

What We Call Ourselves

By Karlyn H. Bowman

Over the decades, arguments have gone on as to the preferred terms in referring to various groups in our society. In the case of Americans of African ancestry, the effort for a long time involved ending the use of terms patently derogatory. But great progress in this area did not end the debate in the black community over preferred group identification, and survey data show that preferences have shifted markedly since the Sixties.

The large immigration of persons of

Race and Spanish Origins

Twenty-five years ago, when the Gallup Organization asked black Americans which term they liked most to describe their race, "African-American" was not offered by the surveyors. In 1994 though, that term was strongly preferred over "black" by 53 to 36% in a survey conducted by Yankelovich Partners (See Table 1). The growing acceptance of "African-American" could have been predicted by taking a careful look at the underlying demographics of

"Colored," "Negro," "Black," and "African" were all established English terms for blacks when this country was first settled. "African-American," Smith says, "was in use at least as early as the late 1700s. The alterations in racial labels...represent changes in the acceptance of various labels, not the creation of new terms."

The Latino National Political Survey (Table 2) asked Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans to choose their preferred term of identification from a list. The results of

Table 1¹
Preferred Self-Identification of African-Americans:
Changes Over the Last Quarter-Century

	Gallup 1969	Yank 2/89	ABC/ Post 9/89	NBC/ WSJ 7/90	Yank 4/91	LAT 9/91	NBC/ WSJ 5/92	JCPS/ Omnifacts 6/92	Yank Monitor 10-12/92	Roper 3/93	Yank 2/94
Afro-American	10%	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	20%	10%	--
African-American	--	26%	22%	25%	39%	34%	23%	34%	30	30	53%
Black	19	61	66	59	48	42	58	53	38	42	36
Negro	38	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	4	1	--
Colored	20	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	3	--

Hispanic origin has opened the question of the preferred term of reference for its members. Recent survey research shows that here there are large differences of opinion across the principal place-of-origin communities—e.g., Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican—now residing in the US.

For several decades, women have differed on the "Miss/Mrs./Ms." question—which involves matters of practicality (men have to deal only with "Mr.")—and matters extending further into the area of equal status. Here, slowly but surely, "Ms." has been gaining in the debate. At the same time, "feminism" has reached a plateau in its level of support.

Let's take a quick tour of the survey findings.

a 1992 poll, this one conducted by Yankelovich Partners for the Burrell-Yankelovich African-American Monitor. The surveyors found that age groups had different preferences, depending on what was most common as they were growing up. Those over 50 strongly preferred "black," with 49% choosing it over "African-American" (19%). Preferences were reversed for the youngest age group in the survey, those ages 14–20. They chose "African-American" over "black" by 46 to 27%. Because the young tend to inaugurate change, more widespread use of the term "African-American" can be expected in the future.

Tom Smith of the National Opinion Research Center points out that the terms

the 1989-90 survey can be seen below. Both Puerto Ricans and Cubans favored the straightforward place-of-origin identification, followed distantly in each case by "American." Mexican respondents, however, preferred the term "Mexican-American," followed by "Hispanic" and Mexican."

Women

In the 1970s, women split on efforts to change women's status in society. Forty-two percent of women opposed the basic idea; 40% favored it. When the question was last asked by the Roper Organization in 1989, however, 77% of women favored such efforts and only 12% opposed them.

Table 2
Preferred Self-Identification of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Respondents

Question: Here is a list of names that are used to describe persons of Spanish heritage [living in the United States]. Please tell me all of these, if any, you call yourself. Which one do you most prefer?

Mexican Respondents		Puerto Rican Respondents		Cuban Respondents	
Mexican-American	37%	Puerto Rican	74%	Cuban	64%
Hispanic	17	American	9	American	17
Mexican	14	Spanish-American	7	Spanish-	
Mexicano(a)	9	Hispanic	3	American	8
American	9	Niuyorican	2	Hispanic	5
Spanish-American	5	Hispano	2	Latino(a)	2
Chicano(a)	4	Latino(a)	1	Hispano	2
Latino(a)	2	Spanish	1	Spanish	1
Hispano	1	Mexican	1	Puerto Rican	1
Raza	*				
Puerto Rican	*				

* less than 0.5%

Source: Latino National Political Survey, 1989-90.

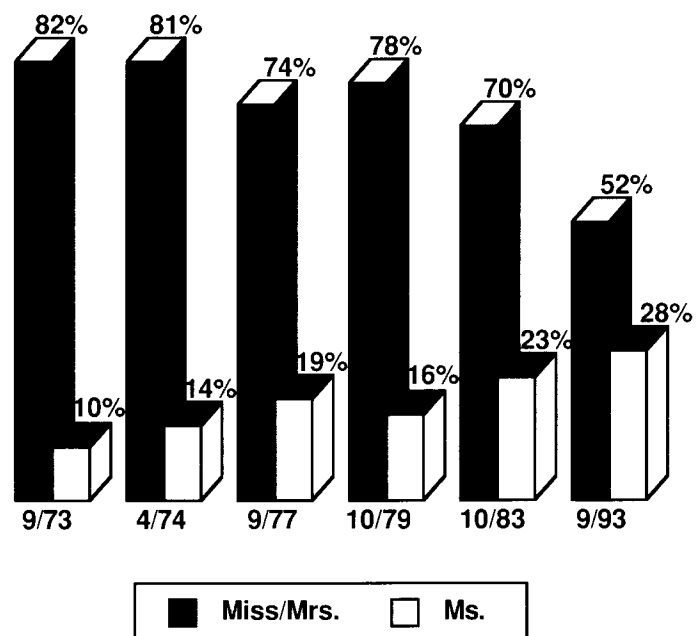
While a revolution has taken place in attitudes, Americans haven't yet embraced the revolutionaries who led the charge. The term "feminist" has yet to find substantial favor. In each of six questions asked in the 1990s, the percentage of women calling themselves "feminists" has never risen above 35%. Young women, who might be expected to lead change, haven't embraced the label either. In a survey done by R. H. Bruskin for Whittle Communications, of 514 female college students at 16 universities, only 16% said they would definitely call themselves a "feminist", while 47% said they "probably" would. In Britain, in a November 1993 British Gallup poll, 23% of women called themselves "feminists"; 70% did not. In the same survey, however, only 23% said feminism was dead; 72% disagreed.

In September 1973, when the Roper Organization asked women which form of address they liked best, "Miss" and "Mrs." or "Ms.," only 1 in 10 preferred the latter, while 82% said they liked the former. The number saying they like "Ms." best has grown, albeit slowly. In a 1983 Roper survey, 23% indicated they preferred it. Ten years later, the number had edged up to 28%. Still, a bare majority of women in the 1993 survey, 52%, preferred one of the more conventional terms.

Not surprisingly, age, marital status, and level of education make a difference in responses. In 1973, women under 30 years of age were over three times more likely than women over 60 to say they liked "Ms." (18% to 5%), but the numbers were small for both groups. Single women under 45,

coming of age at a time when women's issues were receiving new attention, were more likely to prefer "Ms." (30%). College grads were five times as likely as those with a grade school education to prefer the term. In 1993, the number preferring "Ms." has risen among all groups shown in the figure,

Figure 1
Miss/Mrs. or Ms.?



Note: Responses of women only. See Table 3 for question text.
Source: Surveys by the Roper Organization.

