

Which Term Is It? African American or Black?

Understanding The Dynamics of Diversity Categories

Part One

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In the 24 years I have been in the diversity, multicultural, and inclusion industry, one of the most active topics of discussion focuses on diversity names, categories, and labels. I will spend the next few articles sharing my perspective on the categories that cause agreement and disagreement to those who lay claim to its importance and meaning in our global society.

Which Term Is It? Black or African American?

Either term is appropriate. Some people prefer African American, while others prefer Black. Style, tradition and history dictate which term to use. From a global perspective, Black is more appropriate, referring to any person of African descent from Lagos, Nigeria, to Liverpool, England to Long Island, New York.

The term African American pertains to those individuals living in the United States. It can relate to people like me, a 7th generation American with ancestors who were born into slavery. It can also relate to those born outside of the US, but now living in America and adapting to the cultural "norms" of people of African descent. However, don't be surprised if you encounter those born outside of the US who still reject self-identifying as "African Americans." Some in the Haitian community will call themselves Haitian Americans or Haitians before calling themselves African Americans.

It gets tricky because one term does not fit all.

Your best bet is to ASK QUESTIONS and receive feedback from a person or group before arbitrarily assigning one label over the other.

Here's where it gets a bit complicated:

Socially acceptable term to use in the US: People of Color

NOT acceptable in the US: Colored People (this is an old term too closely tied to racial discrimination of the past)

Please Note: The term colored is still used in South Africa to describe people of mixed race in that country.

**Old Fashion Term in the US that may turn heads if you use it:
Negro or Afro American**

Yes I know the Afro American Newspaper in Baltimore. The publisher was the best man in my brother's wedding, and it is one of the oldest and most respected newspapers in the US. I also know about the NAACP - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. That organization, like several others, have chosen to keep their original name first created in 1909.

Term that is NOT ACCEPTABLE anywhere: Nigger.

It's so distasteful to me that it's difficult to even spell it out. I am particularly offended that it is the word of choice by some hip hop artists, rap artists, comics, and other entertainers. NO it is not cool at all to use that word. The historical implications connected with its violent past are still too radio active to consider mainstreaming its use.

We'll look at other terms in our next article. Your feedback is welcome at our website at www.telcarole.com or email me at telcarole@mac.com, especially those readers who only prefer to be called an "American" or "human" and see no value at all in the realm of diversity categories and labels.