

**Racial Differences in the Tempo of Assimilation for
White and Black African Foreign-Born to the United States**

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Abstract

Understanding how immigrants assimilate to the U.S. labor market is important, but measuring the true effect of time in assimilation is difficult. We know extremely little about the effects of time on a particular immigrant group that has only just begun to enter the U.S. in large numbers; Africans. In this paper, I examine the effect of duration on African immigrant men's earnings between 1990 and 2000. I use PUMS 5% and 1% sample data from the 1990 and 2000 censuses, applying a double-cohort method of analysis (Myers and Lee) that avoids problems presented by trying to measure age-period-cohort effects. Additionally, I examine the differential tempo of assimilation for Black and White African immigrant men. I find that while White African-born men's earnings surpass those of White native-born men over time, Black African-born men continue to experience a disadvantage in earnings that cannot be explained by human capital characteristics.

Introduction

The concept of assimilation has generated renewed interest, particularly among sociologists. (Alba and Nee 2003). Where once the term “assimilation” connoted an colonialist discourse of eradicating home cultures, scholars no longer universally assume that some forms of assimilation, such as higher earnings attainment, requires eradicating all cultural differences (Green 2006; Portes 2000; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1997). The current assimilation perspective on earnings predicts that as the foreign-born population learns English and accumulates U.S. job market experience over time, their earnings will converge with those of the native-born population (Kollehlon and Eule 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 1990). Accumulated job market experience is operationalized by the number of years a person has been in the U.S., or their duration.

In fact, it is the passage of time (and the complexities of measuring it) that lie at the heart of assimilation theory (Green 2006). Time is usually measured as either the number of years a person has been in the U.S., or by the year in which they arrived. But using either one or the other measure conflates duration with job market conditions at time of arrival. Additionally, the effects of aging are rarely considered in immigrant assimilation research. Measures of time of arrival, duration, and aging are all required in order to properly measure assimilation changes over time.

The Dearth of Studies on Duration and African Immigrant Assimilation

The existing research on African immigrant economic assimilation is sparse, compared to what is available on Hispanic and Asian immigrants. Most of this literature compares African immigrants to Caribbean immigrants and native-born Blacks at one point in time. None uses more than one data collection time point. Thus, no literature exists on African immigrants that

properly tests the effects of duration on their economic assimilation. In part, this absence may be because it was not until 1990 that sufficient numbers of African immigrants in the U.S. existed to make it possible to analyze their assimilation using Census Bureau data. But now with sufficient sample sizes in both the 1990 and 2000 Census microdata samples, scholars can conduct proper testing of duration effects on African immigrant assimilation.

Knowing the effects of time in the U.S. on assimilation is integral to understanding the impact recently-arrived immigrants will have on our society in the long-term (Yu and Myers 2007). As the largest proportion of African immigrants arrived in the U.S. within the last 15 years (Logan and Deane 2003), examining their tempo of assimilation will give us clues to their future adaptation. Focusing on African immigrants also provides another piece of the puzzle to understanding temporal dimensions in immigrant assimilation broadly, and allows us to make comparisons with Asians and Hispanics, who enter different positions within the U.S. racial structure.

Most extant research on African immigrant economic assimilation compares African immigrants to Afro-Caribbean immigrants or native-born African Americans. These studies find that African immigrants have high levels of education (Butcher 1994; Dodoo 1997; Lapham 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Poston 1994) and occupational status attainment (Butcher 1994; Farley and Allen 1987; Portes and Rumbaut 1990) compared to native-born Blacks. However, after controlling for human capital variables, Black African immigrant men earn less than Afro-Caribbean immigrant men and about the same as Black native-born men (Butcher 1994; Dodoo 1997). Butcher (1994) attributes this difference to self-selection of migrants, showing that foreign-born Blacks have similar earnings to native-born Blacks who moved out of the state of their birth (ostensibly for educational or occupational opportunities). Dodoo (Dodoo

1997) argues that it is due to a disadvantage in foreign-acquired degrees that Africans experience, but not Caribbeans.

These studies are important and useful, but they still fail to tell us the effects of duration on African immigrant earnings. While all these studies include a control for either year of arrival or time in the U.S., none can properly measure the effects of time as they all use cross-sectional data (from either the 1980 or 1990 Census). Of course, nationally representative longitudinal datasets do not exist that include African immigrants in their sample. The solution to this problem is to conduct a double-cohort analysis that creates multiple cohorts with panel data.

The Importance of Two Observation Periods for Measuring Duration

As many scholars have noted, identifying the “age-period-cohort” effect is problematic given the limited availability of nationally-representative longitudinal data on the foreign-born (Firebaugh 1997; Mason and Fienberg 1985; Myers and Lee 1996). As Myers and Cranford (1998) state, “ ‘duration’ in immigration research confounds year of arrival and duration of United States residence, much as birth cohort is confounded with age” (p.75). Thus, a single measure of time in a cross-sectional sample (such as what has been used in previous studies of African immigrant earnings) cannot disentangle the effects of the time spent in the U.S. from the conditions of the labor market at time of arrival or the effects of aging. As a solution, Myers and Lee (1996) proposed a double-cohort method, in which birth cohorts are nested within immigration cohorts. The double-cohort method differs from other age-period-cohort (APC) models in that it focuses on changes between periods of data collection, rather than static models that examine age or duration patterns in single expression.

Data

I used PUMS 5% and 1% sample data from 1990 and 2000. I selected from the 5% sample in 1990 and 2000 males who were born in a country in Africa, not of American parents. I

combined with the African foreign-born a 10% random sample of native-born males from the 1% sample in 1990 and 2000. I selected only men who were between 25-54 years old, as these are the prime earning years in the life course. I also limited the sample to those who were employed at the time of the census. To limit the complexity of the racial analysis, I also limited the sample to males identifying as either Black or White. I created variables to measure race (Black vs. White), immigration status (African- vs. native-born), and an interaction term to measure the differential effect of migration status for Black and White men. The outcome variable is annual wage income, adjusted for inflation (in year 2000 equivalent dollars). I used variables measuring educational attainment and ability to speak English well as controls.

I constructed three age cohorts (25-34, 35-44, 45-54) and four migration cohorts (native-born, pre-1970, 1970-79, 1980-89). I then constructed two-way interaction terms between age and migration cohorts, year of census and age cohorts, and year of census and migration cohorts, and finally three-way interaction terms for each age cohort, migration cohort, and year of census.

Analysis

The saturated model can be expressed as:

$$AdjW = X + Y + R + MC + (R*MC) + BC + (BC*MC) + (Y*BC) + (Y*BC*MC)$$

where *AdjW* represents wages adjusted for inflation, *X* represents human capital effects, *Y* is the year of observation (either 1990 or 2000), *R* is race, *MC* is the arrival cohort (*MC*=0 for native-borns), and *BC* is the birth cohort.

Findings

As previous research has shown, African immigrant men tend to have very high levels of educational attainment, which partially explains their relatively high earnings compared to

native-born men. However, an analysis over time illuminates stark differences by race. When controlling for education and ability to speak English well, White African-born men had similar or higher earnings than White native-born men in 1990, and over time their earnings far surpassed those of White native-born men. Conversely, Black African-born men had lower earnings than Black native-born men in 1990, and even though some migration cohorts experienced a steep incline between 1990 and 2000, they did not surpass those of Black native-born or White men (native- or African-born). These findings point to significant racial differences in the advantages experienced from high educational attainment and immigrant status. For White African-born men, both are advantages, but for Black African-born men, even though they do experience higher wages as they gain U.S. labor market experience, their relative disadvantaged position upon arrival to the U.S. remains over time.

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