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# Minority Entrepreneurship 2.0

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# Minority Entrepreneurship 2.0

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## ABSTRACT

Research on minority entrepreneurship often proceeds by documenting discriminatory barriers impeding business creation and performance. Acquiring appropriate human capital, accessing financing, and exploiting market opportunities have been more challenging for minorities than for White business owners. Particularly regarding Black-owned firms, studies examining barriers impeding their viability invariably identify the presence of those barriers. Findings portray afflicted businesses suffering in ways manifested by their lower survival rates, firm size, employee numbers, and the like – firms shackled by blatantly racist practices. Inadequately addressed is the question of why these beaten-down firms have made such impressive progress in recent decades. The applicable constraints, in fact, have lessened.

Regarding the factors shaping entrepreneurial performance, economists focus heavily on persistent racial inequality while sociologists have stressed pathways to immigrant ethnic inclusion, i.e., group adaptation to life in America. Both paradigms have validity. Black, Latino, and Asian American business owners are diverse groups often impacted in differing ways by America's evolving discriminatory barriers. The fact that most Asian and Latino owners are immigrants, some here illegally, presents complications. This monograph proceeds by probing the differing circumstances under which

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Black, Asian, and Latino owners run their firms and ways in which these differences shape their performance outcomes.

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# 1

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## Introduction

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Black Americans must have “the economic power that comes from ownership and the security and independence that comes from economic power.”

Nixon (1968).

### 1.1 Conflicting Forces Driving Minority Entrepreneurship Forward and Holding it Back

Essential ingredients for creating viable small businesses include the involvement of capable owners possessing appropriate human capital for operating their firms, sufficient financing to achieve an efficient scale of operations and to exploit business opportunities, and access to markets in which to sell the firm’s products. The uniqueness of minority entrepreneurship is clarified by viewing these ingredients as *barriers to be overcome* before success is achieved. The body of published research on minority entrepreneurship often proceeds by documenting specific discriminatory barriers impeding business creation and subsequent performance (Bates, 2011; Parker, 2018). Acquiring appropriate educational credentials and skills, accessing financing, and exploiting market opportunities have been more challenging for minorities than for aspiring

White business owners. Particularly regarding African American-owned firms, empirical studies examining specific barriers impeding their viability invariably identify the presence and intensity of those barriers. Of the many dozens of such studies, the consistency with which they have successfully identified discriminatory barriers is phenomenal. Findings portray afflicted businesses suffering in ways manifested by their lower survival rates, profitability, firm size, paid employee numbers, and the like – firms shackled by subtle and blatant racist practices.

Inadequately addressed is the question of why these beaten-down firms have made such impressive progress in recent decades. The applicable constraints, in fact, have lessened. Why and how have they lessened? We need to know why they have eased. Our understanding of the policy implications of declining constraints and how they are operating requires further development and clarification, yet these issues have not been a major focus of scholarly attention. Particularly among economists, research has focused primarily on analyzing cross-sectional data to document the existence of discriminatory barriers detrimental to minority businesses at one specific point in time. Throughout American history, White Americans have consistently enjoyed greater access to resources than minorities. In the context of small-business financing, economists have repeatedly documented that privileged White access is still the norm. Importantly, very real barriers have been identified, but their declining relevance is inadequately probed. Minority business progress since the 1960s has been particularly rooted in owner human-capital gains: the depth of expertise among minority owners has grown substantially. Market access has broadened as well, and bank financing has become increasingly available.

Progress has been uneven. African American, Latino, and Asian American business owners are diverse groups often impacted in differing ways by America's evolving discriminatory barriers. The fact that most Asian and Latino owners are immigrants, some of whom reside in the USA illegally, presents further complications. This study proceeds by probing the *differing circumstances* under which Black, Asian, and Latino owners run their firms and ways in which these differences shape their performance outcomes.

When scholars began analyzing minority business enterprises (MBEs), their focus was entirely on Black-owned small businesses, and many concluded these firms were collectively insignificant (Brimmer and Terrell, 1971; Osborne, 1976). Andrew Brimmer (1966), the nation's first African American to serve on the Federal Reserve System's Board of Governors, claimed that Black-owned firms lacked the managerial and technical competence to compete successfully in the business world. He predicted *not* growth, but their outright decline (Brimmer and Terrell, 1971). In fact, African American-owned firms and minority businesses overall have grown tremendously in size and scope since the 1970s (Bates *et al.*, 2022).

By the 1980s, the predominant focus of minority entrepreneurship studies had shifted to Asian immigrant-owned firms, particularly those owned by Korean and Chinese immigrants. Pioneering studies of Latino-owned are subdivided into those analyzing Cuban immigrant-owners and their firms, which gained prominence in the 1980s, and Mexican-owned small businesses, seriously studied since the 1990s. Select studies discussed in this monograph examine how evolving barriers are transforming America's major subgroups of minority-owned firms. Analyses of Black, Asian, and Latino small-business owners focus primarily on owner human capital, access to financing, and access to markets as the concepts most relevant for explaining their business outcomes. Differences in how these factors have impacted racially defined owner groups notwithstanding, certain broad generalizations are valid. Specifically, minority entrepreneurship always has been and still is profoundly shaped by broad social, economic, and political forces operating throughout American society. Declining barriers, on balance, have generated a larger scale, widely diversified minority business community.

Many important studies of minority entrepreneurship dynamics are not discussed in this monograph. My focus is limited to studies analyzing owners and their firms operating in the United States. The unique challenges facing minorities pursuing entrepreneurial alternatives arise in very specific social, political, historical, economic contexts, and these contexts differ from nation to nation. Sections 2 through 4 of this monograph examine the different contexts in which Black and Asian owners have run their firms since the late 19th century. In sociological

terms, the kinds of firms they owned and the way these owners operated their firms were heavily shaped by the differing contexts in which they were embedded. Key factors shaping MBEs in America differ substantially from the relevant contextual factors operative in England or France or Germany. It is beyond the scope of this monograph to sketch applicable country-by-country contexts.

## **1.2 Analyses of Minority Entrepreneurship: An Overview**

The scholarly literature analyzing minority entrepreneurship lacks a unifying focus. Sociologists and economists have written most of the influential studies, yet they ask different questions, employ different methodologies, and base their analyses on different assumptions. While economists most often analyze owner racial groups (Black, White, Asian), paying little attention to immigrant status, sociologists typically analyze immigrant ethnic groups (Korean, Chinese, Cuban) exclusively. Because scholars address studies in their own disciplines, underlying assumptions are not made explicit. Key works of sociologists often strike economists as methodologically unsophisticated. Sociologists, in turn, frequently view the questions economists address as not terribly interesting.

Analyses of minority entrepreneurship have underutilized sophisticated nationwide databases describing representative samples of minority owners, characteristics of their businesses, and the environments in which these firms operate. Responsibility for this fact lies heavily with the census bureau's unnecessarily high barriers limiting access to the applicable data. Instead, minority entrepreneurship studies often analyze data plagued by known deficiencies. The decennial census of population public-use microdata (PUMS) files, for example, are easily accessible, but PUMS files lack even basic information on the traits of the applicable small businesses and the environments in which they operate. Case-study methodology is common. Many scholars rely on small, non-representative samples of firms and their owners collected in one or two cities. Although this approach generates provocative insights, it complicates efforts to compare findings across studies. A predictable result is an ongoing difficulty resolving disagreements regarding cause-and-effect relationships driving minority entrepreneurship dynamics.

Studies of Latino-owned businesses, until recently, have been notable for their scarcity, and data constraints are partially responsible. The census bureau's inconsistent definitions of "Hispanic" have not helped matters. Even the sophisticated databases carefully measuring the race/ethnicity of minority entrepreneurs and characteristics of their firms suffer from basic ambiguities and omissions. *There is no single ideal database.* It is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each of those widely used by researchers.

Analyses of minority entrepreneurship by economists are based most often on large-scale, nationally representative databases describing traits of business owners, their firms, and the environments in which these firms operate. Relying heavily upon econometric models analyzing firm formation, performance, and survival, economists have written most of the literature on entrepreneurship among African Americans. They have written, as well, the major works measuring discriminatory barriers shaping the size and scope of America's minority business community, and they have been dominant in the analysis of public policies impacting minority business development.

Sociologists analyzing minority entrepreneurship have most often investigated processes of immigrant adjustment to life in America. While economists focus on business owners and their firms, sociologists stress the networks in which immigrant-owned businesses are embedded. Concepts like social capital and ethnic resources are stressed. Their focus on minority immigrants – particularly Asian immigrants – is motivated in part by the problems these groups experienced while adjusting to the opportunities and constraints they encountered in America. Thus, studies of entrepreneurship among Korean immigrants are common, while studies of English-speaking White immigrants are rare. The presumption that new minority arrivals face labor-market discrimination is the usual starting point from which analysis of the decision to pursue self-employment proceeds. Particularly for those weak in English language fluency, their options for wage work are often restricted to low-wage, dead-end jobs.

In contrast to economists, sociologists are less focused on qualitative improvements like the rising incidence of college-graduate owners as causal factors driving accelerated minority business formation and

expansion in America. Regarding the factors shaping entrepreneurial performance, economists focus heavily on racial exclusion while sociologists stress pathways to ethnic inclusion. Stated differently, the race paradigm explains persistent racial inequality while the ethnicity approach focuses on group adaptation to life in America. “Rarely do they entertain the possibility that both paradigms are valid and consider them together” (Valdez and Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 2182).

Key factors shaping the decision making of minority immigrants contemplating business ownership have been a continuing focus. A “push, pull” dynamic has always shaped the decision to pursue self-employment, more so among minorities than White Americans (Bates, 1997a; Waldinger *et al.*, 1990). Barriers limiting opportunities for wage and salary work often *pushed* minorities toward self-employment, even among those preferring to work as employees. Alternatively, many wanted to own their own businesses and abandoned paid employment when attractive opportunities became available. In this sense, they were *pulled* into business ownership.

Economists, by emphasizing owner human capital and access to financing as explanations of entrepreneurial performance, are not rejecting the theoretical foundations of sociological research. Social capital and ethnic resources are interesting concepts potentially useful for explaining new-firm formation patterns and entrepreneurship outcomes. Economists would be more impressed with these theoretical tools if sociologists presented convincing empirical evidence that *specific* types of social capital really do explain small-business outcomes effectively. As is, working definitions of social capital are all over the map, an inconsistency often negating what could be a valuable theoretical concept.

The theoretical toolkits of economists and sociologists are complements, and present-day progress in explaining entrepreneurial outcomes relies on creative applications of all these tools. Sociologists, to their credit, have embraced the importance of owner human- and financial-capital resources as explanations of business entry and subsequent performance more readily than economists have accepted the relevance of ethnic-resource explanations. A key objective of this monograph is to promote interdisciplinary understanding among those interested in



1.2. *Analyses of Minority Entrepreneurship: An Overview*

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entrepreneurship dynamics. Such an understanding is an essential precondition for achieving an effective minority entrepreneurship scholarly synthesis.

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