

## **WHAT'S IN A NAME?** PREFERENCE FOR “BLACK” VERSUS “AFRICAN-AMERICAN” AMONG AMERICANS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

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**Abstract** This research note examines the preferences of Americans of African descent for the label “black” versus “African-American.” Racial labels have long been associated with majority-group attitudes toward minority-group members, and minorities themselves have changed their preferred terminology over time. We trace the evolution of racial labels from “Negro” to “black” to “African-American” and examine predictors of terminological preference among a national sample of Americans of African descent. Our respondents are nearly equally divided in their preference for the label “black” versus “African-American.” Significant correlates or predictors of terminological preference include the racial composition of the grammar school that respondents attended, respondents’ degree of racial group consciousness, and age, region, and size of city of residence.

The collective term that members of a group use to refer to themselves can provide interesting clues about the group’s status in society and its strategy for advancement. For Americans of African descent, that terminology has undergone many changes over the years. During the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the prevailing usage evolved from “colored” to “Negro” and then to “black.” In the late 1980s a group of civil rights leaders began to press for a newer label still, “African-American,” a term that implied “a shift from race to ethnicity or culture as the defining characteristic of the group and consequently . . . evoke[d] the notion of similarities between this group and other ethnic groups” (Grant and Orr 1996, p. 138). The new term quickly gained a

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foothold: within the next three or four years it was embraced by one-quarter to one-third of blacks nationwide, and by 1994 it showed signs of supplanting “black” as the term of choice, with 53 percent favoring “African-American” and only 36 percent favoring “black” in a national survey (Bowman 1994; Smith 1992). Subsequently, there were indications of a countertrend, and it did not pass unnoticed that, at the Million Man March in 1995, Jesse Jackson (the prime mover for “African-American” just a few years earlier) referred repeatedly to “blacks” and never to “African-Americans” (Heilemann 1995).<sup>1</sup>

For many African-Americans, the question of what to call themselves is a matter of relative indifference. This sentiment found early expression in W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1928 dictum, “It is not the name—it’s the Thing that counts,” and it has been echoed more recently in some opinion surveys.<sup>2</sup> However, the question continues to be of concern to many African-Americans and to many white Americans as well: in Fairchild’s (1985) study, whites were more likely to stereotype “blacks” negatively than “Afro-Americans” or “Negroes,” but, as Zilber and Niven (1995) established experimentally 10 years later, whites react more favorably to “black” than to “African-American” political candidates. This is also a matter of interest to social scientists, for not only do they consider changing opinions about appropriate racial and ethnic descriptors worth studying in their own right; as a logistical matter, they need to be able to construct survey questions that use language that most respondents will regard as appropriate.

The purposes of this research note are, first, to present a new reading of blacks’ terminological preferences and, second, to achieve a clearer understanding of the contours of the lingering disagreement among blacks over what they prefer to be called by identifying the factors that shape these preferences.

## Data and Methods

To address these issues, we draw on data from the first wave of the National Survey of Black Workers (NSBW). The NSBW interviewees are a nationally representative cross-section of African-American adults (18 years of age or older) who at the time of the interview in 1998–2000 were either currently employed or recently unemployed (that is, unemployed for less than one year), resided in the coterminous United States, and had telephone access. Individuals who resided in institutional settings (like prisons, hospitals, and so

1. An analogous debate is occurring within the Spanish-speaking community, where disagreement over the terms Hispanic versus Latino/a is raging. According to a survey conducted in 2002 by the Pew Hispanic Center, 53 percent of Hispanics or Latino/as find either term acceptable, 34 percent favor “Hispanic,” and 13 percent prefer “Latino/a” (Fears 2003).

2. Smith (1992, table 2) cataloged responses to nine questions that were asked between 1969 and 1991 about blacks’ preferred terminology. The percentage of respondents expressing indifference fluctuated wildly, ranging from only a trace up to a clear majority; this percentage was greatly bolstered by the inclusion of a “or doesn’t it matter to you?” proviso within the survey question.

forth), those who were not English-speaking, and those who lived in households without telephone availability were not included in this survey.<sup>3</sup> Data were collected by means of telephone interviews approximately 20–25 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted by African-American interviewers at the survey research centers of the University of Georgia, Kent State University, and Indiana University. Utilizing the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) response rate 4 (AAPOR 2004, p. 29), the overall response rate for this study was 36.2 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Sample respondents were selected by means of a race-targeted, single-stage random digit dial (RDD) technique. Single-stage RDDs permit a natural stratification of the sample by state, county, and area code (Frey 1989; Groves and Kahn 1979) and theoretically provide an equal probability of reaching all households in the nation with a telephone access line (that is, a unique telephone number that rings in that household only), regardless of whether that phone number is published or unlisted (Lavrakas 1993). The NSBW sampling design differed from traditional single-stage sampling procedures in one key regard: because African-Americans represent a relatively small proportion of the total population of households in the United States (12.3 percent of all households nationwide [U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001]), it would have been inefficient to rely on a simple random sampling design. Instead, an RDD design was used that first correlated the probability of ethnic densities within census tracts to Central Office Codes (that is, three-digit dialing prefixes, or COCs). Utilizing this approach, the sample included respondents from the 2,996 COCs where the proportion of African-American households was 30 percent or higher (approximately 60 percent of all directory-listed African-American households in the United States [SSI 1993]).<sup>5</sup>

Sampling procedures for the NSBW also relied on a series of screening questions. Specifically, potential respondents were first screened out of the sample if they indicated that the number contacted was not attached to a household

3. Also eliminated from the sampling frame are those relatively few Americans—estimated at 7.5 million adults, or approximately 5 percent of the adult population—who rely exclusively on cellular telephones.

4. AAPOR RR4 calculates the response rate as the sum of the number of complete interviews (I) and partial interviews (P) divided by the number of interviews (I + P), plus the number of noninterviews (e.g., refusals/break-offs after screening [R]), plus noncontacts (i.e., respondent never available, answering machine, etc., [N]), plus others (e.g., respondents in ‘call back’ status, [O]), plus an estimate of the proportion of cases of unknown eligibility that would have likely been eligible for the study (i.e., unknown if household [UH], e.g., always busy, no answer, answering machine not conclusively residential, etc.; and unknown other [UO], e.g., hang up during introduction, break-off during screening, break-off before respondent selection, etc.). Thus, the response rate formula utilized was of the following form:  $RR = (I + P) / (I + P) + (R + NC + O) + e(UH + UO)$ .

5. To determine how well the demographic characteristics of the sample reflected those of the larger population of African Americans, we compared sample distributions to those reported in the 2000 census. This comparison indicated that sample distributions on age, education, income, occupation, employment status, and marital status closely approximated national norms. However, the sample significantly overrepresented women. Thus, the analyses reported here employed a poststratification weight to adjust for gender.

(that is, the number was attached to a business). Second, respondents were screened out if they indicated that there was not at least one African-American living in the household. Third, if the respondent indicated that no one residing in the household was currently employed, or had been employed within the previous year, the household was deemed ineligible for inclusion in the NSBW sample.<sup>6</sup> Based on these screens we estimate that approximately 50 percent of the phone numbers contacted were ineligible for inclusion. Finally, interviewers made a minimum of eight attempts at contact before coding a final disposition on that number.

For present purposes, the key question in the survey was "Do you prefer the term 'black' or 'African-American' to describe your racial identity?" This was the first question asked in the interview after respondent eligibility was determined, and the interviewer immediately programmed the respondent's preferred term into the CATI protocol; thus, for the duration of the interview, all subsequent questions used the interviewee's preferred label. Question sequence is of crucial importance in this context because of the strong likelihood that the interviewer's use of the term "African-American" or "black" early in the interview schedule, prior to soliciting the respondent's preference, would influence the respondent's choice of labels. By asking the preference question first, this potential source of measurement error was eliminated.

To pinpoint the sources of preferences for the one term or the other, we drew on an array of other information about each respondent. The first was the respondent's age. As has been documented elsewhere (Bowman 1994; Smith 1992), endorsements of "African-American" rather than "black" are likely to be an inverse function of age, reflecting the tendencies of younger people to be more receptive to departures from established practices and of older people to adhere to practices to which they have become habituated. In light of the elite origins of "African-American" and some lingering negative connotations of "black" (Smith 1992), we also expected endorsements of "African-American" to be more common among the more highly educated. We expected, too, that other factors being equal, the newer term ("African-American") would exhibit greater appeal among residents of major urban centers. We also considered it likely that those who had attended integrated primary schools would be more likely to have had experiences and to have internalized attitudes that would predispose them to view themselves more as part of an ethnic group than in strictly racial terms. If that were true, then having gone to a school where the overwhelming percentage of one's classmates were whites may have fostered a sense of racial identity not too far removed from that associated with having attended a predominantly black school. For one other factor, gender, no clear expectation suggested itself, but it seemed prudent to include gender in the model in any event for purposes of statistical control.

6. Of course, this third screening criterion makes our study design different from one in which the intention is to sample from all adult African-Americans.

Respondents also answered a set of questions concerning their racial identification. The literature on racial group identification among Americans of African descent focuses on their feelings about being black, their sense of group commitment and cohesion, and their perceived location in the social structure (Broman, Neighbors, and Jackson 1988; Demo and Hughes 1990). This body of research has identified several features of the experience of being black in American society that affect the intensity of racial group identification. In most such research, however, racial group identity has been conceptualized as a dependent variable. Less frequently, racial group identification has been treated as a predictor of behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, with the majority of these treatments examining either political participation (Ellison and London 1992; Miller et al. 1981) or feelings of personal efficacy (Hughes and Demo 1989). We suspected that respondents for whom racial identification was important would prefer the label “African-American” to “black” because the former term encourages a focus on the common fate of racial group peers as the core of group identity (Martin 1991). While we recognized that our cross-sectional data would not allow us to treat racial identification unambiguously as causally prior to terminological preference, we were nevertheless interested in its predictive ability.

We measured racial identification as responses to the following series of questions:

- “How important would you say African-American culture is in your everyday life?” (“very important,” “somewhat important,” or “not at all important”);
- “Do you currently participate in any organizations that support African-American equality and advancement?” (“yes” or “no”);
- “About how often would you say that you read African-American newspapers and magazines?” (a 6-point scale ranging from “nearly every day” to “never”);
- “Do you strongly agree, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or strongly disagree that African-Americans should always vote for African-American candidates; black people should shop in African-American-owned stores whenever possible; African-Americans should not date whites; and black parents should give their children African-American names?”

We standardized responses to these seven questions and weighted them by their factor score coefficients to form an index with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1; Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient for the index was .63.

## **Results**

Of the 2,382 respondents to whom the question was asked, 1,146 (48.1 percent) voiced a preference for “black,” 1,173 (49.2 percent) said they preferred “African-American,” and 63 (2.7 percent) declined to express an opinion.

Thus, opinions were split almost evenly between the two terms. Comparing these figures to findings from the surveys cited above suggests that the popularity that "African-American" achieved during the early 1990s did not grow during the ensuing decade and that, if anything, "black" has enjoyed a modest resurgence.

Table 1 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis of preferences for the one term or the other; it gives the coefficient and its associated standard error along with the odds ratio for each predictor in the model. To enhance the interpretability of these results (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000), in table 2 we translate them into the probability that a survey respondent with certain specified characteristics would prefer "African-American" rather than "black." To calculate these probabilities, we varied the value of each significant predictor in the model one at a time while holding every other predictor constant at its mean or mode, multiplied each value in turn by the regression coefficient for that variable, added the constant, and generated the predicted probability of preferring "African-American." (The fixed values were: gender = female; age = 37 [the mean]; years of education = 14 [the mean]; community = a large city; region = non-South; grammar school composition = all black; and racial identification = 0 [the mean]. For age, education, and racial identification, the alternative values used in the calculations represented  $\pm 1$  standard deviation in either direction from the mean [an age of 24 or 50, 11 or 17 years of education, and  $\pm 1$  on the racial identification scale].)

**Table 1.** Logistic Regression Results

| Predictor                                      | <i>b</i> | (Standard Error) | Odds ratio |
|--|----------|------------------|------------|
| Constant                                       | -.178    | (.323)           |            |
| Gender (1 = female, 0 = male)                  | .139     | (.093)           | 1.149      |
| Age, in years                                  | -.009*   | (.004)           | .991       |
| Education, in years                            | .027     | (.018)           | 1.023      |
| Type of community (1 = large city, 0 = other)  | .265**   | (.099)           | 1.303      |
| Region (1 = South, 0 = other)                  | -.291**  | (.099)           | .748       |
| Grammar school:                                |          |                  |            |
| mostly black (1 = yes, 0 = no)                 | .070     | (.118)           | 1.073      |
| about half black, half white (1 = yes, 0 = no) | .507***  | (.134)           | 1.660      |
| almost all white (1 = yes, 0 = no)             | .063     | (.150)           | 1.065      |
| Racial identification score                    | .247***  | (.047)           | 1.280      |
| Correctly predicted by chance                  |          | .506             |            |
| Correctly predicted in model                   |          | .575             |            |
| Proportional reduction in error                |          | .136             |            |

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Logistic Regression–Based Probabilities

|   | Probability of favoring<br>“African-American” |
|---|---|
| Age = 24  | .596  |
| Age = 37  | .567  |
| Age = 50  | .538  |
| Residence = large city                              | .567  |
| Residence = not a large city                        | .502  |
| Region = non-South                                  | .567  |
| Region = South                                      | .495  |
| Grammar school = all black                          | .567  |
| Grammar school = mostly black                       | .584  |
| Grammar school = about half black, half white       | .685  |
| Grammar school = almost all white                   | .583  |
| Racial identification = mean – 1 standard deviation | .506  |
| Racial identification = mean                        | .567  |
| Racial identification = mean + 1 standard deviation | .627  |

No significant gender- or education-based differences emerged in preferences for the two terms.<sup>7</sup> As has been noted elsewhere, though, older blacks were less likely than their younger counterparts to endorse “African-American”; with the other predictors all fixed at their benchmark values, a 50-year-old black would fall approximately 6 percentage points below a 24-year-old African-American in terms of the likelihood of favoring the newer terminology.

Preliminary analyses established that a five-category classification of community types (large city, suburb, small city, small town, or rural) fared no better as a predictor of terminological preferences than a simple large city versus other dichotomy, so we treated community types in a dichotomous manner. As table 1 indicates, residents of large cities were significantly more likely to endorse “African-American,” though once again the difference amounted to only a few percentage points. A virtually identical difference emerged between southerners and others, with the latter being about 7 percentage points more likely than the former to favor “African-American.”

The remaining two sets of results contained more sizable differences. Clearly, the racial composition of the school or schools that one attended early in one’s youth helped shape one’s terminological preferences. But clearly, too, it was not simply that the heavier the concentration of blacks, the greater the preference for “black” rather than “African-American.” Rather, it was the

7. Due to the design features of our study, especially the criterion that only those employed or recently unemployed were eligible for inclusion in the sample, the identification estimates for men might have been different had all black men been eligible. We note that earlier studies of preference for racial labels employed different sample designs.

degree of racial integration that mattered, not the proportion of black students per se. That is, those who had attended schools where *either* blacks or whites dominated numerically were 10–12 percentage points less likely to favor “African-American” than were those who had attended schools whose student bodies were about half black and half white. Those who had attended all black, mostly black, or almost all white schools would be expected to have split about 58–42 in favor of “African-American”; but among those whose grammar schools were about half black and half white, the split would be expected to be 69–31. As for the link between racial identification and terminological preferences, those who scored higher on the racial identification scale were significantly more inclined toward “African-American.” This, too, was a fairly substantial difference, as can be seen in table 2: with all the other variables in the model held constant at their specified values, those who scored high on this scale were 12 percentage points more likely than those who scored low to prefer “African-American.” Here again, though, we must caution that the causal sequencing of what we treat as an independent and a dependent variable may in operation be more complex than that.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the joint impact of age, community size, region, early-life racial composition in school, and racial identification was considerably greater than the impact of any of these factors alone. For example, consider a black woman who was 24 years old, lived in a city outside the South, and attended a grammar school that was half black and half white. For her, the predicted probability of favoring “African-American” rather than “black” would be .758. By contrast, for a black woman who was 50 years old, lived in a noncity setting in the South, and had attended all black schools, the predicted probability of favoring “African-American” rather than “black” would be only .34—obviously a very sizable difference.

## Discussion

How group members refer to themselves provides insight into their position in society. This is especially true of minority group members, for whom racial or ethnic labeling at the hands of the majority group has historically been pejorative. If, as Jewell (1985) and Grant and Orr (1996) argue, the term “African-American” rather than “black” reflects a shift away from race in favor of culture or ethnicity as the basis of group identity, then identifying the terminological preference of Americans of African descent can shed light on an important aspect of race relations today.

Among survey respondents who expressed a preference for one term or the other, preference for the label “black” or “African-American” was nearly equally divided. Still, several interesting cleavages emerged among respondents. Gender and level of education did not influence terminological preference, but



age, city size, and region did, with younger residents of large cities outside the South expressing more enthusiasm for the label “African-American.” Moreover, those whose grammar schools had been half black and half white, as opposed to all or mostly black or almost all white, and those for whom racial identity was more important were significantly more likely than others to prefer the term “African-American” to “black.”

It is still unclear which term, “black” or “African-American,” will ultimately gain or lose in popularity. Likewise, it is too soon to know what the implications are for the future of race relations of the cleavages in endorsement of one or the other of these labels. However, our findings suggest that, by virtue of cohort replacement, the label “African-American”—popular among young, urban dwellers living outside the South who attended integrated schools and who embrace their heritage—will predominate. In either case, future research should pay closer attention to preferred racial labels because of the importance historically attributed to such labels by members of majority and minority groups alike.

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