Changing Racial Labels: From "Colored" to "Negro" to "Black" to "African American"

Tom W. Smith

CHANGING RACIAL LABELS
FROM "COLORED" TO "NEGRO" TO
"BLACK" TO "AFRICAN AMERICAN"

TOM W. SMITH

Abstract Labels play an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to the groups. This has been especially true for racial and ethnic groups in general and for Blacks in particular. Over the past century the standard term for Blacks has shifted from "Colored" to "Negro" to "Black" and now perhaps to "African American." The changes can be seen as attempts by Blacks to redefine themselves and to gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior.

Racial labels have been of special importance to Black Americans.[1] Wrenched from their native lands, Blacks lost their core personal identities. Tribal affiliation, kinship ties, language, and many other cultural attributes were destroyed when Blacks were enslaved by an alien culture in a foreign land. As Blacks gradually began to achieve emancipation or to gain ground under slavery, they forged a new culture and formed institutions and organizations to serve their needs and promote their interests. This effort was continually regulated by White society, which strictly controlled Blacks and sought to shape and regulate Black status and consciousness. The development of a Black community accelerated after the Civil War with the abolition of slavery, but White racism in general and the Southern system of segregation in particular severely hampered progress.

As Blacks established community and national institutions such as churches, colleges, and economic associations, they adopted various

1. For this article the term "Black(s)" will be used as the standard racial reference term.

racial labels to define themselves as a people. While many different racial terms have been used throughout their history, the standard preferential term changed from "Colored" in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to "Negro" from then until the late 1960s, then to "Black," and now perhaps to "African American."[2] While the preferred term has changed several times, the common goal for Blacks has been to find a group label that instilled group pride and self-esteem.

"Colored" to "Negro"

"Colored" was the dominant term in the mid- to late nineteenth century. It appears to have gained the upper hand because it was accepted by Whites as well as Blacks and was seen as more inclusive, covering mulattoes and others of mixed racial ancestry as well as those with complete Black ancestry. Others saw it as too inclusive, however, covering not only Blacks but Asians and other non-White races (Litwack 1979; Miller 1937; Wilkinson 1990).

Then late in the nineteenth century "Negro" began to gain greater acceptance. The movement to replace "Colored" with "Negro" was led by such influential Black leaders as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. There is some indication that "Negro" was favored by Civil War freedmen while "Colored" was more popular among the established community of Blacks emancipated before the thirteenth amendment (Bennett 1970). "Negro" was also seen as grammatically more versatile, usable as both adjective and noun and in the singular and the plural. Likewise, it was viewed as more economical since it did not need a noun to complete its meaning (e.g., "Negroes" vs. "Colored people") (Miller 1937). Similarly, DuBois argued that "Negro" was "etymologically and phonetically . . . much better and more logical than 'African' or 'colored' or any of the various hyphenated circumlocutions" (Bennett 1970), but he did not detail these advantages.

"Negro" was also seen as a "stronger" term. As Kelly Miller (1937) noted, "Usually where deep-seated, philosophical meaning is involved 'Negro' is a much stronger term of the two. Try, if you will, to express the idea involved in Negro art, Negro music, Negro poetry . . . and the *Negro Yearbook* in terms of the word 'colored'; and see what a lamentable weakness would result in this substitution." However, this

2. "Colored," "Negro," "Black," and "African" were all established English terms for Blacks when America was first settled. "African American" was in use at least as early as the late 1700s. The alterations in racial labels that we are discussing thus represent changes in the acceptance of various labels, not the creation of new terms.

connotation came from usage and not some inherent difference in the two terms.

But "Negro" also had considerable handicaps to overcome. It tended to be used as a term of reproach by Whites and further suffered from its association to the racial epithets "Niggah" and "Nigger" (Bennett 1970; Branch 1988; Litwack 1979). As Roland A. Barton argued in his famous letter in 1928 to DuBois, "The word, 'Negro,' or 'nigger,' is a white man's word to make us feel inferior."

Despite this derogatory baggage, the edge began to shift to "Negro." In part, it appeared to be a better, specific term for Blacks. "Colored" was seen as too generic a term and one that did not seem to provide specific group identity or define Blacks as a people. The rising number of Asian immigrants may have made the overinclusiveness of "Colored" a more serious drawback. But at the same time "Negro" had to be stretched to cover mulattoes and others of mixed ancestry who were far from being physically black and were not considered as appropriately described as "Negro" by some.[3]

The great expansion of White immigrant groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also may have encouraged the idea that Blacks needed a specific group name that matched Italian, Polish, etc.

But probably the main advantage was that "Negro" was defined to stand for a new way of thinking about Blacks. Racial progress and the hopes and aspirations of Blacks (especially as illustrated by Washington's self-help ideology) were to be captured by the term "Negro," and old racial patterns in general and Southern racial traditions in particular were to be left behind with "Colored." By the 1930s it had become the preferred term, and "Colored" increasingly took on a somewhat dated or antiquated connotation. As Bennett noted, "For a short spell, the term 'Negro' occupied roughly the same place in Negro life as the words 'black' and 'Afro-American' occupy today. In other words, it was a term of militancy, self-consciously used by black men defiantly asserting their pride of race" (Bennett 1970, pp. 376–77).

The supplanting of "colored" by "Negro" progressed gradually, although the former term remained in general, if less dominant, usage into midcentury. Many Black organizations dropped the term "Colored" from their titles, while others changed "Colored" to "Negro." A few organizations, most prominently the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), maintained "Colored"

---

3. The idea that "Negro" and later "Black" does not cover Blacks of mixed ancestry does not appear to hold any longer. For Blacks in the 1979–80 National Black Survey and the 1982 General Social Survey there is no association between skin color (very light to very dark) and preferred racial term.

in their titles while shifting to ''Negro'' for most other uses. ''Colored'' was also virtually abandoned in naming of new organizations by the 1930s, and no national Black association founded after 1940 (and still active in 1990) used ''Colored'' in its title (table 1).

As ''Negro'' gained acceptance, there was a second prolonged struggle over its spelling (Allen 1990, pp. 70, 73; Allport 1954, p. 183; Bennett 1970, p. 377; Miller 1937; Simpson and Yinger 1972, p. 33). Advocates of its use insisted that it be capitalized. As a New Orleans paper argued in 1878, ''The French, German, Irish, Dutch, Japanese and other nationalities are honored with a capital letter, but the poor sons of Ham must bear the burden of a small *n*'' (Litwack 1979, p. 541). A breakthrough was finally achieved by the NAACP when the *New York Times* announced in an editorial in 1930 that ''In our 'style book' 'Negro' is now added to the list of words to be capitalized. It is not merely a typographical change; it is an act of recognition of racial self-respect for those who have been for generations in the 'lower case''' (Bennett 1970, p. 378).

''Negro'' to ''Black''

By the 1950s the dominant position of ''Negro'' was secure. It was the standard term used by Black organizations (table 1) and was widely accepted by both the Black and White media. But as the civil rights movement began making tangible progress in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the term ''Negro'' itself eventually fell under attack. In order to break from the past and to shed the remnants of slavery and racial serfdom, it was argued that a new name was needed. ''Negro'' was criticized as imposed on Blacks by Whites, as denoting subservience, complacency, and Uncle Tomism. In its stead ''Black'' was promoted as standing for racial pride, militancy, power, and rejection of the status quo (Bennett 1970; Newsweek 1968, 1969).

''Black'' was initially favored by radical and militant Blacks in such groups as the Black Muslims and Black Panthers. Especially influential was Stokely Carmichael, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who in speeches and his 1967 book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation,* urged that ''Negro'' be abandoned. Similarly, a survey in Newark of Black males 15–35 years old after the 1967 riot found that 50 percent of those who participated in the riots described themselves as ''Black,'' compared to only 33 percent of nonrioters (Caplan and Paige 1968). Initially ''Black'' was used to describe those who were progressive, forward-looking, and/or radical, while ''Negro'' was used for those who were more established and identified with the status quo (Bennett 1970; Newsweek 1969). While the progressive

Table 1. Preferred Racial Term by Associations[a] (Percentages)

	Pre-1940[b]	1940–49	1950–59	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990	Don't Know
African American	0	0	50	0	3.7	6.4	100	(0)
Afro-American	0	0	50	9.1	3.7	2.1	0	(0)
Black	4.3	0	0	72.7	91.5	91.5	0	(3)
Colored	21.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	(1)
Negro	73.9	100	0	18.2	1.2	0	0	(0)
N	(23)	(5)	(2)	(33)	(82)	(47)	(1)	(4)

[a] Based on a count of organizations listed in Burek (1991). This excludes associations that are inactive or defunct or that used the terms in a nonracial context and international organizations using "African" to refer to non-American matters.
[b] Year in which the racial term was adopted. If an organization renamed itself and adopted a second racial term, it will be listed twice: when it adopted the original term and when it adopted the revised term.

and activist images of "Black" boosted its acceptance, the more radical and extremist associations retarded its adoption by both Blacks and Whites.[4]

"Black" was also favored because of the natural balance it provided to the term "White" (Allen 1990, p. 71). Linguistically it was the best parallel to or match for "White."[5] If "White" was the proper racial label for that race, then it was argued that "Black" was the proper term for the "opposite" race. This feature is illustrated in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 (Washington 1986). While King favored the term "Negro," using it 15 times in that speech, he used "Black" as an adjective four times. In each instance it appeared in a parallel construction with "White" (e.g., "black men as well as white men").

"Black" was also the best antonym of "White." For those wishing to emphasize Black separatism (as did some of its early advocates), this also was facilitated by the term "Black." As Doris Wilkinson (1990) noted, "Black" was chosen as a "deliberate antithesis to 'white.'"

"Black" also connoted strength and power, a connection that was capitalized on by the slogan "Black power." This same assertion, of course, had been made about "Negro" versus "Colored" a generation earlier.

But "Black" also had its negative aspects. It was seen as a derogatory term by some (Branch 1988, p. 748). Surveys of Black and White college students in 1963 indicated that both rated the term "black person" much less favorably than "Negro" (Williams 1966).

In part this was due to the strong association of "black" with evil (Allport 1954, p. 182; Williams 1966). Surveys of Black and White students in the early 1960s found that both regarded the color black much more negatively than white (Williams 1966). This led Williams to predict that efforts to "reverse the conventional symbolism by associating black with goodness and white with badness" would fail "in a culture where the symbolism of white as good and black as bad is so thoroughly entrenched in literature, religion, the mass media, etc." (Williams 1966, p. 539).

This linguistic taint was taken on directly by such slogans as "Black is beautiful" and "Black pride." Among Black college students the campaign seems to have worked. In 1969 the term "black" used with-

---

4. Like "Negro" earlier, "Black" was seen as a forward-looking, progressive term. "Black," however, also had associations with radicalism and even violence that were not associated with "Negro" even when it was the emergent term.

5. "Negro," of course, is Spanish and Portuguese for the color black. Despite the common root meaning, "Negro" was not a color term in English and had only a specialized meaning as a label for Blacks.

out any racial connotation was seen as significantly more positive than
in 1963. However, White students did not change their ratings of the
color black, and both White and Black students rated the color white
more favorably than black (Williams, Tucker, and Dunham 1971).

Likewise, advocates of "Black" purged its use as a racial epithet
by making it a term of positive affirmation. Just as "Negro" had over-
come its use as a slur and a put-down during an earlier period, so now
"Black" shed its derogatory connotations.

From its initial advocacy by progressive and militant elements in the
mid-1960s, "Black" began to win over more and more converts among
the mainstream of Blacks and Whites. Table 2 shows that considerable
disagreement prevailed among Blacks by the late 1960s. "Negro" was
still favored by a plurality of Blacks, but the older term, "Colored,"
was chosen by a fifth, while the emerging terms "Black" and "Afro-
American" were favored by 19 and 10 percent, respectively.[6] By 1974,
however, "Black" had gained considerable ground, with a clear ma-
jority now preferring it. Surveys in 1979–80 and 1982 showed that
"Black" was strongly favored over all other racial terms.

Another source for tracking the shifting preference in racial labels
is the use of terms in survey questions. Surveys must be sensitive to
using proper racial terms because they depend on the cooperation of
representative national samples. Surveys attempt neither to lead nor
lag behind popular usage but to remain current with it. By accessing
the Roper Center's computerized POLL (Public Opinion Location Li-
brary) data base of survey questions used in national surveys, it is
possible to track changes in racial terminology. As table 3 shows,
"Negro" was the dominant term through the 1960s, with "Colored"
seeing occasional use. "Black" then gained ascendancy in the early
1970s, and since the mid-1970s has been virtually the only term used.
In fact, the "Negro/Colored" to "Black" switch is even more concen-
trated than these figures indicate. The four uses of "Black" prior to
1965 were references to the Black Muslims, and half of the mentions
in 1965–69 were inquiries about "black power." If we exclude the
"black power" questions from the 1965–69 period and count the Na-
tional Opinion Research Center/General Social Survey (NORC/GSS)

---

6. Also, competing with "Black" for acceptance as the new racial term for Blacks was
"Afro-American." "Afro-American" had its staunch backers within the Black commu-
nity. For example, the influential Black newspaper the *Amsterdam News* used it to
replace "Negro" (Newsweek 1968). In addition, it was especially popular among aca-
demics. Many scholarly publications adopted the term and numerous research programs
in "Afro-American Studies" were founded (Thernstrom 1980, 1989; Wilkinson 1990).
But the term never caught on among the general population. Surveys of Blacks from
1969 to 1982 showed 10 percent or fewer favoring the term (table 2). Eventually the
"Afro" prefix became largely associated with the Afro hairstyle (Allen 1990; Newsweek
1989; Wilkinson 1990).

dual term questions as black occurrences, then the percentage using "Black" rose from 2.6 percent in 1965–69 to 84.1 percent in 1970–74. Questions using "Negro" and "colored" either switched to "Black" or were discontinued.

"Black" was particularly popular among younger Blacks (Bennett 1970; Newsweek 1969). On the 1982 GSS the term "Black" was favored by 61 percent of those born after 1942, by 55 percent of those born between 1933 and 1942, and by 40 percent born before 1933. Conversely, on the 1979–80 National Black Survey "Negro" and "colored" were found to be unacceptable to 32.5 percent of Blacks born before 1933, 48 percent born from 1933 to 1942, and 64 percent born after 1942. Nomenclature choice is strongly influenced by generation.

While the proposed switch was being hotly debated in 1967 and 1968, it was largely completed by the early 1970s. As "Black" gained general acceptance, it lost nearly all of its radical connections. Associations with separatism, violence, and political extremism were left behind. But "Black" was not merely a substitute for "Negro"; the term had helped to instill and maintain a sense of group consciousness, racial pride, and a hope for racial justice.

From "Black" to "African American"

From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, the position of "Black" was virtually unchallenged. It was preferred by a large majority of Blacks, was used almost exclusively by Black organizations, and was virtually the only term for Blacks used in surveys (tables 1, 2, 3).[7]

But then in December 1988 at a meeting of Black leaders in Chicago, Ramona H. Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition, proposed that "African American" replace "Black." This group endorsed the switch and launched a campaign in favor of "African American" that received wide attention. Jesse Jackson, as the group's spokesperson, announced, "Just as we were called 'colored,' but were not that, and then 'Negro,' but were not that, to be called 'black' is just as baseless. Just as you have Chinese Americans who have a sense of roots in China . . . or Europeans, as it were, every ethnic group in this country has a reference to some historical culture base. . . . There are Armenian Americans and Jewish Americans and Arab Americans and Italian Americans. And with a degree of accepted and reasonable

---

7. But unsettled was the old issue of capitalization. While both upper- and lower-case B's were frequently used, the most common practice was to use small letters for both "black" and "white" (Allen 1990; Raspberry 1989; Simpson and Yinger 1972, pp. 32–33).

Table 2. Preferred Racial Term for Blacks among Blacks

	5/1969	6/1974	1979–80	3/1982	6/1989	9/1989	7/1990	6/1991G	6/1991L
Percentage preferring:									
African American	..	..	..	..	9	22	25	18	34
Afro-American	10	6	1	6	..	..	..	..	..
Black	19	65	72	53	36	66	59	19	42
Colored	20	9	12	5	..	..	..	..	..
Negro	38	10	9	6	..	..	..	..	..
Other	..	4	4	..	..	..	8	..	1
None; no difference	6	..	2	31	46	9	..	61	18
Don't know	7	9	..	..	9	2	8	2	5
N	(977)	(219)	(2,069)	(503)	(165)	(371)	(221)	(303)	(..)
Ratio of:									
Black to Afro/African American	1.9:1	10.8:1	72:1	9.1:1	4:1	3:1	2.4:1	1.1:1	1.2:1
Black to Negro	.5:1	6.5:1	8:1	9.1:1	..	..	..	..	..
Black to Colored	.95:1	7.2:1	6:1	11.4:1	..	..	..	..	..

Note.—The surveys are:

5/1969 = Gallup: Which term do you like most? Colored People/Negro/Blacks/Afro-American.

6/1974 = Roper: The wording of the next question may sound funny at first, but you'll see why in a moment. Members of one racial group are variously described as Afro-American, black, colored, or Negro. What do most of the people of this race that you come in day-to-day contact with prefer to be called—Afro-American, black, colored, Negro, or what?

1979–80 = National Survey of Black Americans, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan: People use different words to describe people of the Black race. What word do you use? Black (or black American)/Negro/Colored/Afro-American/Other/None, DK, etc. First mentions counted.

3/1982 = General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center: Which would you most like to be called, "Black," "Negro," "Colored," or "Afro-American," or does it make any difference?

6/1989 = New York Times: Some people say the term "African-American" should be used instead of the word "black." Which do you prefer—"African-American" or "black," or doesn't it matter much to you? N is approximate.

9/1989 = ABC/Washington Post: Have you heard or read about the term "African-American" used lately to describe black Americans? Which term do you yourself prefer: black or African-American?

7/1990 = NBC/Wall Street Journal: When someone refers to your race, do you prefer to be referred to as black, African-American, or some other term? Registered voters only.

9/1991G = Gallup: Some people say the term "African-American" should be used instead of the word "black." Which term do you prefer—"African-American" or "black" or doesn't it matter to you?

9/1991L = Los Angeles Times: As you may know, black people are sometimes referred to as African-Americans. Which term do you yourself prefer: black or African-American?

Table 3. Use of Racial Terms in American Surveys (Percentages)

	Pre-1965	1965–69	1970–74	1975–79	1980–84	1985–89	1990–91
African American	0	0	0	0	0	.8	1.6
Afro-American	0	0	0.3	0	0	.1	0
Black	1.7	5.1	69.3	99.5	100.0	99.1	98.4
Colored[a]	7.4	10.8	2.2	0	0	0	0
Negro[b]	90.9	84.2	28.1	.5	0	0	0
N	(242)	(158)	(313)	(407)	(420)	(698)	(245)

SOURCE.—Analysis of POLL data base of the Roper Center, October 1991.
[a] Excludes questions that mentioned the NAACP.
[b] The NORC/GSS has permitted the use of either Black or Negro in many of its racial questions. Interviewers were instructed to select the racial term "depending on customary usage in your area." By the late 1970s interviewers reported almost universal use of "Black." The above figures do not count NORC/GSS dual term questions as usages of "Negro" after 1974. For 1970–74 they are double-counted as using both terms. If NORC/GSS questions that allowed the use of either "Negro" or "Black" are not counted as "Negro" usages (i.e., similar to 1975+), the 1970–74 figures would be "African-American" (0%), "Afro-American" (0.4%), "Black" (84.1%), "Colored" (2.7%), and "Negro" (12.8%).

pride, they connect their heritage to their mother country and where they are now." He emphasized, "To be called African American has cultural integrity" (Jet 1989; Lacayo 1989; Newsweek 1989; Williams 1988a, 1988b).

The main goal of the switch was to give Blacks a cultural identification with their heritage and ancestral homeland.[8] This has been emphasized not only by Jackson but by virtually all other advocates. Culture would then become a lever for improving the lot of Blacks. For example, Edelin observed, "Calling ourselves African-Americans is the first step in the cultural offensive. Our cultural renaissance can change our lot in the nation and around the world" (Ebony 1989). It was also seen as broadening society's perspective about Blacks and placing it in a global perspective. Jackson noted, "African American evokes a discussion of the world" (Lacayo 1989), and Edelin added that the term will help Blacks to be seen in a "global context" (Jet 1989).

Furthermore, it was seen as putting Blacks on a parallel with White ethnic groups. On one level this referred only to comparable linguistic terminology (e.g., "African/Polish American"). But on a deeper level the shift to a culture- and homeland-based term like that used by most other groups reconceptualized Blacks as an ethnic group rather than a race (Ebony 1989; Williams 1988a). This has an enormous potential for change since Blacks have traditionally been viewed biologically and physically as a race and not culturally as an ethnic group. While many White ethnic groups are seen as having distinctive physical traits (e.g., tall, blond, blue-eyed Swedes) and racial groups are also seen as having distinct cultures, the distinction between races and ethnic groups is important for several reasons. First, racial differences are deemed to be greater in magnitude and more immutable. Racial differences are viewed as genetically based and thus as beyond the ability of society to change.

Second, racial prejudice and discrimination have greatly exceeded ethnic intolerance. On balance, America has a better record of accepting and fairly treating ethnic groups than it does racial groups. "African American" as opposed to "Black" "would connote ethnicity over color and connote equality in pluralism" (Allen 1990). But given

8. "African" itself, of course, is not an indigenous term but English for the Latin *Africanus*. It was used by the Romans to refer to both their province of "Africa" and the whole continent. It probably derives from the Latin *aprica* (sunny) or the Greek *aphrike* (without cold), derivations that are congenial to at least certain current intellectual perspectives. The fact that "African" is not an indigenous term is no different than for most other ethnic groups in America. In most cases, their group name in America is the English for their ethnicity and/or national origin. Sometimes the English and native terms are similar, but in other cases the English name is far removed from or alien to the ethnic group (e.g., "Italian" and *Italiano,* "French" and *Francais,* "Austrian" and *Oesterreichish,* "German" and *Deutsch*).

the long and deeply entrenched definition of Blacks as a race, it will be difficult to impossible to change this way of viewing them.

In general, the campaign to replace "Black" with "African American" emphasized the positive qualities of the latter rather than the negative aspects of the former. This differed from the earlier switch from "Negro" to "Black," when the former was strongly attacked and pilloried. "Black" was largely considered inadequate because it did not emphasize the cultural origins of Blacks. In addition, it was criticized as a label "originally assigned, recorded, and perpetuated by slave holders" (Wilkinson 1990). Also, as Vernon Jarrett (1988) has observed, "Black" over the last generation has been saddled with "a dismal connotation." Instead of being viewed as "progressive, unifying, inspiring, positive, and hopeful," it has been seen as "sinful, dishonest, without virtue and dismal." These, of course, were the same charges leveled against "Negro" a generation earlier.

Of course, a number of criticisms also have been raised against "African American." Politically, some objected to what was referred to as Jackson's "popelike" imposition of the new term (Butler 1990; Thernstrom 1989). Others saw the controversy as a wasteful diversion that drew attention and effort away from the concrete problems of Black poverty (Ebony 1989; Lacayo 1989; Peretz 1989; Williams 1990).

Cultural objections included the contention that the term was too inclusive, that Africa was not a culture but many cultures. Furthermore, many African cultures such as Arab, Berber, and Coptic were unrelated to the sub-Saharan cultures to which Blacks trace their heritage (Miller 1937; Wilkinson 1990; Williams 1990). Others asserted that "African American" calls for identification with a culture to which almost no actual ties exist (Butler 1990; Negro History Bulletin 1971; Williams 1990).

On linguistic grounds, the earlier objections to "African American," "Afro-American," and other hyphenated forms as too cumbersome were not raised (Bennett 1970; Miller 1937). But concern was voiced that "African American" has the classic "hyphenated American" problem.[9] The hyphen in such ethnic compounds as "German-American" traditionally has been "regarded as symbolizing divided loyalties" (Thernstrom 1980). Such groups were considered at best as less than 100 percent Americans and at worst as traitors to their

---

9. This problem exists whether or not the phrase is actually joined by a hyphen. So far, usage has leaned toward inserting a hyphen. For example, hyphens are favored by *Newsweek,* the *New Republic, Ebony,* the *Chicago Defender,* and the *Los Angeles Times,* while *Time, Jet,* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* eschew the hyphen. The *Washington Post* does it both ways.

adopted homeland (Butler 1990; Gerson 1964; Thernstrom 1980). As a result, the term "hyphenated American" has been used as an ethnic epithet (Allen 1990, p. 92).

Moreover, "African American" may stimulate White racists to urge that Blacks be sent "back to Africa" and may increase the use of African-related racial slurs such as "jungle bunny" and "monkey" (Allen 1990).

Despite these drawbacks, "African American" attracted a great deal of acceptance and gained ground more quickly than any of the erstwhile new terms for Blacks. It was widely embraced by many Black leaders (Ebony 1989; Williams 1988a, 1988b). For example, Benjamin Hooks, executive director of the NAACP, indicated that while his organization would not change its name, it would "go along with the tide. When they first started using the word 'black' (to replace Negro in the late 1960s), I had no idea it would be so accepted in so short a period of time. I'm not going to be caught on the short end of the stick." Other organizations have gone the extra mile and changed their names.

"African American" has also made inroads among the general Black population (table 2). When given an explicit option of saying that they have no preference between the terms, between a plurality and a majority of Blacks have no preference. However, among those with a preference, "African American" has grown in acceptance although "Black" still is preferred by more Blacks. As with the earlier case of "Black," "African American" has been especially popular among younger Blacks (Wilkinson 1989; Williams 1988b). For example, in the 1989 ABC/*Washington Post* survey, 30 percent of Blacks 18–29 years, 21 percent age 30–49, and 12 percent age 50+ preferred the term "African American." Similarly, in the 1991 Gallup poll 23 percent of those 18–29 years, 19 percent age 30–49, and 11 percent age 50+ preferred "African American."

Whites, on the other hand, have been more likely than Blacks to favor the established term than the emergent contender. In the 1970s that meant they were less likely to switch to "Black" and now they are more likely to stay with "Black" (data available from author).

The shift is also seen in how Blacks identify themselves. The GSS ethnicity question asks people "from what country or part of the world" their ancestors came. The percentage of Blacks naming Africa increased from 48 percent in the 1970s to 50 percent in 1982–88 and 59 percent in 1989–91. (Other responses in 1989–91 were "Some specific country besides Africa" [13 percent], "America" [5 percent], "Can't choose" [3 percent], and "Can't name where" [20 percent].) The connection between choice of racial labels and ancestral identification is

shown in the 1982 GSS, where 83 percent of Blacks preferring the name "Afro-American" listed their ancestry as Africa, while only 53 percent of those with other preferences mentioned Africa.

So far surveys have not adopted the new term, however. In part this reflects the fact that "African American" has not gained the upper hand among either Blacks or Whites. In addition, the lack of frequent negative characterizations of "Black" have allowed its continued use as an acceptable term. Even the small inroad of "African American" into survey questions since 1985 is only technical, since all the occurrences have been in questions asking about what racial terms should be used (table 3). No race relations questions have yet adopted "African American" as the standard racial descriptor.

But "African American" has made tremendous gains in the mass media. While some editors and periodicals initially resisted the new term, most quickly accepted it on par with "Black," and some have decided to use it exclusively (Lacayo 1989; Newsweek 1989).[10] Table 4 shows the magnitude of the change at two major newspapers, the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. "African American" was rarely used before the Chicago pronouncement in December 1988. In fact, many of the pre-1989 usages were references to organizations with "African American" in their titles rather than generic uses. Within the next 6 months use increased about four to five times from its base rate, and usage has continued to climb since then.

While "African American" clearly has not supplanted "Black" as the predominant term, it has over the past 3 years established an essentially coequal position with it. Whether "Black" will eventually become as passé as "Negro" and "Colored" awaits to be seen.

Changes in Racial Labels

The changing of ethnic and racial labels is not particular to Blacks. Within the past decade "Hispanic" has replaced "Spanish-speaking" as the preferred term in survey questions, while "Latino" has established a toehold.[11] Similarly, "Oriental" has been supplanted by "Asian" (data available from author). Nor is the instability only among broad racial labels. Currently, terms for Americans of Mexican descent include "Chicano(a)," "Mexican," "Mexican American," and "Mex-

---

10. The news media have stated two criteria for deciding to switch from "Black" to "African American": (1) Blacks being offended by the term and (2) consensus through usage (Lacayo 1989; Newsweek 1989).
11. There is also a controversy over whether Hispanics prefer interethnic labels like "Hispanic" or "Latino" or nationality-specific terms like "Cuban" or "Chicano" (Duke 1991).

Table 4. Occurrences of "African American(s)" in the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times,* 1985–91

	Number of Articles	
	Washington Post	*Los Angeles Times*
1–6/1985[a]	9	6
7–12/1985	9	17
1–6/1986	6	12
7–12/1986	13	5
1–6/1987	14	12
7–12/1987	25	27
1–6/1988	24	23
7–12/1988	24	11
1–6/1989	120	106
7–12/1989	181	144
1–6/1990	222	279
7–12/1990	290	380
1–6/1991	288	612

SOURCE.—Computerized DataTimes search conducted by Patrick Bova, NORC.

[a] Searches are from January 1 to June 30 and July 1 to December 31.

icano(a)" (Allen 1990, pp. 86–89). Similarly, over time preferences have shifted among "Jew," "Jewish American," "American Jew," "Jewry," "Hebrew," and "Israelite" (Lipset 1990; Thernstrom 1980).

Yet the nomenclature issue does seem more contentious and more enduring for Blacks than for other ethno-racial groups. For Blacks their label was both more important and less certain than that of most other immigrant groups because (1) their enslavement had stripped them of their indigenous identities, (2) the enslaved Blacks lacked a collective self-designation that corresponded to how Whites saw them (as a homogenous race) rather than as members of different cultures, tribes, and language groups—they lacked a common indigenous term that corresponded to their social definition in America, and (3) as slaves blacks were long prevented from developing their own institutions and community organizations to advance their group identity.[12]

12. The argument is that the Black group identity was uprooted and fundamentally altered by enslavement, not that all African ties and influences were destroyed. Many elements of contemporary Black culture have African roots. For how slaves and, later, free Blacks retained and adapted African cultural practices in the United States, see Gutman (1976) and Genovese (1974).

Much more so than most immigrant groups, Blacks both had to forge a new identity and adopt a term to describe themselves rather to retain and adapt a well-established, preexisting identity and name.

A second explanation for the greater Black struggle over nomenclature is that as long as Blacks remain discriminated against and oppressed, any name eventually becomes tainted by the racial prejudice. As Evan Kemp of the Disability Rights Center observed, "As long as a group is ostracized or otherwise demeaned, whatever name is used to designate that group will eventually take on the demeaning flavor and have to be replaced. The designations will keep changing every generation or so until the group is integrated into society" (Raspberry 1989).

A related argument contends that Black sensitivity over their racial label reflects an "inferiority complex" (Miller 1937). As DuBois noted, "The feeling of inferiority is in you, not in a name. The name merely evokes what is already there. Exorcise the hateful complex and no name can ever make you hang your head" (Bennett 1970). Evidence on the existence of an inferiority complex is mixed. Studies of Black children at least through the 1960s do indicate a tendency to favor or even identify with White images (e.g., pictures, dolls) over Black ones (Proshansky and Newton 1968). However, self-esteem studies of older Black youths and adults indicate that when socioeconomic status is controlled for, their self-esteem does not differ from that of Whites (Rosenberg 1979). While there is insufficient evidence to link changes in racial nomenclature to feelings of psychological inferiority, there is evey reason to believe that the imposed, socioeconomic inferiority of Blacks has stimulated their drive for names that reflect racial pride and spark hopes for social recognition and advancement.

Repeatedly, as name changes have been proposed, some have asserted that the names do not matter and that arguing over them is a waste of time and a distraction from more important matters. In 1928 DuBois in his response to Barton's urging that the term "Negro" be dropped said, "Get this, Roland, and get it straight even if it pierces your soul: a Negro by any other name would be just as black and just as white; just as ashamed of himself and just as shamed by others, as today. It is not the name—it's the Thing that counts. Come on, Kid, let's go get the Thing!" (Bennett 1970). Similarly, Carl T. Rowan (1989) observed, "I can say with certainty that a name change to 'African American' is not where it is at. . . . What's in a name? Nothing."

Yet names do matter. When God gave Adam dominion over the earth, Adam's first task was to name all of His creations. Parents carefully consider the proper names for their children, manufacturers hire market and advertising researchers to pick optimal names for their new products (and increasingly for the companies themselves),

revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries change place names as their power waxes and wanes, and women have struggled to control their surnames.

And so it is for ethno-racial groups. Labels define the groups and help to determine how both ''in'' and ''out'' group members respond to the group. As Simpson and Yinger indicated, ''Words prefigure and control experience to some degree; they are not simply innocent labels'' (1972, p. 32). Blacks have successively changed their preferred term of address from ''Colored'' to ''Negro'' to ''Black'' and now, perhaps, to ''African American'' in order to assert their group standing and aid in their struggle for racial equality. While symbolic, these changes have not been inconsequential. For symbols are part and parcel of reality itself.

References

Allen, Irving Lewis. 1990. *Unkind Words: Ethnic Labeling from Redskin to WASP.* New York: Bergin & Garvey.

Allport, Gordon W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice.* Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Bennett, Lerone, Jr. 1970. ''What's in a Name?'' In *Americans from Africa: Old Memories, New Moods,* ed. Peter I. Rose, Chicago: Aldine.

Branch, Taylor. 1988. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burek, Deborah M., ed. 1991. *Encyclopedia of Associations, 1992.* Detroit: Gale Research.

Butler, John Sibley. 1990. ''Multiple Identities.'' *Society* 27 (May/June): 8–13.

Caplan, Nathan S., and Jeffrey M. Paige. 1968. ''A Study of Ghetto Rioters.'' *Scientific American* 219 (August): 15–21.

Duke, Lynne. 1991. ''Labels Mask 'Latino' Diversity.'' *Ford Foundation Letter,* Winter, pp. 10–11.

Ebony. 1989. ''African-American or Black: What's in a Name?'' *Ebony* 44 (July): 76–80.

Genovese, Eugene D. 1974. *Roll, Jordon, Roll: The World the Slaves Made.* New York: Random House.

Gerson, Louis L. 1964. *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy.* Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.

Gutman, Herbert G. 1976. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925.* New York: Vintage Books.

Jarrett, Vernon. 1988. ''Redefine 'Black' as a Positive Term.'' *Chicago Sun-Times,* December 22, p. 39.

Jet. 1989. ''Broad Coalition Seeks 'African American' Name.'' *Jet* 75 (January 16): 53.

Lacayo, Richard. 1989. ''In Search of a Good Name.'' *Time* 133 (March 6): 32.

Lipset, Seymour Martin, ed. 1990. *American Pluralism and the Jewish Community.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Litwack, Leon F. 1979. *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery.* New York: Knopf.

Miller, Kelly. 1937. ''Negroes or Colored People?'' *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 15 (May): 142–46.

Negro History Bulletin. 1971. ''What's in a Name—Negro, African, Black, Afro-American, African-American, Colored, Black-American, or Negro-American?'' *Negro History Bulletin* 34 (February): 28–29.

Newsweek. 1968. "Name Calling." *Newsweek* 71 (March 25): 84.

————. 1969. "Identity Crisis." *Newsweek* 73 (June 30): 62.

————. 1989. "From 'Black' to 'African-American'?" *Newsweek* 113 (January 2): 28.

Peretz, Martin. 1989. "Identity, History, Nostalgia." *New Republic* 200 (February 6): 43.

Proshansky, Harold, and Peggy Newton. 1968. "The Nature and Meaning of Negro Self-Identity." In *Social Class, Race, and Psychological Development,* ed. Martin Deutsch, Irwin Katz, and Arthur R. Jensen. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Raspberry, William. 1989. "When 'Black' Becomes 'African American'." *Washington Post,* January 4, p. 19.

Rosenberg, Morris. 1979. *Conceiving the Self.* New York: Basic.

Rowan, Carl T. 1989. "Saying 'African American' Ain't Where It's At." *Chicago Sun-Times,* January 18, p. 21.

Simpson, George Eaton, and Milton J. Yinger. 1972. *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination.* 4th ed. New York: Harper & Row.

Thernstrom, Stephan. 1989. "Just Say Afro." *New Republic* 200 (January 23): 10–11.

Thernstrom, Stephan, ed. 1980. *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Washington, James Melvin, ed. 1986. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: Harper.

Wilkinson, Doris. 1990. "Americans of African Identity." *Society* 27 (May/June): 14–18.

Williams, John E. 1966. "Connotation of Racial Concepts and Color Names." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3:531–40.

Williams, John E., Richard D. Tucker, and Frances Y. Dunham. 1971. "Changes in the Connotations of Color Names among Negroes and Caucasians, 1963–1969." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 19 (August): 222–28.

Williams, Lillian. 1988a. "Black: Call Us African American." *Chicago Sun-Times,* December 20, p. 1.

————. 1988b. "NAACP Won't Change Name." *Chicago Sun-Times,* December 21, p. 4.

Williams, Walter E. 1990. "Myth Making and Reality Testing." *Society* 27 (May/June): 4–7.