

# The Secret of West Indian Success

Suzanne Model

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**Abstract** For nearly a century, black immigrants from the West Indies have enjoyed greater economic success than African Americans. Several explanations have been proposed for this trend, but until now, none of these explanations have been subjected to systematic scrutiny. Recent efforts to adjudicate among them indicate that West Indian success can be attributed entirely to the “selectivity of migration”. This phrase refers to the tendency of people who migrate to be more talented and determined than the compatriots they leave behind. One implication of this discovery is that sympathetic observers should stop exhorting African Americans to behave more like West Indians. Such pleas are inappropriate because West Indian success is a consequence of choosing to move, not a consequence of Caribbean birth. A second implication is that persons of West Indian background remain vulnerable to racism. The new findings provide no evidence that positive selection protects West Indians from the negative stereotypes that Americans associate with black skin.

**Keywords** West Indian immigrants · Caribbean immigrants · African Americans · Selectivity

Reports of West Indian success have long fascinated the American public: “Number of Black Immigrants at Elite Colleges Growing” (NPR), “Income gains made by Caribbean Immigrants boost the black median income in Queens” (*NY Times*), and “Business Booms for Afro-

Caribbeans” (*Newsday*). Why do these stories attract so much media attention? The most likely reason is that, at first glance, black immigrant success can be interpreted as evidence that white racism is declining. After all, black immigrants are “black”, so if they are doing well, racism must be in retreat. What’s more, if American blacks want to do as well as foreign born blacks, a good first step would be to behave more like black immigrants. In short, reports of black immigrant success are popular because they imply that African Americans can overcome their disadvantages without any help from white Americans.

But is this interpretation correct? Does the fact that black immigrants have stronger socioeconomic outcomes than African Americans mean that racism has disappeared? If so, it must have disappeared long ago because, for nearly a century, black immigrants born in the English-speaking West Indies have been billed as the model minority that African Americans should emulate. Now, new research into the causes of their success indicates that black immigrant achievement does not mean that white racism has disappeared nor that African Americans ought to behave like black immigrants.

The insights that make up these new research findings go something like this: Immigrants are generally more able, ambitious, and diligent than natives. West Indians are immigrants. Therefore, West Indians are more able, ambitious, and diligent than natives. On the other hand, African Americans are natives; hence, they cannot display the same ability, ambition, or diligence that black immigrants display. In fact, immigrants’ socioeconomic achievement carries no implications for the achievement of their native born counterparts. They are independent phenomena (Model 2008). The remainder of this article describes these new findings.

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S. Model (✉)  
Department of Sociology, University of Massachusetts,  
Amherst, MA 01003, USA  
e-mail: model@sadri.umass.edu

## The Positive Selection of Immigrants

What forms the basis for the idea that immigrants are more talented than natives? And what's the evidence? Everett Lee was the first demographer to propose that migrants are a select population. By this, he meant that they are not a random aggregation of persons at origin; rather, they are selected on some basis. Lee went on to specify a connection between the attributes on which movers are selected and their motive for moving. Of particular relevance to West Indians, Lee hypothesized that "Migrants responding primarily to plus factors at destination tend to be positively selected..." By "plus factors at destination", he meant economic opportunity. By "positively selected", he meant having an abundance of the characteristics associated with economic success. In his formulation, Lee mentions both those characteristics that are easy to measure, like education or number of children, and those that are hard to measure, like ambition or ability.

In addition to the motive for moving, intervening obstacles also influence selectivity. Lee considers factors like distance, immigration rules, and familiarity with destination as obstacles. The greater the obstacles, the more positively selected the migrant. This means that economically motivated immigrants moving long distances will have more of the characteristics associated with labor market success than those moving short distances; it means that immigrants who know a little about conditions at destination (early birds) will be more positively selected than those who know a lot (late comers).

The evidence that West Indians are positively selected on education is strong. A comparison of the average years of schooling of adult immigrants to the US from the four most important sending nations in the English-speaking Caribbean (Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad, and Barbados) and the average years of schooling of adult residents in these four respective nations shows the immigrants consistently the more educated. In addition, those arriving earliest (in the 1960s) registered a relatively larger educational edge than those arriving later (in the 1990s). This trend is consonant with Lee's idea that early birds are more positively selected than late comers.

Of course, even if movers have more favorable easy to measure characteristics than residents at origin, they may not have less favorable easy to measure characteristics than residents at destination. This is because most people move from less developed to more developed countries and residents of more developed countries are usually more educated, more urban, and less fertile than residents of less developed countries. However, West Indians are an exception to this rule; they are not only more educated than their compatriots in the Caribbean but also more educated than African Americans. They are also more likely to be

married, live in areas where wages are higher and have more work experience than African Americans.

West Indians' "positive selection" on these easy to measure characteristics is an important reason for their success, but it is not the whole story. When the last 4 years of census data are used to compare West Indians to similarly educated, similarly partnered, similarly located African Americans, the immigrants' advantage diminishes, but it does not disappear. In 2000, the labor force participation rate of all West Indian men was 20% higher than that of all African American men and 10% higher than that of similarly educated, similarly partnered, similarly located African American men.

If positive selectivity explains this pattern, the traits responsible must be hard to measure because the exercise just described compares West Indians and African Americans whose easy to measure characteristics (like education) are the same. As it happens, several scholars have argued that economically motivated immigrants are positively selected on hard to measure traits. For instance, economist Barry Chiswick asserted: "...self-selection in migration implies that for the same schooling, age, and other demographic characteristics immigrants to the United States have more innate ability or motivation relative to the labor market than native-born persons."

One way to find out whether West Indian immigrants are also positively selected on hard to measure traits is to compare their economic outcomes with those of similarly qualified African American internal migrants. If migrants have stronger hard to measure traits than nonmigrants, then African American internal migrants should be more gifted than African American nonmigrants. In other words, a comparison undertaken between two groups of black movers should attenuate, possibly even eliminate the difference between them. To be sure, the obstacles to international migration are greater than the obstacles to internal migration. Hence, the immigrants should retain a modest advantage over internal migrants. But that edge should be much smaller than the edge that West Indians register over African Americans as a whole.

To implement this inquiry, West Indian immigrants who arrived in the US within the past 5 years of the last four censuses are compared to similarly qualified African American internal migrants who changed their state of residence within the same 5-year period. In all comparisons, the West Indian advantage diminishes; in 70% of them, the gap between the two groups of blacks is no longer statistically significant. In other words, black international movers have stronger economic outcomes than African American stayers but not stronger economic outcomes than African American movers. This is strong evidence that the positive selectivity of migration is responsible for West Indians' advantage over African Americans.

But is selectivity entirely responsible? At least three other explanations for West Indian advantage can be found in the literature. First that differences between Caribbean slavery and American slavery work to the immigrants' advantage, second that socialization in an "all black society" is more advantageous for blacks than socialization in a "white dominated" society, and third that American whites "favor" West Indian immigrants (or discriminate less against them than against African Americans). Any or all these explanations may operate in combination with positive selectivity.

As before, it is not difficult to devise empirical strategies for testing these explanations. The task simply requires manipulating the causal mechanism associated with the explanation and observing the consequences. In the case of selectivity, the causal mechanism is "moving". The other three explanations lend themselves to similar manipulation. But, as will become clear below, these tests fail. The results contradict the expectation that additional causal mechanisms are at work; rather, the positive selectivity of migration is the sole reason for West Indian success.

### Testing the Alternatives

The economist Thomas Sowell is the main advocate of the position that variations in the organization of slavery explain contemporary West Indian advantage. He argues that demographic and geographic differences between the Caribbean and the US Mainland gave West Indian slaves more opportunity for autonomy than American slaves received. Examples of this autonomy included chances for rebellion and escape, access to provision grounds where slaves could grow food and sell the surplus, and training in skilled occupations. According to Sowell, these disparate opportunities affected the personalities of the two slave populations. West Indian blacks became more independent, diligent, and entrepreneurial than American slaves because these behaviors brought tangible rewards in the Caribbean but not in the US. Furthermore, Sowell believes these differences can account for the economic advantage West Indians register over African Americans today.

The strategy for testing this formulation draws on history. As it turns out, slavery was not the homogeneous institution that Sowell envisioned; rather, slavery varied significantly in both the Caribbean and the American South. For example, in flat sugar-intensive Barbados, there was not enough cover to protect rebels and escapees nor enough vacant land for slaves to grow their own crops. Conversely, in the Carolina Low Country, slaves cultivated their own plots and pursued a number of skilled occupations. In short, Barbados was more like the American South; the Low Country was more like the Caribbean.

This variation provides a basis for testing Sowell's hypothesis. If he is correct, emigrants from Barbados should be less successful than their counterparts from the more traditional Caribbean; conversely, black migrants from the Low Country should be more successful than their counterparts from the more traditional South. However, analyses of four decades of census data do not support these predictions. The outcomes of migrants from the atypical contexts are indistinguishable from the outcomes of their neighbors from the typical contexts. In sum, variations in the organization of slavery do not translate into variations in contemporary economic success.

An explanation for West Indian advantage that attracts rather more adherents than Sowell's is the "all black society hypothesis". The argument here is that blacks benefit psychologically from living and working in societies where their group predominates rather than in societies controlled by whites. Consider sociologist Milton Vickerman's description of Jamaicans "[T]heir numerical preponderance has imparted a degree of self-confidence that has helped them to cope with persistent subjugation. Socialization in a society made up mainly of blacks has made having black role models seem normal." When articulating the benefits, supporters mention ambition and perseverance, as well as vigilance against discrimination. After citing many examples in which black immigrants fought valiantly against bias, Vickerman observes: "West Indians are not shrinking violets." In the same vein, sociologist Mary Waters reports that "the foreign born pride themselves in being more likely to stand up to whites when 'real situations' occur" than African Americans. Waters attributes this contentiousness to socialization in an all-black society, which creates a sense that confrontation is the appropriate response to injustice.

One way to test this interpretation is to contrast the economic outcomes of immigrants from two sending regions: an "all black society" and a society in which blacks live but whites rule. When the economic outcomes of immigrants from these two societies are compared, the expatriates from the "all black society" should be the more successful. Of course, the two sending regions need to be fairly similar in most other respects. At first glance, immigrants from Jamaica, an all-black society, could be compared to immigrants from South Africa, a multiracial society ruled by whites. But variation in racial politics is only one of the many differences between these two countries. Hence, a more appropriate comparison would contrast immigrants from South Africa with those from Nigeria or Ghana or some other sub-Saharan African location. When such comparisons are undertaken, however, they yield little difference. Over the last two censuses, black immigrants from South Africa have statistically identical outcomes to black immigrants from other sub-

Saharan African nations. This makes it unlikely that socialization in an all-black society contributes to West Indian success.

The final popular explanation for West Indians' economic advantage over African Americans is that whites discriminate less against them. Several rationales for this interpretation have been offered. According to sociologist Faye Arnold, West Indians' lilted speech reminds Americans of an English accent, a connection which instantly bestows high status on the speaker. Ramon Grosfoguel, a world systems theorist, proposes that an imperialist society consistently relegates its own colonized minorities to lowest status. America's colonized minorities include African Americans but not West Indians; hence, West Indians rank a little higher. On a more practical note, scholars like Nancy Foner and Percy Hintzen find that some West Indians are actively engaged in painting a positive picture of black immigrants (diligent, honest) and a negative picture of African Americans (indolent, deceitful). Supporters of the white favoritism hypothesis believe that employers and supervisors readily accept this depiction.

The core idea here is that West Indians profit from the presence of a more stigmatized group: African Americans. Though at first glance, whites do not perceive black "ethnicity", when made aware of it, they offer West Indians better opportunities than they would offer African Americans. This situation implies that West Indian economic achievement would be lower in places where there are no African Americans or at least very few. Invoking this logic, writer Malcolm Gladwell, the Canadian-raised son of a Caribbean-born mother, distinguished the West Indian experience in the two countries as follows: "In America, there is someone else to despise. In Canada, there is not."

Put another way, because there are many blacks in the US and few in Canada, West Indians should do better in the US than in Canada. Extending this idea, the larger the proportion of African Americans in a labor market, the more successful West Indians should be. For example, other things the same, West Indians should do better in Atlanta (24.8% African American) than Hartford (7.3% African American) and better in New York (11% African American) than San Francisco (3.3% African American).

However, when such comparisons are undertaken, the size of the African American population in the last four censuses has no systematic relationship to West Indian outcomes. This is true whether the comparison is carried out among US cities or across US borders. For instance, a comparison of West Indians in New York and Toronto reveals that men earn more in Toronto, while women earn more in New York. Previous empirical research likewise shows inconsistent results; West Indians in Canada sometimes outperform their US counterparts, sometimes not. Taken together, these findings are incompatible with the

idea that white favoritism contributes significantly to West Indian economic well-being.

To review, West Indian immigrants have long fared better economically than African Americans. This generalization holds even when immigrants and natives are assigned the same age, education, location, etc. Experts have proposed four distinct explanations for this state of affairs: West Indians are positively selected immigrants, Caribbean slavery taught West Indians valuable skills, socialization in an all-black society is psychologically beneficial for blacks, and white Americans discriminate less against West Indians than African Americans. When the four explanations are tested empirically, only positive selection receives support.

This is not to say that growing up in an all-black society might not provide psychological benefits or that whites might not respond positively to blacks with a Caribbean accent. But even if these relationships hold (which has yet to be demonstrated), there is no empirical evidence that they enhance West Indian economic attainment. Rather, West Indian success can be attributed entirely to the greater talent and ambition of those who choose to move. Similarly, the subset of African Americans who are voluntary internal migrants are better off than their less venturesome counterparts. Once this point is clear, it is easy to see why West Indian success offers no lessons for African American improvement.

And what of white racism? Does West Indian success mean it has disappeared? To address this question, it is necessary to determine if West Indians are doing as well as equally qualified native whites. According to the last two censuses, West Indian women have fared *better* than equally qualified native white women on both labor force participation and earnings. Yet, African American women have done nearly as well, achieving *parity* with equally qualified native white women on these same outcomes. Some scholars do interpret these findings as evidence that racism is in retreat. On the other hand, both West Indian and African American women still have higher unemployment rates than similarly qualified native white women. Finally, and most important, *on no economic outcome do West Indian men fare as well as equally qualified native white men*. African American men, of course, lag even further behind.

So, the racism scorecard contains more minuses than pluses. There is good news on a subset of women's outcomes, but this good news holds nearly as strongly for African Americans as for West Indians. In other words, the claim that racism against black women has declined could be made without consulting any data on West Indians, and the claim that racism against black men has held steady could be made by consulting data on either African Americans or West Indians. In sum, contrary to media

hype, West Indians' economic advantage over African Americans sheds no new light on American race relations.

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**Suzanne Model** is Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts. Her research focus is immigration; her preferred line of inquiry is cross-national comparisons of immigrants' socioeconomic attainment. She is the author, most recently, of *West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story?* (Russell Sage 2008) and coeditor of *Child Rearing in Six Ethnic Families: The Multi-Cultural Dutch Experience* (Mellen 2006).