

African American, Person of Color, BIPOC: The extent to which (white) people avoid saying "Black"

Felicity Flores & Kristen di Gennaro, Pace University (NYC)

Introduction

- Self-identified Black Latine Non-Binary individual incorrectly identified as *African American*
- "White people use *African American* because they're afraid to say *Black*."
- Does *BIPOC* serve Black Americans?

Research Questions

1. What race labels do survey respondents select in reference to Black Americans?
2. How do responses vary based on the gender, racial background, or era of the person/people being described? (i.e., Do respondents apply current labels to historical figures?)

Method

Following previous studies; survey data: Baugh, 1991; Brown, 1999; Fairchild, 1985; Niven and Zilber, 2000; Rafky, 1970; Smitherman, 1991; Speight et al., 1996.

Current study -- survey: **8 fill-in-the blank statements**; well-known people, places, or events with different eras, races, genders, and nationalities.

Example: Jackie Robinson is famous for being the first _____ to play on a major league baseball team.

- African American
- Black person
- Person of Color
- Non-White person
- BIPOC
- I don't know
- Other _____



In your opinion, which one of the terms listed is the **most respectful? least respectful? most inclusive? least inclusive?** (four separate questions)

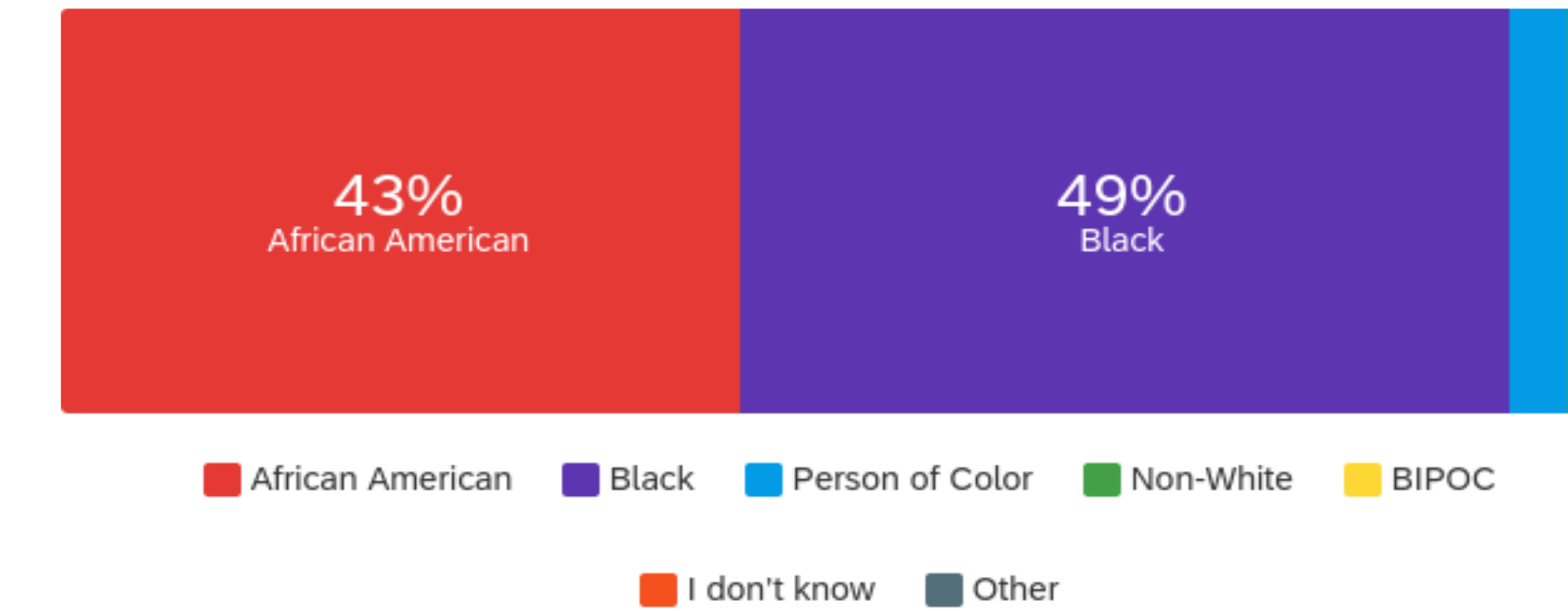
Results

142 (primarily white) respondents indicated **preference for African American** in most contexts, **especially in reference to groups** (Detroit residents, enslaved people, people who celebrate Kwanzaa) **but also for historical figures** (Jackie Robinson) **and people of mixed race** (Kamala Harris). Some even selected this label for British actor Idris Elba.

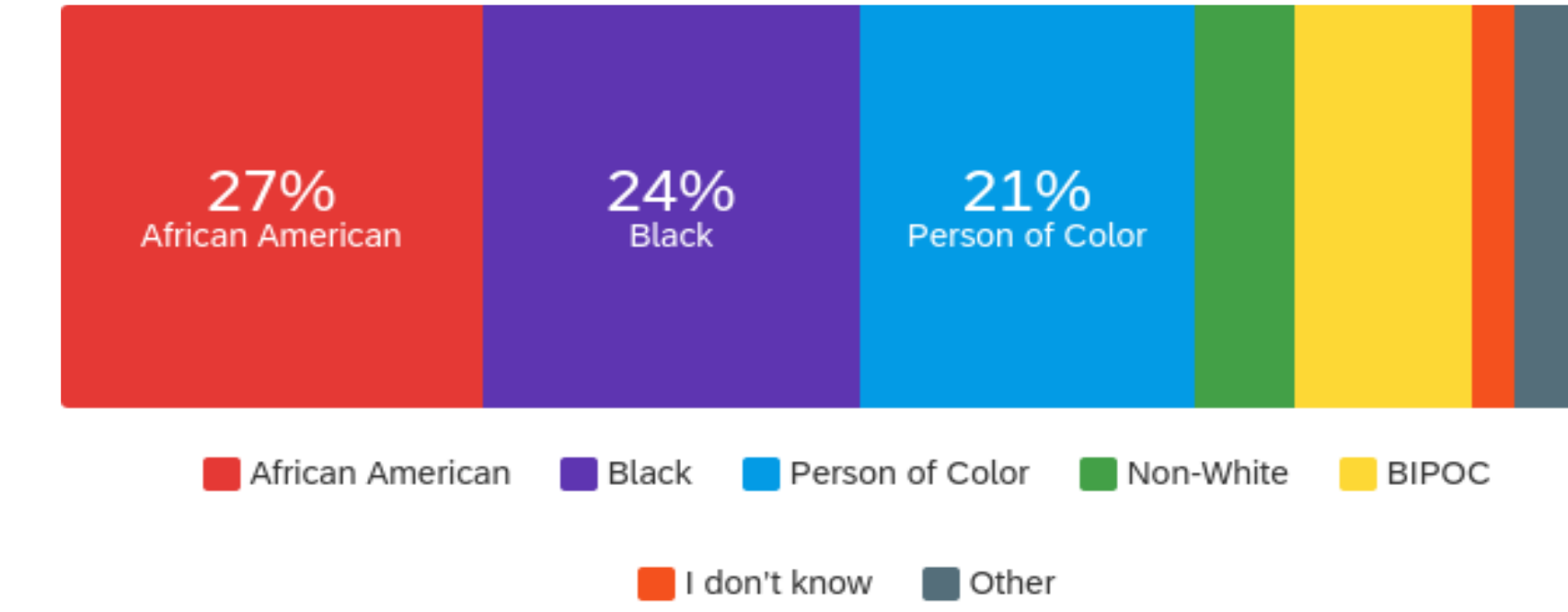
Harriet Tubman is best known for helping many enslaved _____ escape to freedom.	Options	%	Rank
	African American people	52.11	1
	Black people	39.44	2
	People of color	4.93	3
	Non-white people	0	
	BIPOC	0	
	I don't know	2.11	4
	Other	1.41	5

Jackie Robinson is famous for being the first _____ to play on a major league baseball team.	Options	%	Rank
	African American	52.11	1
	Black person	33.10	2
	Person of color	8.45	3
	Non-white person	0	
	BIPOC	.70	5
	I don't know	4.93	4
	Other	.70	5

Q4: Barack Obama



Q5: Kamala Harris



Respondents **chose Person of Color as the "most respectful" and "most inclusive" term; African American considered the least inclusive.**

Rankings for attitudes toward terms

Most respectful	Least respectful	Most inclusive	Least inclusive
African Amer. 2	African Amer. 3	African Amer. 4	African Amer. 1
Black 3	Black 2	Black 5	Black 3
Pers. of Color 1	Pers. of Color 5	Pers. of Color 1	Pers. of Color 4
Non-White 5	Non-White 1	Non-White 3	Non-White 2
BIPOC 4	BIPOC 4	BIPOC 2	BIPOC 5

*1 indicates the highest number of responses; 5 indicates the least responses.

In reference to BIPOC:

"I have heard from **many black people that they feel it is stripping them of their black identity** - an identity which defines them in America - by simply calling them people of color. It is **an inclusive term that should be used** when you do not know how someone prefers to identify."

"I think we keep creating more terminology simple **so white people can have categories they can kinda...somewhat...might...be able to fit into.** I really think it's them co-opting something else to be included."

Acknowledgements: Pace University's Provost Undergraduate Research Program

Discussion / Conclusion

- *Person of Color* most respectful and inclusive; not selected much for historical figures or for Obama
 - *BIPOC* not used for historical figures; mixed responses for inclusiveness and respectfulness
 - *Black* not considered very respectful or inclusive; preference for *African American* and *Person of Color* (mostly white respondents; who is included?)
 - Perhaps *African American* used for historical figures out of respect (?)
 - Results suggest that (white) respondents are more comfortable with alternatives to *Black* despite in-group preferences (cf. *Black Power* and *Black Lives Matter*).
 - Language of identity - describe or prescribe?
 - Cancel *BIPOC*?
 - Listen to Black voices
- ### Future Research
- More Black respondents
 - How can findings support the Black community - identity preferences; "un-erase" and "un-simplify" Black identity?
 - Uncover who benefits and who is disadvantaged by umbrella terms

Selected References

- Baugh, J. (1991). The Politicization of Changing Terms of Self-Reference among American Slave Descendants.
- Bennett, L., Barton, R. A., & Du Bois, W. E. B. (1969). WHAT'S IN A NAME? Negro vs. Afro-American vs. Black.
- Brown, T. N. (1999). Predictors of racial label preference in Detroit: Examining trends from 1971 to 1992.
- Collier-Thomas, B., & Turner, J. (1994). Race, Class, and Color: The African American Discourse on Identity.
- Fairchild, H. H. (1985). Black, Negro, or Afro-American?
- Niven, D., & Zilber, J. (2000). Elite use of racial labels: Ideology and preference for African American or Black.
- Rafky, D. M. (1970). The Semantics of Negritude.
- Smith, T. W. (1992). Changing racial labels: From "colored" to "Negro" to "Black" to "African American"
- Smitherman, G. (1991). "What is African to me?": Language, ideology, and African American,

Further information: kdigennaro@pace.edu