African Immigrants and Inequality: Wealth Unrecognized

After reviewing the history and context of African immigration, both racial discrimination and social capital theories of poverty will demonstrate the following: although African immigrants experience poverty and inequalities as a result of racial discrimination, their own internal social networks provide invisible social capital that may safeguard them from experiencing more profound levels of austerity. Poverty and inequalities among African immigrants are not necessarily caused by a lack of wealth. Rather, the types of wealth that they possess are devalued by and invisible to current government policies. However policies will be proposed to restore value and dignity to one of America’s growing immigrant groups.

Defining Terms: Who African Immigrants Are and How They Are Counted

Before exploring group inequalities, it is important to define who African immigrants are. The US Government groups Africans based on geography rather than ethnicity, so non-blacks from nations such as Egypt and Morocco and black Africans are grouped together statistically. According the 2000 US Census, African immigrants, or foreign-born Africans, are legal immigrants to the United States, including refugees and holders of student visas. Though non-black Africans, black Africans, immigrants and refugees have different circumstances and challenges, there are few government statistics on sub-categories, such as on poverty among black African refugees.

Government statistics are further limited in their measurement of this population. In the introduction to the US Immigration & Naturalization Service’s (INS) 2000 Statistical Yearbook, editors also note that statistics on immigrants only count immigrants who have been processed by the agency. Because refugees and asylees are processed upon entry by the State Department’s Bureau of Refugee Programs, they are not included in INS statistics unless they used the agency to adjust their status to permanent residency. Some refugees may not adjust their status for years. Undocumented
immigrants are also missing from these statistics, although there are not large numbers of Africans in this group. Consequently, the actual number of migrants from Africa is higher than the statistics cited here. Though demographic information will still be drawn from census data as well as statistics from the Statistical Yearbook, other research studies will be used as much as possible to consider particular differences and challenges within the African Immigrant community. The statistics in the paper should be the then used to note trends in immigration and a general sense of the size of the African migrant population.

Lastly, poverty will also be defined using 1999 federal poverty rate, which is based on a set of minimum income needs for different family sizes and types. This threshold for a family of four in 1999 was $17,029. This was the poverty standard used 2000 U.S. Census Bureau’s report on foreign-born populations as well as the March, 2000 Current Population Survey (CPS). Use of this standard facilitates comparisons between African immigrants and other immigrant groups. No comparisons can begin, however, before describing the journey of Africans from Africa to North America.

Modern African Diaspora: A History

Africans are not new to North America. The first Africans may have arrived in United States as early as 1526, preceding almost all other immigrants. Millions were trafficked as part of the transatlantic slave trade and millions more died during the journey. The slave trade may account for the largest single migration from Africa to the United States, but second wave of truly voluntary migration only began approximately 60 years ago (Takougang, 1995). With the exception of refugees, most members of this modern African diaspora voluntarily migrated, mostly in search of higher education.

Following World War II, a number of African intellectuals studied in the United States, in hopes of receiving training and skills they could use to help newly independent, developing native
countries in Africa. As part of an American Cold War era policy designed to strengthen relationships to new African nations, the African Scholarship Program of American Universities was developed to fund these students. In 1954 there were a handful of students from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Liberia. By 1967 African students accounted for almost ten percent of all international students in the United States, totaling 1,306 students from over thirty African countries (Takougang, 1995). Today educational attainment remains the main motivation for African migration to the United States. Like their predecessors sixty years ago, most Africans still study in the states in hopes of returning to their native countries to transfer skills and expertise (Arthur, 2000).

Between 1965 and 1992 over 2.25 million people emigrated from Africa to the United States, comprising three percent of the total number of immigrants to the United States (Kamya, 1997). According to the 2000 US Census, African immigrants numbered 700,000 among the 28 million foreign-born people in the United States, having increased in population by 300,000 within ten years. This estimate may be conservative. A continuing trend of increasing refugee migration means the African immigrant population may have grown significantly in the last two years since the 2000 (US Immigration & Naturalization Service, 2000). Regardless of their exact numbers, most African immigrants are fairly new to the United States: the median length of residence in the US is 10.2 years, lower than the medians for populations from any other part of the world (Schmidley, 2001).

Hugo Kamya (1997) believes two factors account for the modern wave of migration: changes in immigration policy and social, economic, and political upheaval in the world in general. In 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 eliminated a quota system and established kinship ties as the primary “rationing device” for admittance of new immigrants. This resulted in an increased number of women, children, and older immigrants. The African community in America was built through these kinship ties: over 42% of African immigrants are relatives of US Citizens. In 1986 The Reform and Control Act of 1986 allowed other illegal aliens to become lawful
permanent residents and, in 1990, the Immigration Act also increased the annual cap on immigration (Schmidley, 2001).

Simultaneously social, economic and political changes in the world itself resulted in what Kamya (1997) terms as “a mass exodus of affected peoples into new lands” (p. 2). The Refugee Act of 1980 also increased the number of eligible refugees, though tightening immigration quotas for other kinds of immigrants (Kilty & Vidal de Haymes, 2000). The INS (2000) noted that 17,624 refugees arrived from Africa, and 92% were from war affected nations such as Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan. With the exception of Ethiopia, where refugees account for over one in four immigrants, these countries’ sent more than twice as many refugees as other immigrants. However, approximately 60% African immigrants in 2000 were not refugees. Africans still accounted for less than 24 percent of those granted refugee status by the United States in 2000, when there were more refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina than refugees from all the countries in Africa combined (US Immigration & Naturalization Service, 2000). Instead most African immigrants are skilled, educated, and from Anglophone countries, in search of economic refuge and opportunities not available at home.

Among the US African immigrant population over age 25, 95 percent of African immigrants had completed high school or more education, exceeding the 81 percent completion rate for Europeans, and 84 percent of Asians. Over 49 percent of African immigrants held a Bachelor’s degree or more, still more than 45 percent of Asians, and 36 percent of North Americans (Schmidley, 2001). Africans are the most educated immigrants in the United States. In terms of education as a form of human capital, they are quite fortunate. Unfortunately, they are exporting these resources from their native countries.

Although migration theory holds that the distance and the cost of migration “selects out” those Africans who do not have a certain educational background, F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo (1997) argues
that these immigrants come from stalled economies where higher education is more attainable than actual job opportunities, pushing skilled Africans to leave their countries as part of the “brain drain.” The United States also offers opportunities for research and employment at incomparable levels of compensation. Takougang gives one stark example, the 1993 yearly salary of a Nigerian university lecturer was less than a month’s stipend of a Visiting Fulbright Professor in his or her country. Nigeria alone accounted for 18 percent of new, non-refugee African immigrants in 2000. Over 60 percent of non-refugee African immigrants to the United States in 2000 were from six countries: Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria (US Immigration & Naturalization Service, 2000).

Based on their human capital, most Africans seemed poised for success upon arrival in the United States, or achievement at a level that is at least congruent with their level of education. However, financially they do not achieve the same level of income as less educated immigrant groups. For many reasons, human capital does not seem to guarantee Africans of equal footing in America. Racial discrimination is one possible explanation of inequalities African immigrants face.

*Neither Black nor White: Racial Discrimination against African Immigrants*

Theorists such as Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro (1995) and Donald Feagin (2000) might argue that racial differences in wealth are partially responsible for this downward mobility. Feagin clearly points out that Racism in the United States is systemic, they argue, and is codified in racist and discriminatory policies that targeted America’s first African immigrants. Racial constructs and discrimination leads to unequal distribution of wealth and thus poverty, particularly for native blacks (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Modern African immigrants become victims of this racism because their identities are reconstructed based on race. In the case of black Africans, their skin color becomes a defining characteristic. As a result, black Africans are discriminated against in similar
ways to native blacks, as well in a very different manner: their educational background and credentials are devalued.

Though African immigrants are more educated and would seemingly have higher access to skilled occupations, 37 percent of Africans versus 39 percent of Asians and 46 percent of North American immigrants worked in “managerial and professional specialties” (Schmidley, 2001). Both African men and women often find that their degrees in fields such as healthcare and education are devalued or sometimes cannot be transferred at all (Arthur, 2000). Some could argue that caused is by discrimination and racist perceptions about the quality of African education. F. Dodoo (1997) agrees, citing other studies, that degrees earned outside the Untied States may have less perceived transferability than degrees from the Caribbean or other parts of the Western Hemisphere.

Reduced acceptance of their educational credentials is compounded with other forms of discrimination. Emeka Nwadiora (1995) studied of alienation and stress among 127 African immigrants and noted the following reaction:

Most black immigrants, because they come from a country that is predominantly the same race as they are, have difficulty understanding the brand of racism in America. After a few years of living in the United States they begin to experience the very overt and sometimes the subtleties of racism and how that affects their physiological and psychological health and economic prosperity. Unlike American Blacks who have lived with racism all this time, the immigrants’ reaction to the newly discovered racism is that… they are frustrated that in a country where they believed they could reach any level of progress, suddenly their skin color is a barrier to them” (p.67)

When asked about exposure to different stressors, 56 percent of respondents reported experiencing racism and 64 percent experienced discrimination. Over 80 percent of women and 56 percent of male respondents reported work stress. Those with undergraduate or terminal degrees reported more stress than those with high school degrees, possibly because these immigrants expected better rewards for their education than they received. The longer immigrants lived in the United States, the more stress they experienced due to racism.
Dodoo (1997) also notes that black Africans face discrimination in hiring practices, compared to “African Americans and Caribbean immigrants in that order” (p. 542). The median income of African households was $36,371, while Asian households earned $41,733. North American households earned $46,799. Schmidley points out that a higher proportion of Asian workers not only held high-paying management jobs, but 70 percent of Asian women worked, resulting in more dual-income households. In contrast, only 50% of African women worked (Current Population Survey-March, 2000). Some could view low wages and participation as stemming from racial discrimination. African women also typically dominate small business in their traditional communities but have difficulty finding employment or become confined to the service sector upon arrival in the United States, where wages are low and benefits are minimal (Arthur, 2000).

Evidence suggests that Africans feel subject to discrimination in America, an extremely negative, hopeless stereotype of Africa, and belief that “issues pertaining to peoples of African ancestry are generally considered peripheral and unimportant by members of the dominant culture” (Arthur 2000, p. 73). Evidence shows that Caribbean immigrants often emphasize their accents in order to not be mistaken for native black or black African (Dodoo, 1997). Black Africans in turn emphasize their country of origin, calling themselves “foreign blacks” instead of native blacks. Arthur (2000) agrees: “One fact remains clear for both African immigrants and American-born blacks: their access to economic opportunities and political power have been influenced, in part, by their perceived low racial statues relative to whites [because they] have been relegated to a subordinate position in the American stratification system” (p. 79).

African immigrants thus face institutionalized racist policies native blacks face. They are targeted at higher rates by law enforcement, and face challenges of being limited to affordable housing in higher crime communities. Because most African immigrants live in predominantly minority communities, their businesses have difficulty securing loans form banks even though they
may have adequate collateral. In Arthur’s study, only 15 percent used Small Business Administration assistance for minority-owned business. Immigrants said they did not apply because of the process seemed tedious, and because they could not afford to hire skilled accountants to prepare the paperwork. Instead, African immigrants often funded down payments at high interest rates on credit cards, or several entrepreneurs pooled their credit card advances together. Similar to Oliver & Shapiro’s (1995 p. 45) discussion of African Americans and their creation of economic detours, African immigrants have created business that serve their communities, feeling that their access to the greater market is limited by language barriers or discrimination.

Given the racism that many African immigrants face, some studies show that many never feel content in the United States and plan on returning to Africa ultimately (Nwadiora, 1995). Africans immigrants have one of the lowest rates of naturalization of any immigrant group (US Immigration & Naturalization Service, 2000). Many see their time in American as a way to build homes and create wealth in their native countries. Many African immigrant communities remain insular. Refugees are particularly sensitive to discrimination and do no stray far from the enclaves in urban areas. Racial discrimination theorists would argue that the tight-knit communities that African immigrants create are a consequence of racism and segregation. However, these social networks do more than provide safety in numbers. They are wells of African immigrant social capital.

_Taking Care of Each Other: Social Support as a Form of Social Capital_  

If deficiencies in social capital, defined as formal and informal social networks, lead to inequalities and determine poverty, then African immigrants are do not experience poverty as severely as other groups. Nancy Folbre (2001) and others might argue that social networks among the African immigrants are their internal source of social capital and a source of great, uncounted wealth in this immigrant community. These networks are conduits for the transfer of wealth between native
countries and the United States through “stepwise migration”—immigrants first from rural areas in their countries in search of education and employment, and then to another country to save money to meet income eligibility requirements before coming to the United States, until finally settling in metropolitan areas within family and/or ethnic enclaves. (Arthur 2000 p. 32). Consequently African immigrant settlement is particularly concentrated by geographic area. For example, almost one third of all Ethiopians in United States can be found in Washington, DC alone (Takougang, 1995).

These informal social networks become indispensable ways of sponsoring and settling new immigrants. They often provide temporary housing, job opportunities, and knowledge about how things work. US immigration policy requires potential immigrants to prove that they will not become public charges by showing a level or wealth or assets, or a sponsor whose assets could cover the potential immigrant (US Immigration & Naturalization Service, 2000). As Arthur (2000) indicates, African immigrants tend to build further on this stipulation by tending to sponsor others who have postsecondary credentials, capable of pursuing advanced education in the United States and ultimately finding good employment. He describes these social units as “units of production… harnessing the contributions of its members to help raise their standard of living” (p. 96). African immigrant households are larger than average native born households of 2.54 people, with 3.18 people on average. 22.3% of African immigrant non-family households (meaning people living together not because of birth, marriage or adoption) are male, more than any other immigrant group.

Perhaps such efficient use of social capital could explain why the 1999 poverty rate for African immigrants was 13.2 percent, lower than the average rate of 16.8 percent among all immigrants (Schmidley, 2001). This provides a better explanation than an argument based on racial discrimination, where African immigrants should not only be poorer, but poorer than other racial groups and more comparable to native blacks.
Folbre (2001) unwittingly described African immigrants when she said, “if human capital is so important, maybe we should pay more attention to how and where it is actually produced—in families and communities” (p. 71). Arthur also points out that these units even alter traditional gender roles significantly for the goal of production. Men sometimes take up household duties that were typically African women’s work so women can work outside the home if their earning potential is higher. When viewed from the perspective of social capital, perhaps the 50 percent of African immigrant women who are not in the labor force are involved in the invisible labor force of caring labor by sharing childcare responsibilities, housework, and caring for other relatives. Folbre argues that if this labor was visible, the value of household earnings for people like African immigrants could rise as much as 30 to 60 percent. One could argue that this caring labor takes pressure off these immigrants to rely upon federal means tested cash benefits, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Only five percent of African immigrants received TANF or SSI. Over 13 percent received non-cash benefits, such as Medicaid, food stamps, and housing assistance. Only European and North American immigrants had lower numbers. (Current Population Survey- March, 2000).

Harnessing of resources through networks is one form of what Folbre (2001) calls “contributions that go unmeasured” (p. 54). Social Capital would also ascribe a value to remittances—large sums of money that are sent periodically to family members in their native countries. Takougang mentions that in one 1991 study of African immigrants, 57 percent of respondents sent remittances ranging from $1,500 to $20,000. Because this wealth leaves the United States, it goes undocumented and uncounted, thought it is a stunning indication of African immigrant frugality and productivity. This social capital for Africans has its own goal: the transfer of human capital and resources back to native countries. Many Africans hope to one day return to their native countries and funnel money back to buy land, or build houses for retirement. The ultimate goal of repatriation may
be the best explanation of why, at 38.2 percent, African immigrants have one of the lowest rates of homeownership of any immigrant group (Schmidley, 2001). Rather than assuming that discrimination is keeping them out of the buyer’s market, perhaps they do not want to buy at all. Because of their social capital, one could also argue that African immigrants have a low rate of naturalization because they do not see economic benefit beyond what they can achieve through their social networks. Citizenship would involve forfeiting their nationality and often property rights in their native countries. Beyond voting privileges, many see no benefits beyond those received with permanent residency. In one study nearly 70 percent of immigrants surveyed said that the opportunity to become eligible for certain public welfare programs did not influence their decision to become naturalized (Arthur).

*Valuing the African Immigrant: Combining Social Capital with Equal Opportunity*

Evaluating African Immigrant inequalities from through theories of racial discrimination and social capital leads to complementary results. Both theories explain aspects of the African Immigrant experience in the United States. One truth emerges from both theories: African Immigrants are devalued. Racial discrimination devalues their education and experiences, while racism stratifies them as a social group. From a social capital perspective, their social networks, financial contributions and worth are devalued by a society that places greater stock in other things. The key to social justice for African immigrants are policy responses that assess and restore value to social capital and social networks, while assuring that African immigrants have equal opportunities for success.

Beginning with social capital responses, public policy should ascribe value to the caring, invisible labor force to which many African immigrants may belong. If the African immigrant social unit does in fact act as a unit or production, it should be rewarded for its efforts. Policies would value
the invisible corps of people who care for family members, provide childcare, or simply cook so
others can work. This would not only restore the dignity to immigrants who work hard to support
their communities, but appropriate programs could actually increase their well-being. For example, if
this work became “visible,” through legislation giving tax credits to community members who
provide childcare or other community resources, it could reward African immigrant families for what
they are already doing well. If truly structural policy changes occurred, such as setting higher wages
for individuals in caring labor, African immigrants are just one group who could benefit
economically. Paired with the Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC), they would receive more credit for
what they earn, even if that money later took the form of remittances sent back to the African
continent. Other policy responses include broadening the definition of “family” for TANF grants to
include kin or adults caring for needy, non-related children. This would allow these social networks
greater resources and flexibility in caring for each other.

Returning the value taken by discrimination to African Immigrants involves not only policy
changes, but also deep changes in American culture’s construction of race. Policies should be
established codifying the evaluation and acceptance of international education and other credentials.
Immigrants should receive credit and compensation for education based on recognized criteria rather
than subjective standards, and there should be penalties for discrimination based on the national
origin of credentials. Non-cash benefits, such as housing assistance, are important benefits for this
immigrant group. Like cash benefits, an expansion of the definition of “family” could help African
immigrants by allowing extended families and social units to live together or near each other and to
pool resources for the common good. It is just as important that policy enforces fair housing
practices that protect immigrants of color. Fair lending policies could ensure greater access to African
immigrant entrepreneurs, who should not be penalized for having specialized stores for their
communities. These businesses should not only be restricted to lower income neighborhoods, but
also allowed to flourish in more mainstream enterprise zones. In an era of rapidly changing immigration laws and growing distrust of Muslims from any part of the world, Protecting African immigrants from racism is one way to prevent them from becoming racists themselves. As generations of Africans become black Americans, it is important to keep them from perpetuating the stereotypes that hinder all people of color.

In the words of Nancy Folbre (2001), “we need to improve the measures of the kinds of success we care about. Otherwise we will not be able to reward the kinds of behavior we most value” (p.79). Many of the behaviors exhibited by African Immigrants are admirable, but they are not rewarded. Many Africans arrive in the United States in search of higher education and learning, but instead their credentials and experiences depreciate, while their complex cultural and ethnic backgrounds are boiled down to black, or not white. Once here, they become part of intricate networks intent on preserving their culture and caring for each other across national boundaries. Many succeed so well that many members may not rely on public assistance programs, despite lower wages and larger family size. It is time to abandon the assumption that Africans immigrants are refugees in every sense. They are not doomed people from a doomed continent. Instead American society and policies should ascribe value what African immigrants bring and what they try to achieve: honest exchanges of social capital across national boundaries and oceans, for the greater good.
References


