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

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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.

Options % Rank
African American 52.11 1
Black person 39.44 2
People of color 4.93 3
Non-white person 0
BIPOC 0
I don’t know 2.11 4
Other 1.41 5

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.

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

Rankings for attitudes toward terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Most respectful %</th>
<th>Least respectful %</th>
<th>Most inclusive</th>
<th>Least inclusive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Amer.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>African Amer. 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Black 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pers. of Color</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pers. of Color 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Non-White 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIPOC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>BIPOC 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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.”

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

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