cost of being black.

If, on the other hand, a higher proportion of blacks than whites are lazy, then adding indicators of these characteristics would decrease the cost of being black.

The opinion that poor work attitudes are the main cause of African American economic disadvantage has a long history. Already in the late nineteenth century, black leaders like Booker T. Washington were advocating that blacks “soft-pedal” their grievances against whites and look to their own behavior as the cause of their low status (Meier 1963). Others, particularly W. E. B. Du Bois, disagreed, maintaining that white racism was the primary obstacle (Broderick and Meier 1965). And in the main, this opinion has prevailed, as can be seen by the perspective of civil rights leaders. But the civil rights movement focused primarily on racism in the political arena, not the economic arena. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the issue of discrimination in the workplace again rose to the fore.

Of the many legacies of the civil rights movement, affirmative action proved the most controversial. Statistical studies of the kind undertaken by Paul Siegel showed that blacks earned less than similarly qualified whites. Liberals maintained that discrimination was the cause of this shortfall. Conservatives maintained that the cause was a lack of diligence on the part of blacks; multivariate analyses, they argued, did not control for the difference in work ethic between the two races. Neither side brought new evidence to the debate until studies of West Indian “success” began to appear. That this discovery was a blow to the proponents of the discrimination argument and a windfall for the opponents of affirmative action the following remarks make clear.

In 1978, Thomas Sowell (1978b, 41–42) wrote: “West Indian Negroes in the United States have long had higher incomes, more education, higher occupational status, and proportionately far more business ownership than American Negroes. Both their fertility rates and their crime rates have been lower than those of native blacks—or native whites.” Using 1970 census data on West Indians, he showed that they “earned 94 percent of the average income of Americans in general, while native blacks earned only 62 percent. Second-generation West Indians in the United States earned 15 percent more than the average American” (Sowell 1983, 107).

Sowell’s writings had an impact not only because his figures were news to many Americans but also because his interpretations were news. Drawing a dichotomy between successful and unsuccessful minorities, he asserted that

the Jews, the Japanese-Americans and West Indian Negroes emphasized such traits as work, thrift, and education—more generally achievements

involving planning and working for the future; implying the emotional control for self-denial in the present and emphasizing the logical and mundane over the emotional, the imaginative, and the heroic. The opposite characteristics can be seen among the Irish and the Negroes, where advancement has been achieved in emotional and imaginative areas, such as oratory, lyric literature, and music, and which have produced many dramatic "leaders and heroes." . . . A high value on immediate "fun," "excitement," and emotionalism has characterized the less successful minorities. For both the Irish and the Negroes, Saturday night acquired a great importance as time to release emotions in music, lively social activities, and fighting. (Sowell 1975, 130–31, 146)

What is the evidence for these disparate value systems? On what grounds does Sowell conclude that West Indians exhibited attitudes and behaviors that spurred success, while African Americans exhibited attitudes and behaviors that fostered failure? His empirical evidence is primarily an examination of outcomes. Arguing from effects to causes, Sowell reasons that *because* West Indians have been more prosperous than African Americans and *because* the Islanders have had fewer social problems than American blacks, the attitudes and behaviors of the two groups must differ in ways that have an impact on economic and social outcomes. To be sure, demonstrating that a set of work-related attitudes produces specific on-the-job behaviors, which in turn affect the size of economic rewards, is an extremely difficult task. Rather than attempt it, Sowell turns to history for the source of these attitudinal differences. As he reads the historical record, differences between the Caribbean slave experience and the American slave experience were sufficiently great to produce highly disparate value systems (Sowell 1975, 1978b, 1981, 1983).

Delaying until chapter 3 a synopsis of Sowell's interpretation of history, it is immediately apparent that there is a problem with his logic. Would not the attitudes and behaviors that blacks developed under slavery change after abolition? Clearly Sowell thinks they remained the same. Consider, for example, his description of the consequences of slavery in the United States: "Many generations of such dependency depressed initiative, so slaves developed foot-dragging, work-evading patterns that were to remain as a cultural legacy long after slavery itself had disappeared. Duplicity and theft were also pervasive patterns among antebellum slaves and these too remained long after slavery ended" (Sowell 1981, 187). Evidently, inertia was responsible for propagating values and behaviors that were no longer useful. Again, to quote Sowell, "History shows new skills being rather readily acquired in a few years, as compared to generations—or centuries—[being] required for attitude changes. Groups today plagued by absenteeism,

tardiness, and a need for constant supervision at work or in school are typically descendants of people with the same habits a century or more ago" (Sowell 1981, 284).

In the context of the affirmative action debate, the implication of these remarks is clear. African American culture contributes more to black economic disadvantage than does white discrimination. In statistical jargon, adding indicators of work motivation to analyses of job outcomes would greatly reduce "the cost of being African American" but would have no effect on "the cost of being West Indian."

And what are the implications of this conclusion for social policy? The sociologist William Beer summarized its implications well in a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* editorial:

People in favor of affirmative action assume that the low rate of upward mobility of black Americans is largely due to racial discrimination. West Indians are black, and they presumably must be targets of bigotry as much as black Americans. . . . Yet, the percentages of blacks from the Caribbean who are successful in business and the professions surpass those of many white ethnic groups, and the group's jobless rate is lower than the national average. Its stunning success contradicts the claim that the dismal situation of black Americans is largely due to racial discrimination, thus calling into question the whole rationale for preferential treatment. (Beer 1986, 12)

In this way did West Indian prosperity become proof that cultural deficiencies, not job discrimination, lay behind African American disadvantage.

### *Higher Education*

Although university administrators began implementing affirmative action in the 1970s, West Indians had no place in early discussions about the policy's implications for education. The reason is probably that, until recently, relatively few West Indians were of college age. In those early years, admissions committees devised their own strategies for maximizing student body diversity. The medical school at the University of California at Davis reserved sixteen of its one hundred spaces for members of targeted groups. When it twice rejected Allan Bakke but admitted students of color with lower test scores and grades, Bakke sued. The consequence of his suit, which reached the Supreme Court in 1978, was that explicit quotas became illegal. At the same time, the Court agreed that some steps could be taken to enhance

the representation of disadvantaged groups in institutions of higher learning.

In the years that followed, many admissions committees utilized a points system. They gave additional points to members of targeted groups, as well as to persons from particular geographic areas, children of alums, musicians, athletes, and so on. Undergraduates applying to the University of Michigan received 20 additional points out of a maximum of 150 if they belonged to a targeted group. The university's law school, however, engaged in a "whole file review": each applicant was evaluated on the basis of all the information available. In addition, the law school aimed to produce not a fixed percentage but a "critical mass" of underrepresented minorities. In June 2003, the Supreme Court heard suits against both these policies. In the end, it struck down the numerically driven undergraduate policy by a vote of six-to-three, but endorsed the subjective approach developed at the law school five-to-four. In defending the latter, the majority opinion supported affirmative action on the ground that a diverse student body enhanced learning (Harvard Civil Rights Project 2003).

Interestingly, West Indian achievement played no part in the Michigan lawsuit, perhaps because colleges and universities had little information about the heritage of their black students.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, research had been accumulating that showed that heritage has consequences. An inquiry into the ancestries of Harvard undergraduates revealed that only 38 percent of a sample of black students identified as African American. Twenty-three percent described themselves as Caribbean (Haynie 2002). Others identified as African, as biracial, or as bi-ethnic. A more rigorous study, this one of blacks at twenty-eight elite colleges and universities, revealed that black immigrants and their offspring accounted for just over 40 percent of these schools' black students (Massey et al. 2003). This is more than four times their proportion in the black population (*Harvard Magazine* 2004).

The *New York Times* reported these findings in June 2004, just after they were presented at a reunion of Harvard's African American alumni. A storm of controversy followed, primarily because these discoveries raised the question: "Who Really Benefits from Colleges' Affirmative Action?" (McNamee 2004). Were the children of black immigrants benefiting at the expense of the children of African Americans (Onwuachi-Willig, forthcoming)? Opponents of affirmative action, such as University of California at Berkeley regent Ward Connerly, interpreted the Harvard finding as further evidence that low-income native blacks were not benefiting (Johnson 2005). Even supporters of affirmative action agreed that the people for whom the policy was originally intended were being neglected. For example, the sociologist

Philip Kasinitz commented that the Harvard findings were “a victory of diversity over justice,” adding that “the traditional mission of affirmative action seems to be eclipsed” (quoted in Kline 2005). Others used it as a basis for accusing black middle class parents of neglecting their children’s intellectual development (Kline 2005). One of the strongest of these indictments came from Henry Louis Gates, chair of Harvard’s African and African American Studies Department. “We need to learn what the immigrants’ kids have so we can bottle it and sell it,” he said, “because many members of the African-American community, particularly among the chronically poor, have lost that sense of purpose and values which produced our generation” (quoted in Rimer and Arenson 2004). So here again West Indian immigrants were identified as a model for African Americans to follow.

## The Organization of the Book

Chapter 2 presents some basic information about West Indian immigrants, past and present, as well as some important findings: West Indian immigrants have stronger measurable job-related characteristics than West Indians who remain in the Caribbean; West Indian immigrants have stronger measurable job-related characteristics than African Americans; and when West Indians are assigned the (weaker) job-related characteristics of African Americans, the immigrants still have stronger economic outcomes than African Americans. Chapter 3 offers a detailed discussion of the three most popular explanations for these findings—cultural superiority, positive selectivity, and white favoritism—with a focus on the precise causal mechanisms associated with each explanation. In some cases, there is more than one such mechanism. To help conceptualize the relationships among them, the chapter concludes with a path diagram that depicts the causal linkages among all three explanations.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are each devoted to testing one of the three hypotheses. Selectivity is considered first, then culture, and finally white favoritism. Each chapter begins by summarizing previous research relevant to the hypothesis. In the case of selectivity, most of that research is statistical; in the case of culture, it is predominantly historical; in the case of white favoritism, it is both ethnographic and statistical. Each of the hypotheses is then subjected to a battery of statistical tests. Most of these tests utilize the public use samples of the last four U.S. decennial censuses, but a few draw on data from other destinations that West Indian immigrants have chosen: Canada, Britain, and the Netherlands. To the extent that statistical analyses of census data can provide an an-

swer to the question of why West Indians have better economic outcomes than African Americans, the results of these tests support selectivity.

Chapter 7, the final chapter, assesses the implications of these findings. It acknowledges the limitations of statistical analyses and concedes that other research strategies might identify additional sources of West Indian advantage. The discussion then turns to the meaning of the statistical results for African Americans, for West Indians, and for affirmative action. The results also have some general implications, particularly for immigration policy. The chapter closes by proposing that research on black immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa would constitute a useful supplement to the present undertaking.

At the end of the book is a methodological appendix that provides details about data quality and model construction. Readers who want to understand the technical challenges associated with the statistical analyses will find this section useful.