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‘Race, diversity, and productivity: American whaling in the nineteenth century’

This project examines the effect of interpersonal diversity on the productivity of whaling voyages in the United States between 1790s and 1920s. From colonial settlements into the twentieth century, whaling was an important industry in America, thanks to the process of industrialization and urbanization that raised the demand for oil used for lubrication and illumination and for baleen used in the production of various consumer products. Vessels that sailed from various New England ports dominated the industry. Crews were multiracial and multiethnic, composed of individuals from various northeastern states, recent immigrants, and various other nationalities that joined on the whaling routes.

Customs registers include the crew lists for each voyage and the “shipping papers” that specify the position (rank) and payment (share) of each crew member. Information regarding the output (sperm oil, whale oil, baleen) of each voyage is also available. Our dataset includes about 4,400 voyages and 113,000 crewmembers. Information about the crew includes name, age, height, birthplace, residence city, citizenship, rank, and payment. It also includes a visual description of each crew member (complexion, hair, and eye color) recorded for identification at customs, which has been used by previous researchers as proxy for race. Because of the subjective and unsystematic nature of this information, however, it is recognized to be an imperfect proxy. Without reliable external information for comparison, it is not known how crewlist enumerators used certain designations (e.g., dark, brown, black, copper for skin color) to differentiate among races (e.g., black vs. native).

For preliminary analysis, we have combined the information regarding complexion and hair with other data on the names of native whalers to classify the crew into four broad categories: white, black, native, and other. By calculating the fractions of crew in each of these categories, we have constructed various indices of diversity for each voyage to estimate the effect of diversity on output.