

Which Term Is It? African American or Black?

Understanding The Dynamics of Diversity Categories

Part Two

by Carole Copeland Thomas, MBA

Do you know about the complexities of being called an African American? I am an African American, since I was born in the US and my ancestral roots go back to the 1700s (yes, my cousin, Clarence Gaines, has traced our slave family roots back to 18th century Colonial America).

My son-in-law, Jerome Farquharson, is an African American. He was born in Jamaica, came to the US when he was nine years old, and became a US citizen years ago.

And technically Theresa Heinz, wife of Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, is an African American. Why???? Even though she's White, she was born in Mozambique, when it was called Portuguese, East Africa.

Here's what our Multicultural Symposium Series member Paulette Ngachoko, co-founder of the [International Institute of Justice and Development](#) has to say about her African roots as a native of Cameroon (West Africa):

I know some people would like to be called "Africans" simply because they are from an African country and not (or not yet) American citizens. Others see and acknowledge a cultural difference between "African Americans" and "Africans", but in all they love "African Americans" as their long lost or separated families, with all that it comprises. Some "Africans" see their American born children as more "American" or "African American" than themselves. As a matter of identity, being called "African" sometimes also makes Africa look like one country and only perpetuates the false idea that some people have that Africa is one country, with Black people who look the same, eat the same way and share the same culture. When you know Africa, you clearly understand that it is a very rich multicultural universe, even within individual countries.

Then we turn to Mellanie True Hills, a speaker and author (www.stopafib.org) who reflected on her childhood roots in Birmingham, Alabama. Her father taught at the Naval Academy and practiced equality for all in his household. Mellanie vividly remembers the 16th Street Baptist Street Church bombing of 1963 that killed four little Black girls: Addie Mae Collins (aged 14), Denise McNair (aged 11), Carole Robertson (aged 14), and Cynthia Wesley (aged 14). Mellanie states:

I kind of bristle at being called a "white". I recall a few years ago a friend pointing out that a mutual friend was black - I had honestly never noticed because I don't see people as colors, I see them as individuals. I hope that one day we can continue to celebrate our unique heritages without labeling each other by color, or even noticing. For me, perhaps some of this comes from having grown up in Birmingham, AL in the 60s to parents that were "color-blind" and to whom everyone was to be treated with the same level of respect. I certainly don't want to take away your diversity work, because I know it's important and needed, but I hope our society will soon mature to the point that there will no longer be a need for it by the time you are ready to retire.

MSS Member and international consultant Darnley Howard (www.advansa.biz) makes these comments:

I tend to use Black because a) it's short and b) I often find myself in contact with African descended people from many places and that one word seems to include everyone. When referring specifically to Americans I'll say African American or black American. Africans seem to like African American since it explicitly acknowledges our Africaness.

On a related note, in college in the late 1970s a Puerto Rican friend explained to me that Latino refers to Puerto Ricans and Dominicans while Hispanic refers to Mexicans and others with roots in Latin America. Not knowing any better I took her word for it. I suspect the answer might be different today. Might have been different back then from someone of a different background. We're all confused!

And finally professional speaker and author Patrick Lee (www.PatrickLee.com), shares his comments, more specifically on the "n" word:

My wife and I are long-term foster parents to African American twin boys, now almost 13.

They use the n-word. It carries a \$5 fine if we hear it, so it happens rarely around home. A Sunday school teacher reported its use by one of our boys three weeks ago in class. That cost him \$5, too. He protested because I hadn't heard it. I replied, "If it's not appropriate at home, it's not appropriate anywhere."

The f-word carries a \$5 fine, too, as does "I'm gonna kill you," and acts of physical aggression. The same Sunday one boy got ratted out for his language in class, the other got caught flipping the bird to other drivers as we drove home. Cost him 5 bucks!

"Sucka" is 2 bucks. So is "shut up", "freakin" and "friggin." So is calling Mom or me "cracker."

At home, they rarely see or hear the kind of "entertainment" that carries vile language of any kind. (I have to say rarely rather than never, because we have just watched one of my favorite all time movies, "In the Heat of the Night.") I'm sure they get plenty of language in school and on the bus.

As a White foster parent who is trying to encourage in his sons a healthy respect for themselves, for others, and for their race, it is discouraging that some members of their race use that word indiscriminately, whether in "entertainment" or everyday conversation.

Our efforts to eliminate its use are undermined by those of their own race who have it as part of their regular vocabulary.

Different perspectives on race and ethnicity based on different people and their life experiences. I WELCOME your continued comments, both pro and con. We must start this dialogue on race, gender, and other diversity terms so that we can bridge the cultural divide that separates us from true multicultural awareness.

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