What's in a Name?

Understanding the Racial and Ethnic Labels
Among People of African Descent

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June 9, 2015

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Chapter One

Conceptual Framework

The words that people employ to describe and categorize themselves and others are important elements of the human identity. In particular, terms tied to ethnicity and race are potential flashpoints and spaces of controversy. For example, in a November 2014 interview with popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey, young actress Raven Symone said her ancestral roots in Africa were not of interest to her and stated, "I'm not an African American; I'm an American." In response Winfrey—likely anticipating a response from audiences who identify as African American—said, "Oh girl, don't set up the Twitter on fire!" (Wilkenson, 2014). Similarly, in 1997 golfer Tiger Woods declared that he was "Cablinasian"—a merger of Caucasian, black, and Asian (Aumer, Li, Hatfield & John, 2010). In 2004 at an NAACP ceremony, Bill Cosby declared, "We are not Africans. Those people [African American youth] are not Africans; they don't know a damned thing about Africa" (Cosby, 2004). In 2013, the U.S. Census Bureau decided to remove the term "Negro" from its list of racial identification, as some expressed that the term was offensive and outdated (Fama, 2013). The identity terms that people adopt—or have imposed upon them, as has often occurred in U.S. history—are imbued with great meaning and can tell us much about racial values and identity. The challenges and expectations that come with these racial and ethnic terms are a phenomena that merits close examination. Whether individuals or people in power are selecting the terms, their importance for self-understanding and broader cultural understanding is high.

My focus for this research is on identity labels, specifically racial and ethnic labels and even more specifically, racial and ethnic self-labels employed by people of African descent

living in the United States. This means I am fundamentally interested in communication—how and why language is employed to construct meaning. All ethnic and racial labels have been socially constructed in society (Campbell, 2007) in order to create societal distinctions and to highlight difference. For example, research suggests that the labels "black" and "African American" invoke such differing perceptions that they can affect the socio-economic status of persons who identify with either label (Hall, Phillips, & Townsend, 2014). The label, or labels, that an individual chooses ultimately connects them with a group identity that has been acknowledged within society (Tomley, Yee-Jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright, & Oetzal, 2000). For individuals in the African diaspora in particular, racial and ethnic labels carry a deep historical legacy with contested means of ownership. With terms from "Colored" to "Negro" to "black" and to "African American," the evolution and development of these labels communicate moments and attitudes in history. Examining the labels employed by individuals of African descent and why they use them will help us recognize how black[1] Americans claim a portion of their identity. If we can gain insight into how and why individuals use self-labels, then we can begin to understand how they conceive of themselves and their placements in society (Anglin & Whaley, 2006). Ultimately, we will gain insight into the complexity of the black racial grouping in America, with its different cultures and histories.

With all of this in mind, I examined the racial and ethnic labels that people of African descent attach to themselves. I conducted interviews with eight college students, four from the University of Washington and four from the University of Mississippi. This was an opportunity to get a sense of how such individuals think about self-labels, or if they even do so at all. They

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[1]In this thesis I employ the term "black" as the default label when referring to people of African descent. Among the list of labels that I have mentioned, this label in particular is widely accepted in the American society. The term reflects a universal grouping of people with darker complexion, which is the common denominator among people of African descent.

were selected by contacting student organizations with focuses on experiences or identities of African descent. I began the interviews by asking participants how they define racial and ethnic labels and what they perceive to be the beliefs surrounding the terms. Next, I handed participants a list of frequent labels and asked them to select the ones to which they closely relate and use to describe themselves. The goals were to gain an understanding of the factors considered by individuals when they choose a label or labels for themselves. This research provided insight into the multidimensional perspective of people of African descent and furthermore highlighted why and how labels matter.

Racial and Ethnic Labels

Identity is a broad concept that helps us to understand how humans interweave experiences, knowledge, and feelings to construct some sense of who they are. In the words of Stryker (2000), identity can be defined as "parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play" (p. 284). These "parts" include many categorizations that one assigns to their own personhood and to those around them. Burke (1991) defines identity "to be a set of self-meanings which are under self-control to be maintained at a preferred level, degree or state" (Stets, 1995, p. 133). Further, identity is commonly conceived as "in-practice"—which means it is negotiated, constantly in flux and evolution, and bound to the groups to which we affiliate (Carabello, 2014; Smedley, 1998). Putting these views together, we can think of personal identity as a multidimensional self-understanding with at least some flexibility, rather than as a fixed image with one role or singular meaning. In this understanding, the words we employ to describe our selves, our histories, our values, our relationships, and other important life facets are central to our self-imageries. In turn, our individual decisions

about how we name and construct our self-images—indeed, whether we are *even* in position to do so—contributes to broader cultural hierarchies.

One crucial element in the constancy of identity construction is what we might call *labels*. These are the words and terminology that people employ to identify, categorize, and describe things in this world (Smith, 1992). According to Merriam-Webster, a label is "a word or phrase that describes or identifies something or someone." As a building block for personal identity, the labels that we create or adopt provide insight into the values, attitudes, behaviors, and histories we attach to ourselves or to others. An important component of a label is the *attachment* of specific meanings to the label and what the word therefore conveys when being used. Further, like the identities they point to, labels are not written in stone and do not provide a fixed badge or nametag that individuals must wear at all times; rather, labels are linguistic representations that help to form complicated social realities for people (Hecht & Ribeau, 1987). In turn, labels almost certainly impact the worlds in which they're employed. Brochu and Esses claim that labels evoke "different attitudes as a result of their symbolic beliefs elicited by the labels" (2011, p. 1982), and Eberhardt, Dasgupta, and Banaszynski (2003) suggest that labels "create expectancies or activate prior beliefs that, in turn, often lead people to assimilate their judgments to the label provided" (p. 361). Labels, in short, communicate deep meanings that both reflect and shape the social constructions in societies.

Within the concept of labels, how individuals describe their racial and ethnic identities is a topic that has been discussed and studied for some time. Marsiglia, Hecht, and Kulis found that ethnic labels—and the same could be said of racial labels —are terms "used to determine the ethnic group to which respondents [believe] they belonged" in their research (2001, p. 29). Especially within a nation as diverse as the United States, labels in which certain racial terms or

facets are highlighted say much about how we understand distinct social groups, cultures, ideologies, and history. Anglin and Whaley (2006) claim that labels are suggestive of "the importance people place on their racial [or ethnic] heritage and the degree to which they perceive themselves to be part of their racial [or ethnic] groups" (p. 485), and Fairchild (1985) declares that "one's attitude toward a particular racial group is, in part, a function of the racial or ethnic label associated with that group" (p. 48). For instance, on the U.S. census, citizens are encouraged to choose labels such as "black," "Asian," or "Hispanic" without the option to choose "other" (Campbell, 2007). In describing one's self, by choosing or selecting a particular label over another, a person also claims association with the group to which the labels are commonly applied—and the social expectations and stereotypes that the labels carry with them. The varying social realities people experience build on the identities, which then construct or extend the labels that are associated with them.

Black in America

In considering black populations in the United States, African Americans and African immigrants[2] are commonly lumped together and experience a multitude of labels used across both groups. In terms of numbers, U.S.-born black Americans are the largest African diaspora group in the United States, followed by African-born residents (McCabe, 2011). The groups are often categorized or socially targeted by the same labels because of the high levels of melanin in their skin, which result in darker complexions (Westerhof, 1997). As African Americans and African immigrants share similar ancestry through their African roots, Arthur (2000) states that a

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[2] The black population in America extends beyond these two categories. In this work I do not focus on groups of people who emigrated from South America who consider themselves to be "Afro-Latino" or groups from the Caribbean or other black populated regions aside from Africa. I focus on African Americans and African immigrants because they are the largest populations of black people in America and this is a first step of a larger research program.

"majority of the [African] immigrants come to recognize that no matter what they do, they are never able to insulate themselves from white racial stereotypes and discrimination against people of African origins" (p. 4). A term by the name of "racial affinity" addresses the linked relationship between people who are categorized similarly, which in the case of this thesis are people of black/African origin (Alex-Assensoh, 2009). Through the perspective of this affinity, all people with an African heritage are commonly thought to relatively share the same culture, identity, and customs. Therefore logically, they are lumped or categorized together when discussing racial or ethnic terms. The U.S. census displays this mindset: there is a single "black or African American" box for racial identity (U.S. Census, 2010). This reality portrays the diminishing extension of further seeking an understanding of the labels within this broad categorization.

In reality, however, these groups tend to be different in histories, cultures, and languages, and the labels of "African American" and "African immigrants" used for each group vary in terms of origin and functionality (Alex-Assensoh, 2009). Before jumping into the specifics, it is first important to understand the fundamental difference that separates African Americans from African immigrants: one group's ancestors did not come voluntarily to this continent and one group's did. African Americans have a history in the United States that began with the first groups of enslaved Africans brought to colonial America. The systematic oppression produced a race of people stripped of their identities, cultures, and languages. For centuries, African Americans continued to develop and create their cultures out of the necessity to survive in their African diaspora (American Psychiatry Association, 2015). An example of the displaced peoples' generation of culture would be the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an extension of the African American identity that "permitted

its institutionalization in organizations" (Eyerman, 2001, p. 2). In contrast, the first groups of

African immigrants arrived in the United States during the much later decades of the 1980s,

primarily to pursue higher educational opportunities or political refuge (Roberts, 2014). The

number of African immigrants has been increasing at a rapid rate: "More black Africans arrived

in this country on their own than were imported directly to North America during the more than

three centuries of the slave trade" (Roberts, 2014). Each of these African groups brings their

national cultures, languages, and customs, which can sometimes influence their surroundings.

For example, in 2007 the Washington D.C. City Council adopted Amharic as an official

language because of the large presence of Ethiopians residing there (Alex-Assensoh, 2009). In

sum, the conditions and circumstances for being in America are vastly different for each group.

These respective beginning points are important because scholarship suggests two

prominent factors underlie racial or ethnic labeling: nationality and culture. What is believed to

be common for African immigrants is a connection they keep to their roots, to their founding

nationalities (Alex-Assensoh, 2009). When arriving in America "immigrants initially resist the

racial classification that they find in the host country and resort to their ethnic identity and

nationalism" (Amoah, 2013, p. 130). African immigrants tend to use nationality as a determining

factor because if they surrender it rhetorically, they fear they might surrender their cultural ties

and norms (Alex-Assensoh, 2009). The purpose of defining themselves by their home countries

is to preserve their national identities, regardless of what country they may now be living in. A

second key factor behind selections of racial or ethnic labels is a cultural perspective. Culture is

defined as a "socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings,

premises, and rules" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). When looking at the terms that are commonly

employed among African Americans, it is vital to look at how these labels are addressed and

understood among their users. The self-label of "black" can often signify a connection to "black political identity" in the United States (Anglin & Whaley, 2006). In the 1960s, "black" symbolized the bold and radical approach that some African Americans used to fight oppressive systems. By claiming to be black, African Americans were also claiming cultural aspects that represented their identity, such as Afro hairstyles, a variation of the English language—Ebonics—and black music (Steyn, 1997). Another example of a cultural element in the African American community is the term and usage of "nigger." The word was "routinely used to psychologically and publically demean slaves, who had no property, funds, or legal rights" (Fogle, 2013, p. 85). However, with the help of black entertainers, the term transformed among some in the black community as a self-defining word. As controversial as this word still is in the black community, Fogle (2013) states that the argument to use the word is that it "either signif[ies] racial pride or endearment" (p. 89). By claiming a term that had been used in a destructive manner and giving it a new meaning, this transformation is representational of the potential shifting meaning of self-labels. As the culture among black people develops in the United States, values, behaviors, and attitudes are reflected in the use and meaning of language.

Labels for African Americans

There have been several labels commonly placed-upon and employed by African Americans. The labels that have been commonly found in previous research are "Colored," "Negro," "black," and "African American" (Adams-Bass, Stevenson & Kotzin, 2014; Anglin & Whaley, 2006; Lacayo & Monroe, 1989; Oyserman, Gant &, Ager, 1995; Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001; Smith, Levine, Smith, Dumas, & Prinz, 2009; Smith, 1992; Speight, Vera, & Derrickson, 1996; Waters, 2001). These labels reflect the popular names given to people who are native-born African Americans in America but also labels that may not have been self-

designated by this group of people (Alex-Assensoh, 2009). The ordering in which I presented these labels are how they emerged in society. Starting with "Colored," this label was one of the first terms to classify African Americans simply based on their physical complexions (Smith, 1992). Originating in the mid-to late nineteenth century, this was a label created to group all people aside from Caucasians, in order to establish institutions that segregated whites from blacks, such as schools, hospitals, businesses, transportations, and social settings (Smith, 1992). However, some African Americans decided to advocate for a label that they developed, in response to "shifts in consciousness and sensitivity" (Hales & Kvasny, 2008, p. 9). As a result, prominent black leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, initiated the push for the term "Negro" in the late nineteenth century (Smith, 1992). This label was seen by African Americans as a "stronger term" as it "did not need a noun to complete its meaning" (Smith, 1992, p. 497; Mencken, 1944). This transition in terminology reflected a small victory for African Americans. Systematically their rights and livelihood were still being oppressed and unequal to Caucasians, but the act of changing their label was a step towards equality.

In the 1960s some African Americans took a more dramatic approach to seize ownership of their identity. The term "black" started to be used commonly among African Americans, specifically during the emergence of a black political identity (Alex-Assensoh, 2009; Sigelman, Tuch, & Martin, 2005; Smith, 1992). Advocated by black militant groups such as the Black Panther party and black Muslims under the Nation of Islam, this label was seen as an equalizer to the use of "white" to denote Caucasians as white (Smith, 1992). With an equal balance in terminology, the Black Power movement in the 1960s also advocated for an agenda that encouraged an upsurge of black pride. For example, the phrase "Black is Beautiful" created an affirmation of the black identity "that hadn't been as common with prior labels" (Speight, Vera,

& Derrickson, 1996). This act of self-labeling, also known as self-designation, further provided many African Americans with the confidence to build a stronger sense of self and community (Kirschner, 1973; Speight, Vera, & Derrickson, 1996). Defining a label contributes to the ownership and power one can then assume when asserting this label.

The most recent transition in this domain called for a specific label that would incorporate the essence from all previous labels. The term "African American" was a label officially presented in 1988 by Ramona H. Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition (Smith, 1992). The purpose of this change in terminology was to establish that African Americans living in America had both ancestral roots in Africa and cultural roots in America. Speight et al. (1996) suggested the label embodied more than a color, but rather a sense of pride in acknowledging African roots and heritage. As a spokesperson for the change in labels, Reverend Jesse Jackson insisted that "to be called African American has cultural integrity" (Smith, 1992, p. 507; Lacayo & Monroe, 1989). Jackson went on to mention that other ethnic groups living in America use hyphenated labels to connect to their "mother country," and that people of African descent deserved such a label (Smith, 1992). This shift in terminology sought to affirm and equalize African Americans with other ethnic groups who had already established their ethnic and national labels.

Labels for African Immigrants

The past four decades have included an influx of African immigrants migrating to America. Generally in pursuit of higher education and better job opportunities, native-born Africans have established cohorts of communities around the nation, with large representations from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya (Alex-Assensoh, 2009; Guenther, Pendaz, & Makene, 2011). From 2000 to 2010, the number of legal African immigrants living in America rose to

about 1 million people (Roberts, 2014). As these immigrants established themselves in society, they often resisted using the labels that are applied to their counterparts with similar dark complexions (Guenther, Pendaz, & Makene, 2011). Instead of using labels that align with people of African descent already in America—African Americans—African immigrants commonly invoke their national origins as their labels of choice (Amoah, 2013; Alex-Assensoh, 2009). In Alex-Assensoh's (2009) study about labels among African immigrants, one participant explained why she preferred to be labeled as an Ethiopian while living in America. "I'm an Ethiopian," she said. "I'm not a black American, I'm not a white American, I'm an Ethiopian" (p. 99). For this woman, it was important to use the label that described the nation from which she originated.

Notably, within African immigrant populations there are also labels, not just nationalities that are employed by some to differentiate these groups further. As Alex-Assensoh found, within ethnic groups of African immigrants some labels refer to specific tribal groups within those nations (2009). For example, within the East African nation of Ethiopia, a prominent ethnic group by the name of "Oromo" has developed a presence in the United States. Some people from this ethnic group have historically defined themselves to be separate from the general nation of Ethiopia, and prefer to be referred to as such (Woldemariam & Lanza, 2014). In a *Washington Post* article, Taha Tuku, who is the leader of the Oromo Liberation Front in Washington D.C., said, "We still want to keep our identity as Oromos" (Wax, 2012). Thus, even among people from the same nationality, there are variations of labels. Clearly, there is no one label that can be accepted among every person of African descent: "Black ethnic groups are often simply aggregated together under the racial category 'Black' without respect to the ethnic diversity that exists between them" (Ogundipe, 2011 p. 1). The complexity of figuring out which labels are applicable to which group is an overwhelming process; it would be pointless and incorrect to

sum up all experiences and histories of the African diaspora with a couple terms. Dismantling the concept of group and focusing on individuality is a start in understanding and employing both accurate and sensitive labels.

The focus of this study encapsulates possible components that are considered for the racial and ethnic labels employed by black people. With groups, such as African Americans and African immigrants, at the forefront of black populations in America, the heterogeneity of their histories and experiences frame the contexts and factors they may choose for their labels. However, the mistreatment by homogenizing these groups into singular racial categories can cause an incorrect oversimplification of the countless groups represented under the umbrella of America's black population. When looking at the black population, it would be proper for someone not to assume they have the same history or even same ancestry. The same argument can be said for the labels; not every label represents every black person in this country. Self-labels, though, are beginning insights into people's histories, and research on which labels people employ and why can help us to accurately address and value the individuals that use them. Furthermore, it opens up questions about whether popular labels being used are actually accepted by their users as well as who has the power over the labels themselves and their meanings. Before we can uncover the histories of the labels, we need to know the labels themselves.

Chapter Two

Methodology

I conducted interviews to dive deep into what spurs self-labeling, to strengthen the general understanding of the factors one considers when labeling himself or herself. I was interested in learning about the racial and ethnic labels among people of African descent living in America because I wanted to know what were the factors these individuals considered when choosing or utilizing a label in this category. The labels of "black" and "African American" are the most widely accepted labels for black people in our society, but I was curious to know if all black people embraced these labels? Self-labels connect to broader experiences understood by black people in America and I believe it was worth it to start this inquiry at the most basic level: what label do you use and why? To study these labels and the factors that individuals considered, I employed the method of interviews with college students. These students were associated with a black student campus organization or were referred to me by members of black student organizations. The interviews were held on two university campuses and on average lasted twenty minutes with each participant. For the study, interviewees were asked a set of questions as well as had the opportunity to circle the labels they used from a list, and explain why they chose their labels. I used this methodology to allow for the interviewees to take ownership in their responses, as they were the ones choosing the labels and determining why. I believe that this methodology was the best fit for this topic, as participants brought up insights that I had not initially outlined. This interview structure created dialogue between myself and the participants, which further expanded the understanding that racial and ethnic labels are meant for individuals to decide and defend for themselves.

Interviewing

To gather the data, I needed to create questions that I could ask participants about the topic. In theory, I could have only looked at previous scholarship and compared the data in such research to assess what labels black people use and why. I did look at such work, but I also wanted to be a witness myself and conduct one-on-one interviews with participants to hear the stories, reasons, and choices for their self-labels. Interviews are essential in "understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Siedman, 2006, p. 3). This definition perfectly emphasizes the importance in exploring the factors for racial and ethnic labels. Asking these particular individuals gives insight into their orientations and experiences with these labels and provides context. Burkard and Knox (2009) say that interviews allow for experiences to be translated and to be accessed by wider audiences that may not have access otherwise. The purpose of these interviews is not only to make sense of the data but also to share and contribute to the larger narrative surrounding racial and ethnic labels.

My methodology was one-on-one in-person interviews. I chose this method because I wanted to devote time and attention to one interviewee at a time. In addition, in-person interviews allow for "the observation not only of verbal but also nonverbal data" (Burkard & Knox, 2009, p. 568). A point to consider during these interviews is being present to how participants reacted to labels and noting some of their non-verbal behaviors in the transcripts of their interviews. The significance of documenting the non-verbal actions can allow for the data to provide more context and nuance that would have been missed if they were not in person (Burkard & Knox, 2009). A better term for this method is individual in-depth interviews. The advantage of this style is that interview questions can cover different components under the

research topic (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). Asking the participants the labels they use, why they use them, and where they use them covers a significant amount of ground. Even though my questions seek to understand a bigger cultural phenomenon, being able to start from the ground level up can allow for patterns that are only visible from this stage to emerge. Individual in-depth interviews hold no distractions to interviewees. In this form, participants draw from their own experience and reflect on themselves without overt pressures or considerations from their environments. Individual interviews isolate their thoughts and beliefs from their daily distractions. The significance of this style lies in "being attuned to the participant [rather] than with necessarily following the same path for all respondents" (Burkard & Knox, 2006, p. 567). By interviewing one participant at a time and providing a neutral setting, there was ample opportunity to extract data beyond what was anticipated.

Data

For this thesis I focused on labels that were most commonly discussed among people of African descent. I drew upon previous scholarship to narrow the list of terms that I felt represented the large groups of people in the African diaspora, and I then conducted "pilot" interviews to test the body of questions. I selected this initial body of participants based on suggestions from friends of people whom they knew were of African descent. These interviews were for practice, and the data collected from these correspondences was not included in this thesis. Once I felt that the interview questions had been adequately solidified, I started recruiting participants whom I met or interacted with through the black or minority student organizations on two college campuses. I interviewed a total of eight students, four from the University of Washington and four from the University of Mississippi.

I conducted these interviews in neutral quiet areas such as libraries or offices, which provided one-on-one engagement and minimized distractions. I began by first asking participants to define racial and ethnic labels; this helped interviewees to start to think about this terminology. I then told study participants the working definition of racial and ethnic labels that I was employing for my thesis, and I handed them a sheet of potential labels that they might use. I asked that they read and circle the terms that they employ as well as express to me why or why not they use each label. I then moved through a standard interview protocol, occasionally using probing inquiries to continue the conversation. Here was the approach:

- Thank you for joining me today. I have asked you here to talk about the racial and ethnic labels that are used among African Americans and African immigrants.

  - Q1: What comes to mind when I say racial or ethnic label? How would you define these terms? [After their responses, give them my definition]
    - **Racial & Ethnic labels:** [represent] the importance people place on their racial [or ethnic] heritage and the degree to which they perceive themselves to be part of their racial [or ethnic] groups

  - Q2: Here is a list of commonly used labels for [people of African descent]. Which label/labels do you use/relate to?
    - Colored
    - Negro
    - Black
    - African American
    - American
    - *African nationality* (Ex: Nigerian)_____
    - *African nation* (Ex: Nigerian-American) _____
    - Write-in_____
      - Possible follow-ups/probes
        - Can you go through these terms and assess your usage of them?
        - Why do you relate to this label?
        - Why didn't you use X labels?
        - Is there more than one label you use? Why or why not?
        - In your opinion, what are the differences between these labels?
        - Is there a label you don't see on the list that you use?
          - Why do you use this label?

- Q3: Why do you think you chose this label? What influenced you to choose this label?
  - Possible follow-ups/probes
    - Have you grown up with people who also use this label?
    - Do you think that it is your personal choice to use this label or do you feel it's an external pressure? Why or why not?
    - Does this label reflect where you grew up or were born?
    - Does this label reflect a culture that you associate with?

- Q4: In what environment do you use these labels?

- Q5: What is it like being asked about the labels you use?
  - Possible follow-up/probes
    - Are these labels important to you? Why or why not?
    - Do you think labels should be left for the individual to decide?
    - Do you think these labels could cause tension between African Americans and African immigrants? Why or why not?

I chose these questions because I wanted to know if there are in fact common labels that these individuals use. I have seen labels such as "African-American" and "black" consistently appear among scholarship, but I wanted to know if these terms are actively being used aside from what's been seen in research. At the same time, I anticipated that some participants would select multiple labels. Some students employed a label not commonly represented, which is why the write-in option was included. Lastly, I was curious to know how the participants felt about discussing or being asked about his or her choice of labels. Significantly, this was a topic that they conveyed that they often consider but don't get the opportunity to express. These questions allowed the participants to consider the labels on a deeper level rather than just the surface, which is the only way to gain a full understanding. As opposed to just circling the label they use, which is what they are most familiar with, they had the chance to express why or when they use these labels, which created opportunity for reflection and meaning.

I conducted this research in two locations: on the campus of University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi, and on the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington.

I interviewed eight students, all of them roughly between the ages of 18-24. I chose to interview college students because they are the generation that will be carrying these labels forth. By reflecting on the labels they use and asking them to assess deeper connections, I sought to create open and honest assessments by these individuals with minimal interference of societal pressures and expectations. All interviews were conducted and recorded with an audio device.

Analysis

To analyze the interviews, I first transcribed the content and then read them multiple times, looking for themes. Themes are patterns that are apparent to the readers and listeners of communication texts. In the words of Bernard and Ryan (2003), "A theme is a set of words and/or ideas that recurs over the course of the interviews and relates to 'how often it appears, how pervasive it is across different types of cultural ideas and practices'" (p. 87). Themes are repetitions of ideas and words, and identifying their presence helps researchers to track how they culturally manifest. Themes connect ideas and create relationships to foster specific meanings, often supporting and expanding a scholar's research questions (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). My focus was on racial and ethnic labels, and identifying the themes within participants' responses provided insight into the broader cultural significance of the labels and the societal systems in which they are employed. Bernard and Ryan (2003) further explain that themes are expressions that convey the "discrete concepts" that perhaps are not manifested enough to be identified on their own but rather exist within a category of similar content that surrounds and buttresses the broader idea. This concept translates the raw words into linked patterns that participants might share. Identification of themes allows a researcher to advance to the next progression of assessment and analysis.

Theme: Social Interaction

One of the more common themes in the interviews focused on who the interviewees were communicating with; I labeled this "social interaction." Whenever participants discussed a particular person, or types of people, with whom they communicate, I considered that to be part of this theme. This theme arose because some interviewees expressed how their labels were impacted by the nature of whom they interacted. Their responses introduced ways in which they selected labels based on the people with whom they were engaging. For example, Fred said that he uses the "N" word when he is around other black people but not otherwise. He expressed comfort and acceptance when using that label around people of his race but not such sentiments when around people who are not black. Another participant, Mikayla, said that she would only employ the label "African American" if she were around individuals who used "American." She said she would do so to differentiate herself from other "Americans." For these participants, an awareness of their audiences reflected the comfort they consider for themselves, and the others around them, in asserting their label of choice.

Theme: Environment

This theme pertained to the overall settings in which individuals employ certain racial and ethnic labels. Environment differs from Social Interaction because it highlights physical places, settings or tones of the spaces in which a person is located in rather than the specific people and more importantly beyond the makeup of the individuals present. For example, Patricia said that she uses the label "black" when conversing in social settings. In contrast, when in academic settings or engagements, such as filling out scholarships, she said, "I write African American cause it sounds like, not more educated, but it sounds more politically correct." The evolution of these labels emphasizes environments in which they are likely to be highly accepted

or commonly used. For Patricia, instead of considering the specific people with whom she is engaged, she considers what expectations surround the places she is in to determine the labels she uses. This theme places significance on how the participants assessed what norms or rules governed the setting they faced.

Theme: Culture

This theme focused on how people talk about the relationship of their selected racial and ethnic labels with cultural experiences. A cultural focus emphasizes the values, beliefs, and customs that an individual considers when deciding which label to employ. One participant for example, Mikayla, said that she chose the label "black" because she interacted with what she deemed as "black culture" that, according to her, was comprised of "food to reality TV to clothing to rap and hip-hop." She also said she has pride in "being black" and being taught to be a "strong black woman" by her mom, which she also attributed in coming from the black culture. The transition from "Negro" to "black" in America represented the pride and acceptance from black people of the traditions that originated out of their community such as food, music, and TV programs that showcase the different narratives of people who employ the label "black." Beyond employing the term "black," Mikayla describes this label as framing her thoughts and outlook on society while asserting the cultural identity that is associated with the label. Culture shapes the historical and contemporary perspectives of these ethnic and racial labels, which give them sustenance and value when these participants are employing them. For Mikayla, she primarily engaged with the label "black" which she credits to her upbringing by her mother who helped her construct the belief of what it means to be black and a part of that culture.

Theme: Ancestral

This theme emphasized how ancestry and descending from a particular region or nationality are related to the racial and ethnic labels employed. This theme accentuates the direct ancestral traces that people have to a place or country of origin, and how these are intertwined with a label. For some of the interviewees, there was significant importance on the place they were born, where their parents were born or where they knew their ancestors originated from. Two participants, Talea and Samuel, said that they or their parents were born in a country in Africa and that they therefore preferred a hyphenated label to represent that lineage. In these cases, they utilized both nationalities, that of an African nation and "American." They considered these nationalities to be a part of their current and historical pedigree. Labels considered by the ancestral roots position a direct and clear explanation from participants that logically explain their label.

Theme: Historical

This theme encapsulated the historical denotations and/or connotations of racial or ethnic labels that can shape whether people are comfortable in use of a particular label. Understanding the histories behind these labels can be a major factor as to how an individual might employ it or not. For several of the participants, they said they did not use the labels "Colored" and "Negro" because these carried the segregated history of the American past. They believed the connotations were born out of an oppressive history for people of African descent. Talking about the label "Colored," Mikayla said she would never use it because "it just reminds [her] of slavery and times of coloreds only and whites only." Similarly Patricia said her reasoning for not using the word "Colored" was because "I'm associating it with slavery and segregation and like white drinking fountain and Colored drinking fountain." The meanings of the labels in various eras of

American history, ranging from slavery to emancipation to the Civil Rights Movement to present day, supplied them with a value that affected their choice to employ the labels or not.

The methodology for this thesis focused on the stories that these participants shared, which allowed for the interview content to then be analyzed. Structuring the interviews in such a way that placed the control among the interviewees resulted in data that were not anticipated yet contributed to a deeper analysis. For example, the "N" word was not inserted into the list of labels, but nonetheless was sometimes brought up on its own due to the openness of the questions. These careful considerations of methods provided data that offer insight regarding the larger cultural narrative about racial and ethnic labels in America. These eight interviewees were not connected personally or necessarily had similar geographic histories and therefore were not influenced by each other in any way. The remarkable discovery, however, was a set of commonalities across the interviews, which points to a shared cultural set of experiences. Additionally, this methodology created a space of openness and opportunity that gave the participants the chance to ponder these labels for themselves. In creating the proper space, constructing the individual in-depth interviews, and identifying the themes, the narratives from interviewees can now be added to the broader discussion of the racial and ethnic labels for people of African descent.

Chapter Three

Results

The racial and ethnic self-labels employed by participants help us to understand how they see themselves and their places in the world. Interviewees thought about the labels they employ and presented explanations as to why they chose their labels, and their impressions clustered into overarching themes. Participants credited social interaction, environmental elements, culture, ancestral lineages, and historical meanings as reasons for how they used labels and why or why not they chose to employ other terms. In this chapter, I address the five themes that stood out in the interviews, providing excerpts for each theme. This analysis provides insight regarding the racial and ethnic labels employed among people of African descent.

Theme: Social Interaction

One of the more consistent themes identified by the participants in thinking about their self-labels was their social interactions. The people with whom they were communicating, participants said, heavily influenced the specific labels employed.

For instance, Samuel was very specific about which labels he employs based on the reaction he gets from the people he engages with.

> Well there's, someone approaches me and I believe it's them genuinely trying to know who I am and what I am about, I'll tell them I'm Ethiopian-American and we can have a great dialogue. But if it's someone that just wants me to say it without sincerity or they just want a quick answer and they want to move on from the topic or they're just asking for me to fill out an application I'm just going to say African American because I don't feel like me saying Ethiopian-American, there's so much more meaning behind it that it needs a dialogue.

Samuel said he used the label "Ethiopian-American" only when engaging with people who were "genuinely trying to know who I am and what I am about." He said he employs this label when he determines the sincerity in a dialogue and when he believes the other party is truly invested in knowing what he claims his identity to be. In situations where he does not experience this sense of sincerity, he employs the label "African American" because "if they just want a quick answer and they want to move on to the next topic … I'm just going to say African American." Samuel at later moments again highlighted this theme by stating that it was because of the people, or "audience" he is around and how vested they are in their interaction, that determines the specific labels he uses. He said,

> So it depends who my audience is. If my audience is interested in what I have to say. And is genuinely interested in that the answer of what am I, then I will respond with Ethiopian-American and we can have dialogue afterwards.
>
> Like I was telling you earlier, when someone asks with sincerity, I will answer Ethiopian-American. When someone is just asking me to check off a box, I'm going to answer African American.

In his words, "African American" is the equivalent to "check off a box" that lacks full context or background.

Talea mentioned how social interactions with people of specific backgrounds and heritages compelled her to bring forth specific labels. She said, **"**I usually find when I'm around other people who are black, who are black, then I'll use black." So, if the people are black then that's the label Talea said she uses. A second label Talea said she employed was "Nigerian." She felt most comfortable using this label around people whom she believed would understand her identity. The most convincing component was expressing this label around other visibly black people who she assumed would understand and shares in her label. That included people who

might share a similar heritage or background as she did. She mentions using this label to connect

to her African heritage if other people might understand that history.

> So there is a group of guys from the Congo and they like ask like "oh where are
> you from?" And I felt comfortable saying Nigerian because they'll know and
> understand a little bit. Versus if other people are asking then I'm like "oh I'm
> from Federal Way" (laughs).

> Being surrounded by a group of people from a specific region, Talea determined that her

label would be easily translated and relatable to "a group of guys from Congo…And I felt

comfortable saying Nigerian because they'll know and understand." She determined that because

of their African identity, she thought her African label would be best understood in such an

interaction. Talea further states that there is an importance using her "Nigerian" label around

other Africans who "know exactly where their ancestors originate from."

> I would usually say I'm Nigerian and leave it at that when I'm talking to other
> people who are African and know exactly where their ancestors originate from …
> I would ... I would like to say that I identify as Nigerian-American, as I kind of
> mentioned with my dad and also my mom's side. But again, it feels like it comes
> down to who's asking. It comes down to who's asking and that if someone is like
> "oh what is your ethnicity" then I'd probably say Nigerian and leave off the
> American even though at the end of the day I view myself as Nigerian American.

This is another key part of the social interaction—having knowledge of the backgrounds of the

people with whom she's interacting. If they are asking, with having the knowledge and

background that Talea has about her nationality, then she feels it is opportune to exert that she is

Nigerian. The manner in which she is being asked is also credited in the employment of this

label. If she is questioned about a specific ethnic group that she belongs to, she acknowledges

that the person asking is somewhat keen to her heritage or background.

> Yeah, I would say it changes because of the audience not so much of the
> environment. Like if the environment was all social settings, then it would be the
> people in the social settings which would be why I may change which um, which
> um, which label I use. Like if I'm with other people who maybe like Nigerian,
> Ghanaian, Ethiopian and we're like talking about like ... a movie or something,

> then I'd be like "oh yeah that was by a ..." um I don't know if this is a good example, or like "oh that was by a Nigerian director or like he's a Nigerian actor." Rather than maybe in another setting I would say like "oh he's African American, or he's black."

By changing her label dependent upon the people with whom she's interacting, Talea is altering information that she feels may not resonate with the people that surround her as well. Talea doesn't assert information that connects to her ethnic background with people whom she believes aren't aware of or care about her label, and so instead uses "Nigerian" or "African American or "black" when the appropriate social interaction is at hand.

Similar to Talea, Mikayla said she prefers to use the label "African American" when she is informed about the labels that the people around her have chosen.

> Where would I use African American? Um, I guess if my audience was all, if they, if all my audience identifies as American then I wouldn't be like "yeah I'm black" I would say African American. So I guess just in terms of like who I'm conversating with. I don't know the exact setting like if it was a school or a store, I don't know the exact but I think just if I knew what they identified with then I feel like, that's how I would choose whether I would use black or African American.

If she is aware that others have used the label "American" around her, she said, then she adopts the label "African American" because of the same denominator. This would involve exchanging dialogue and conversation with others prior to establishing the label of her choice.

A second label she said she employs around a certain grouping of people is the "N" word. Mikayla acknowledged the contentious history of this label, and is intentional regarding the social interactions when she utilizes it.

> And it is definitely, if someone of not African American were to call me that [the "N" word], I would most certainly feel offended so it's kind almost contradictory for me to use it but not one to be used to me. But I definitely take in account my audience of who I am speaking to when I would say that word.

Mikayla recognizes the complexity behind this label, which motivates her to only use it around people who are African American. She explicitly states that if a person, outside of that group, were to use this label it would be assumed to be offensive. Therefore, her social interactions and peers heavily influence which labels she uses.

Fred also brought up the "N" word and said he too would only use it among certain people. He said, "Yeah, I would only use 'niggah' or yeah, I'd only use the N-word with other black people." He also intentionally introduced alternate spellings that he described carried distinct meanings. This particular spelling, Fred pronounced, is used as slang and a more laid back tone. However, what is key to focus on is his specific use for the word only around black people. Similar to Mikayla, Fred highlighted how fragile the word is, especially when it's taken out of the community that predominantly employs it.

> I don't like using it around white people at all because it would give them the message that they'll start thinking that they can use it too because you can tell the white people that have been hanging around black people and black people been letting them use the word and that's how they get themselves in trouble.

The employment of this label, according to Fred, is particularly challenging due to the possibility that if people outside of the recognized group use this label, they find "themselves in trouble." Similar to what Mikayla had articulated, this label was seen as belonging only to black people, and Fred specifically declared there would be consequences if white people were to start using it. For Fred, he is discrete when employing the "N" word as he takes into heavy consideration who is or isn't around.

In order to assert his label, Teddy said that if he were presented with another's label, he would then consider it appropriate to share his.

> [W]hen somebody thinks that he's white, I consider myself black. If that is you know, if there is a race thing. But if there is no race thing, I don't label people as this is black this is, I don't care about that.

As he describes it, if someone were to provide his or her racial or ethnic label, then he would choose to engage by sharing his. He further explained that if people around him were to not employ a label for themselves, then he would not provide his. This factor further extends Teddy's influences on how he would classify other people, which he does not care to do.

Emily said she finds that her employment of "black" and "African American" change dependent upon her social encounters. For the term "black," she employs it around "the African American community" which conveys a unique meaning.

> [A]s far as black, I think I use it more in the African American community. Like, black people like you say stuff like that like "black people always be doing this" or "black people always do..." like that's what we talk about but as far as any other outside I don't really use black that much with everybody else I use African American and women of color or person of color.

She finds acceptance of using this term in the African American community and alters her label to "woman of color/person of color" or "African American" when she is not surrounded by members of the latter. Emily provides a specific interaction when she feels it necessary to employ the label "African American."

> I used African American and American ... you use it only when you're talking about your nationality so we don't, I don't really get into, yes I do, with international students I talk to them and they ask me what I am and African American but I always say African American I never just say American.

She mentions this particular label as a sign of nationality and specifically when she is talking to international students. For Emily, it's appropriate to credit her nationality among the students that represent their international identities. In contrast, when she is around African Americans, she employs the label "black" because she believes it is better understood in that community: "So whenever I'm around other African Americans they know what I mean when I say black and talking about us, African Americans so I don't have to say us African Americans do this, I could

just say black people do this." Emily describes the label "black" to be understood only by

African Americans she engages with who do not need the longer label. She makes it clear that

"they know what I mean when I say black," because there is a foundation of understanding.

These excerpts across participants highlight the importance of social interactions and how it

affects the racial and ethnic labels people employ.

Theme: Environment

In the interviews there also was an emphasis on the tones and contexts, distinct from the

people with whom one interacts, in which people use specific labels. Patricia, for example,

highlighted how the specific type of communication influenced her employment of labels. She

said, "[G]enerally when I'm writing more academic papers like scholarship papers I write

African American cause it sounds like, not more educated, but it sounds more politically

correct." Her specific use of the label "African American" is centered on academic papers that

she believes possess a "politically correct" tone over other labels. In such a specific instance,

Patricia believes this is an appropriate context for the label. She made additional similar

comments:

> And whether or not that impacts what you're doing, it kind of depends on the
> activity but like I said, scholarship applications. Because, I mean, as sad as this is
> playing up your minority status can help you get scholarships because they want
> minority students to go farther in college and get higher education and support our
> efforts which is awesome.

> And so I would say like applying for scholarships, that kind of stuff, legal forms,
> which yeah because they have census data on them.

According to Patricia, "African American" is a label that can assist in her advancement of higher

education. She further states that this is a label that she employs on "legal forms" that contribute

to "census data," which establishes a formal tone that is linked to her employment of "African

American." The context she referenced in these comments was an academic environment, and she employed the label that she believed was the most appropriate.

Samuel said he uses the label "African American" in a similar manner. For example, he said, "[O]r they're just asking for me to fill out an application I'm just going to say African American because I don't feel like me saying Ethiopian-American, there's so much more meaning behind it that it needs a dialogue." Samuel insinuates that there is a nature of applications that merit them to be for official use of some kind. Further, he says he chooses "African American" in that particular setting "because I don't feel like me saying Ethiopian-American, there's so much more meaning behind it that it needs a dialogue." Due to the lack of explanation or dialogue behind simply stating a label, Samuel defaults to "African American" on applications if there is not an opportunity to explain his preferred label further: "Um, applications. Right? If someone says are you African American I'm going to say yes. In an application because there will not be that dialogue. Being Ethiopian means I'm also African, right?" He continues to reiterate that because there is a lack of dialogue on such application forms, he does not employ a label that he believes will just need more explanation. If the application asks what his label is, he will place "African American" because he believes it does not merit further description. The guiding influences of this theme are the unspoken rules of the environmental context.

Fred similarly said he employs the label "African American" in specific formal environments. In his words, "For myself as a black guy, African American to me is more formal. I would never use that in everyday conversation but like if I was describing myself or describing my people, then I would use, um, African American." The labels Fred mentioned were "black" and "African American," which he contrasts in their environments of use. In the excerpt he

proclaims himself as a "black guy" while acknowledging that "African American" is a label that would not exist in the settings of an everyday conversation. He recognizes that particular environment in which he'll employ the label: "African American is more when I'm trying to be formal. If I were giving a speech or something I would be more likely to use African American because black would sound offensive in a formal context." According to Fred, there is a dynamic about the label "African American" that leads him to employ it in formal settings or in an official public manner.

Fred also talked about employment of the "N" word and how his environment influences his usage. He said, "I love saying it in class. I love to refer to myself, um I guess satirically, like in a self-deprecating matter." In contrast, Fred explains where and how he employs the label "black" in different settings: "I would say that probably I use black more so in every situation no matter which culture that I'm in, whether I'm in a predominantly white setting or predominantly black setting." Fred points out that setting does not have a sole effect on his employment of the label "black." Instead he emphasizes how he uses the label in "every situation." Environment affects his choice of labels in ways that can enforce labels in specific settings or acknowledging that this factor doesn't affect his employment of a specific label.

Mikayla explained her usage of different labels across various settings as driven by the significant messages that she believes her labels address. In her words, "[I]f someone was like 'Oh those niggers over there' it'd be like different than 'oh what's up nigga?' You know so. It just it's definitely context with that word. It's a word that has to be peculiar in use." The employment of the "N" word for Mikayla is entirely dependent upon context. She emphasizes that the label can fluctuate in different tones and explains that it comes down to "context with that word." Between the labels "African American" and "black" Mikayla explains how she

applies them in a specific environment: "Even half, on job applications I have to put African American, black descent so I feel like, without me even calling myself that, the society has labeled me black." In a format of filling out job applications, Mikayla expresses the lack of choice that she feels when identifying her label. Acknowledging that these applications provide a joint label of having both "African American" and "black" she finds that "society has labeled me black." In this specific instance she expresses how the applications have provided her with a label without her proclaiming a label for herself. However, in employment and in academic settings, Mikayla emphasizes her comfort with exerting the label "black."

> Um definitely in the workforce because you're asked that, ironically. And just academic settings, being that I do consider myself an activist and a feminist I definitely try to make it known that I am a black woman because I feel like there is, we're so not expected to succeed in this society and we're so expected to be on section 8 and the welfare so I definitely like to, people to know that I'm black and I'm educated and I'm going to do something for my community and I'm trying to better myself so I try to use the word black.

In asserting her label as being "black" Mikayla feels it important to "make it known that I am a black woman." She explains the further meaning behind that due to her belief that "we're not expected to succeed in this society." Since she feels strongly that because "I'm black and I'm educated" it is her responsibility to present her label in environments where skill and intelligence are tested.

Talea described how her employment of specific labels changes across the settings in which she finds herself. For example, she said, "Um 'Negro' I don't use. I think it's really strong, I guess the only times that word comes up is in academic settings." In a similar way, the term "Colored" is something that Talea said she would rarely employ:

> Yeah. So I guess when I think about "Colored" I wouldn't say I use this in a serious context. I usually use it when I ... in a ... It's usually in an instance where somebody has done something that I find kind of like prejudice or like, I guess

> where I was offended not to the point to like be really, really mad but like
> offended somewhat.

Reflecting on the employment of "Colored," Talea specifically mentions how she wouldn't use it in a "serious context." Rather, if there was an instance of "prejudice" that she encountered, she'd find it appropriate to utilize this label that recognizes that prejudicial tone. Talea further comments on her presence at her university and how that affects her choice of labels.

> I was actually reflecting on this the other day and like this is my second year at
> UW and just being at a prominently white institution has made me very much
> more aware of my blackness and I find that I use black more, even when speaking
> with people of different racial groups or ethnicities I find myself using black more
> in conversation.

Being in an environment that is predominantly white, Talea said, influences her to more often employ the label "black." As she develops being "aware of my blackness" she acknowledges her increasing usage of "black" as her primary label in academic settings and specifically, in her everyday conversations there.

> And so I usually find myself in a professional setting, I think I would refer to
> black more now cause when talking about black people but...(long pause) I guess,
> if I'm talking about someone and I know they have an African nationality or if
> I'm talking about myself, then I still feel like I would be forced to use black in a
> professional setting.

Talea expresses her consistent use of the label "black" in professional settings while being aware of how others identify themselves. As with the others, the labels she employs are tied closely to the environment in which she finds herself.

Theme: Culture

A third theme in the interviews was a highlighting of a cultural connection as serving an influential role in the labels employed by participants. Customs, traditions, and beliefs were deep-seated elements that some interviewees saw as their reasoning for their labels of choice.

Mikayla, for example, credited her upbringing and how her mother instilled values about her black identity.

> Um, I think in terms of using the word black, I feel like I was taught to know that I'm black. So in terms of my mom, you know strong black woman, and she's, you know black pride and love yourself and you're black. My mom always used to tell me you already have two things against you, you're a woman and you're black. So I feel like it's always been ingrained that that was my identifier almost.

She said her mother taught her to be a "strong black woman" and to have "black pride and love yourself … you're black." These are powerful communicative examples of valuing the context of the label "black." Mikayla credited what her mother said as an impactful moment that contributed to her appreciation and use of the label "black" and finding pride in that label. The value behind the label "black" has "been ingrained" to the point where "that was my identifier." Aside from the values that she finds pride in, Mikayla highlighted specific customs that she believes constructs the culture behind the black label.

> And it's actually a wide range from food to reality TV to clothing to rap to hip-hop. I definitely think that there is a black culture.
>
> I feel like black is like our little cult of like ok we like soul food, and you know curvaceousness. But that's our little like things that identify our culture so, definitely black.

According to Mikayla, her use of self-labels has deep roots in a black culture.

Talea focused on the cultural components associated with her label "Nigerian" and how these connect to her choice of this particular label. She said:

> Yeah so um, part of my African nationality maybe like, I guess like, the food or the music or, language, even though I don't speak it. But just like even just like the language or history that I interact with with people who identify with the certain African nationality

Talea credited her pride for her label "Nigerian" as being due to "the food, or the music, or the language" and the "history that I interact with." These are components that she finds distinguishes her label as having specific attributes of which she is proud when she employs the

label "Nigerian." The essence of the culture and its influence upon the choice of labels is also due to the community that it develops.

Similarly, Samuel claimed that his self-label "Ethiopian-American" presented two cultures at once. In his words, "Cause even though I am Ethiopian my parents tried to teach me cultural Ethiopian, cultural ways of growing up, it's the American culture that really raised me." Samuel highlights his Ethiopian culture due to his parents and elements of the culture that they instilled within him. However, he is not diminishing the second half to his label, because he credits the American culture as having "really raised me." He emphasizes both pieces to his label and both cultures that have defined how he interacts and identifies with his label.

For Emily, she said she believes that her labels indicate a larger representation of community and culture. She said:

> I find them important to like know what community I belong to that what ... the people I identify with what that community that family like that people who you can relate to, I think that that's important to have I think that's the only reason why we even have labels for anything because if we didn't need that community I don't even think that we would have them. But like I think that it's important to me in order for me to identify with others and people like me.

She connects these labels to assist in finding "what community I belong to" and that "the only reason we have labels for anything because if we didn't need that community I don't even think that we would have them." The connections that she feels from the use of her labels, highlights the importance "to identify with others and people like me." Emily specifies which community in particular that she connects to the label she employs.

> But as far as in America, the only culture I have is African American culture.

> [A]s far as the culture, it's the African American culture that I identify the most with because and I'm not very sure of where my ancestors came from in Africa for me to be able to associate or identify or relate with that but, so all I have is like African American which is majority of the time looked at as being a black community.

Emily links her labels with cultural ties and associations to what she calls an African American community, or identity.

Fred connected the "N" word label to the culture he said he participates in. In his words, "I think about with 'nigga' you know 'what up my nigga' stuff like that, I think about you know black culture, you know some of the more wonderful aspects of black culture." Fred emphasizes this particular label being a part of the "wonderful aspects of black culture." He explicitly states how this label helps him to think about black culture but to also find pride in the employment of this label within that culture. For Fred, this was an example of the language that is distinct to the black culture. More generally among all the interviewees, the beliefs, traditions, value and art comprise a culture, their labels, and then extend to their communities.

Theme: Ancestral

Some participants spoke about how their ancestral origins impact their self-labels. Talea, for example, explained how her parental lineage helped her to establish the labels that she feels comfortable employing.

> I know that my dad is Nigerian and my mom is Black American and I can trace my roots back on my dad's side but I can't do the same for my mom.

> I feel comfortable saying that ok I know at least I know my identity originates in Africa and I can identify one country, at least on one side so I feel comfortable using it.

Talea said she knows where her dad comes from and therefore finds security in employing her identifying label as "Nigerian." She further states that she "feels comfortable … I know my identity originates in Africa." Further, her comfort level of employing her "Nigerian" label enhances as she discovers others origins being linked to Africa as well: "I would usually say I'm Nigerian and leave it at that when I'm talking to other people who are African and know exactly

where their ancestors originate from." Further, Talea said she hopes her label transmits more meaning than just a label.

> And then another one would be as an expression of my identity so I feel like if I'm specifying that I'm Nigerian, that's because I want people to know that there is a part of my upbringing and who I am that connects to a specific geographic location.

She explicitly wants "people to know that there is a part of my upbringing" when she employs the "Nigerian" label. The label "connects to a specific geographic location."

Very explicitly, the message that Talea is trying to convey to the people around her is rooted in a specific nation because of her ancestry. She explained the importance in finding out the story of one's familial past to determine the present diction of labels:

> I think that comes with we've also earned our right to be an American, American citizens. And so, I feel like even though some people may have tried to separate us or have in the past, I feel like it's important to acknowledge that ancestors and people who came before us fought for like our American rights and privileges and all of that but that's why I feel like I will say black American rather than just like saying black or if I'm comparing African American to black American, I think I usually say it in that way too.

Talea refers to her second label of choice "black American" and how she ties that into her ancestry. First, she understands the importance of having "American" attached to her label because it acknowledges her as being an "American citizen." Second, she emphasizes employing this word because "ancestors and people who came before us fought for like our American rights and privileges." With this understanding, she sees the value in this particular label because of the people who strived to establish it.

Samuel expressed a similar reasoning behind his employment of the label "Ethiopian-American," which he credited to have a lineage stemming in Ethiopia. He said, "And I don't say Ethiopian-American to, to, break away from African roots as a continent but it's only because I am privileged enough to know specifically where in Africa I'm from," a point he accentuated by

tapping the table. He recognized his direct connection to a geographic location, which he represents in the racial label of his choice. Further he mentioned that being able to "know specifically where in Africa I'm from" is a "privilege." He finds privilege in stating that he is "Ethiopian-American" as well as being confident that he employs this label because he knows his ancestry, even while assessing other labels; American: "I was born in Ethiopia but I am a U.S. citizen holder" (click sound effects), and "Yet again I have strong ties with my background um I believe its part of my ethnicity that I am from Ethiopia and yea." Although Samuel was born in Ethiopia, he also said that his nationality is American to which he credits half of his label. Thus, he confirms that he is a "U.S. citizen holder" and also "from Ethiopia." Stating those two identities provides a reason as to why he employs those labels based on his places of origin. Both Talea and Samuel expressed their unique backgrounds, which have allowed them to physically locate their places of origin for themselves and their family.

Emily made a similar point but in more general terms. For example, she expressed her use of "African American" in continental African terms:

> Well I know like African American is because of my heritage because of where my ancestors came from.

> I'm African American because my ancestors were African so I look at racial, like, the categorizing myself from my history.

> But African American is definitely because of my ancestors.

Although not providing in-depth detail about her ancestry, Emily, said that "my ancestors were African" and that is an impactful reason as to why she employs the label. She further stated, "African American is definitely because of my ancestors." This theme was interpreted however the participant viewed it; in all instances it expressed an emphasis on ancestral connection and places of origin as key factors contributing to their racial and ethnic labels of choice.

Theme: Historical

The final theme focused on the historical meanings for labels. Some labels have existed for longer periods of time and highlight distinct connotations that most interviewees did not wish to invoke. In particular, the labels "Colored" and "Negro" were discarded almost always due to their historical origins. Jacob expressed:

> Um, "Negro" and "Colored" just reminds me of slavery days and um, you know the type of stuff that our ancestors endured and went through, so I've never, you know, identified as "Colored" or "Negro."

Jacob said he doesn't see these labels as helpful or useful today because of the period of time in which they were most employed, a time being especially cruel to people of African descent. He highlighted his extreme distaste for the labels as he said, "I've never, you know, identified as 'Colored' or 'Negro.'"

Fred recalled specific instances in history in which these same two labels were wedded to outright discrimination among people of African descent.

> Ok so "Colored" I would never use that. Um because it makes me think about uh, white and Colored with the bathrooms and stuff like that. That has a negative connotation. "Negro" sounds really antiquated and archaic and kind of a lot of those same connotations as "Colored" so I wouldn't use that.
>
> But Colored, Negro, that's too many negative connotations.

The historical realities of segregation of public facilities are significant in Fred's perspective of these labels and therefore why he chooses not to employ them. Specifically he brings in the association of separating "white and Colored with the bathrooms" as a representation of this "antiquated and archaic" time. He further stressed that these labels carry "negative connotations" that preserve them in the past.

Mikayla similarly expressed that these particular labels establish a time capsule of some sort when they are employed. She said:

> Um "Colored" I probably would not ever use that. It just reminds me of slavery and times of Coloreds only and whites only, so I would probably never never use Colored. I just feel like it's just bringing us backwards to a place of oppression and just belittlement and inferiority.

She associated these labels with a heavy connection to the past when people of African descent were subjected to a divided and exclusive society, and she doesn't see them as contributing to a forward progression. When she exclaims that these labels bring "us backwards to a place of oppression and just belittlement and inferiority" she is addressing the explicit connotations that she believes are associated with "Colored" and "Negro."

Patricia offered a very similar understanding of how the historical legacy of these labels carries a negative connotation. In her words, "[T]he label Colored to me, immediately I'm associating it with slavery and segregation and like white drinking fountain and Colored drinking fountain. It has a very negative connotation for me." The associations Patricia places alongside these labels involved segregation of many aspects of life between whites and blacks. Her immediate connection to this past and the segregation between a "white drinking fountain and colored drinking fountain" explain her strong belief to not employ this label.

Samuel said the historical connotation of the label "Negro" was a direct reason as to why he does not employ it. He said: "I see color as a, 'Colored' being saying that people who are white are not colored right so. So I see it with a negative connotation. Same thing for Negro. Um that holds a lot of negative connotation that's why I don't identify myself as a Negro. I believe Negro is a western civilization word." The historical pasts associated with these labels damaged them for Samuel and for several others.

Summary

Identifying the reasons behind the choices of labels reflected a deeper understanding of why the interviewees employed their racial and ethnic labels. The construction of how they interacted with these labels is important information because it links to their personal stories and experiences. Acknowledging the different experiences and circumstances that led them to their labels of choice provides insight as to how some people of African descent use their labels and why. The similarities found under these five themes create meaning in that there are shared experiences or understandings that contribute to a larger cultural phenomenon that deals with these labels. As each individual explained their labels of choice and the formation as to why they employ them, they made similar cases that bring their individual experiences into a wider shared experience that, with further research, can continue to build.

Chapter Four

Discussion

In this research I examined the racial and ethnic labels that people employ when understanding or identifying themselves. I interviewed eight college students, four at the University of Washington and four at the University of Mississippi. These eight interviewees commonly ascribed five reasons or circumstances for their employment of racial or ethnic self-labels. Specifically, they highlighted social interactions, environments in which they found themselves engaging, the cultural links associated with a specific label, ancestral lineages, and the historical contexts of the labels. These themes helped to construct unique perspectives on how and why individuals of African descent select and employ certain racial or ethnic self-labels. The consistency of these emphases and their ties to the labels across the interviewees was notable. The participants attend universities in very different regions of the country—the Northwest and the South—and have unique personal histories. They ranged in gender, too, and for the African immigrants they ranged in the nations of origins. The ability to conduct this research across these differences is a strength of the project and lends a generalizability to the presence of the themes in how people of African descent self-identify.

The most common theme highlighted the nature of the social interactions in which interviewees were forced to decide which labels to employ. Participants often pointed to these interactions as greatly influencing their choice or alterations of their self-labels. Examining the data, there is a distinction within these social interactions that contributed to the employment of certain labels. For some participants, the specific *individuals* that they were around affected their label of choice while for others it was the specific *behavior* by those individuals that impacted

preferred labels. Such social interactions were not highlighted by previous scholarship but were very present in my interviews. An example of the behavioral impact came from Samuel as he explained how a person's perceived depth of interest affects which label he employs. He said he utilizes "African American" if the conversation is in passing and quick, whereas he uses "Ethiopian-American" if he believes people are "genuinely trying to know who me and what I am about." I find it notable that Samuel's concern is not about the race or ethnicity of the individual but rather how invested he or she is in knowing about Samuel's identity. This behavioral emphasis forces Samuel to pay close attention to the social interactions in which he is engaged when racial labels emerge in conversation.

The theme of social interactions also included some focus by participants on the properties of the people around them. For example, some participants brought up the "N" word, and they made it clear that they employ this word around certain people and that this label should not be employed by just anyone. In particular, Fred mentioned, "I don't like using it around white people at all because it would give them the message that they'll start thinking that they can use it too." Under the circumstance of interacting with white people, Fred deemed that to be enough of a factor to eliminate his use of the "N" word during those interactions. Another example of this type of social interaction occurred for Talea when she expressed how knowing the ethnic backgrounds of those she engaged with determined which label she'd employ. She mentioned how her father is Nigerian and that she employs that label when "I would usually say I'm Nigerian and leave it at that when I'm talking to other people who are African and know exactly where their ancestors originate from." Knowing their origin or best-guessing it determines whether she employs her "Nigerian" label. A label that some interviewees believed to be only utilized around other black people was the label "black" itself. Talea expressed that when

she was around a black person that was when she employed the label herself. Emily also stated that her usage of the label "black" meant more to her when she was around black people. According to Alex-Assensoh (2009), Sigelman et al (2005), and Smith (1992), the emergence of the label "black" was an act of ownership that black people living in America did not have. This label stands specific in its formation, as it was essential in uniting diverse black peoples together. I believe the exclusivity behind the employment of this label echoes its original purpose to associate with others who understand the pride in the term.

A second important theme of influence on the self-labels was the environment in which participants found themselves. Environment, as discussed by participants, was the tone, setting or physical place in which interactions occur. Patricia emphasized this theme as she explicitly said her use of the label "African American" on scholarship applications was a more "politically correct" term. Congruent with Smith's research on the evolution of terms among African Americans, this label was seen as an official presentation to the community by the National Urban Coalition (1992). With this transition, this was a validation that established the label to an official capacity that allowed for it to be on the same level as other racial and ethnic groups with an American hyphenation. This type of validation is what coincides with how Patricia employs her label in official capacities. Similarly, Fred expressed how he reserves his use of the label "African American" for formal engagements such as "giving a speech." The contexts described by these participants highlight specific labels as appropriate for only certain environments or when certain agendas are present. What is remarkable is the *unstated* assumptions or expectations of these participants: there are no official laws or rules that govern the employment of labels, and these participants have taken it upon themselves to assess and assume which labels fit the environment that they engage with. To some capacity, these participants engage with a

construction of their own perspectives of these environments instead of the environments themselves. Understanding the tone settings connected to labels would help us gain deeper insight into the conceptualization that individuals have on the labels they employ.

Cultural associations also were distinct components named by the interviewees, and this links closely with the findings of prior scholarship. Participants credited their labels being connected to cultures with which they were engaged. Cultural components that they believe fostered their self-labels included food, music, language, and the communities in which they participated. According to Geertz, a culture is comprised of the "socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules" (1973, p. 89). While this aligns with the majority of what participants explained, there was also an emphasis on an encompassing "community" in which people were enveloped. This idea of community elicited in some of these interviews described a group of people who share some common history, think similarly, and understand one another in special ways. Only among these people and their like-minded perspectives would these labels be presented without elaboration. For example, Emily said she relied on her deep engagement with her community for usage of the label "African American." She went on to claim that the only reason she believes labels exist is to find that association and connection within a particular community. Culture not only allows a close association of these labels but it also highlights the significance of associating with a particular body of people that view and most importantly understand the labels they choose to engage with.

A label with cultural associations that emerged several times was the "N" word. It was always brought up, if it came up, by the interviewees. The word's origin was to denigrate people of African descent, but Fogle (2013) emphasized a shift in its use specifically among some black Americans, to it being a term of "racial pride and endearment" (p. 89). Fred, for example,

specifically associated this label as being a part of black culture and having a distinct cadence when used among black people. This coincides with Fogle's claim that the word is sometimes dismissed because of its historical formation, but carries a different meaning among some people within black and African American communities. This meaning is meant to closely relate one another in an endearing manner but is not always seen that way. According to Fred, that is the manner in which he employs this label with other black people. He believes it to be a part of the "wonderful aspects of black culture." Although the word elicits mixed perspectives on its employment, what marks its exclusivity is the change in meaning that the black culture provided to it. Through humor of standup comics and rap music, the reconstruction of the N-word originated with the black American culture by implementing a positive and embracing meaning which reflects a complex history thought to be understood only by members of this culture. The shift to an endearing meaning behind the word almost resuscitates power back into the label, which in turn promotes its exclusivity to those who were designed to suffer from its employment. Culture can so greatly influence, and in this case reconstruct, the shift in meaning within language which can then determine who is able to employ the label.

Another theme in the interviews emphasized the influence of participants' ancestral lineages on their self-labels. Talea, for example, expressed that because of her Nigerian father, she has the option and privilege to employ that label. Samuel expressed a similar reason by stating that because he was born in Ethiopia, he can claim that label. This ties in very closely with the conclusion by Alex-Assensoh (2009) that African immigrants employ a label of their nationality based on their country of origin more so than their host country's national label. For some of the participants, by claiming their ancestral ties through their labels, they were acknowledging and giving recognition to countries of origin. To further Alex-Assensoh's claim,

these participants were more removed than first-generation immigrants. Talea was born in America but referred to her father's lineage as being the source for her employment of the label "Nigerian." These findings highlight the value of examining whether and how self-labeling shifts over generations as people reside longer in a host nation. In their interviews, Talea and Samuel stated that they were able to connect to a specific geographic location where their familial ties were based, which gave them the credibility of employing their ethnic labels of "Nigerian" and "Ethiopian," respectively. Their parents immigrated to the United States; one wonders whether their children will continue to accentuate the ancestral ties in their self-labels twenty or thirty years from now.

Lastly among the themes, the perceived histories of these labels more often than not discouraged participants from employing certain labels altogether. Particularly, "Negro" and "Colored" were labels that interviewees expressed that they did not tend to employ. "Colored," Smith (1992) said, was created out to categorize people of African descent in a manner to intentionally segregate. This was exactly the message and reason as to why participants refused to engage with it. Jacob explained that the label reminded him of "slavery days and um, you know the type of stuff that our ancestors endured and went through." When it came to "Negro" the perspective remained the same to Fred as it "sounds really antiquated and archaic." Although Negro was a term that was seen to be a stronger term and an improvement from "Colored," participants more or less could not shake the specific eras that this label invoked. I was intrigued that these labels seemed to cause serious reflections by the participants as if they almost were transported to that segregated era. The consistent perspectives they offered were surprising but seemingly symbolized a shared perspective among these eight strangers. Their orientations reiterated the same historical bind that they believed firmly kept people who looked like

themselves in second class standing compared to whites. The time that these labels were highly employed discouraged and turned away participants from even considering them as labels for themselves. The negative responses to these two labels highlight the power these labels can have. What is interesting is how the historical construction of these labels open up a narrative to the participants about a specific time. When asked to explain why they didn't choose these labels, each one provided an example or a reality for people of African descent during oppressive heights in American history. The historical context brings from the narratives that were explicit during the time of the labels employment.

Research seeking to identify the racial and ethnic labels employed among people of African descent and why they've been employed has focused on this group of people living in America. What this specific study has shown are the many different perspectives, histories, cultures, and beliefs that are not captured by the labels but by the individuals. These labels start the conversation toward an understanding of one's identity but fail to represent the complex and variously different experiences that fall under that categorization of people of African descent. How is it that a few terms are meant to represent all people of the same complexion? The answer is that they do not. They in fact result in further need for clarification and understanding which goes against the purpose they exist in the first place. Granted, some of these labels did not originate during times of equality for people of African descent, but as the labels transform over time, so should the perspective about these labels.

To be clear, this research is only one study, and there are several things about this study that merit caution. First there are the ways in which I solicited participants to be involved in this study. I was referred to some participants from people within black student organizations on campus and I approached some of these individuals by myself within these groups. What

conflicts with this method is that in independently seeking individuals, I am already labeling the participant to a certain extent which can in fact counter the purpose and focus of the study which is to allow for interviewees to self-label. By seeking out participants on my own, I have projected onto them my assumptions of their labels instead of consistently only being referred to by students. There was not a uniform plan of outreach that I utilized in recruiting participants. The advantage of only interviewing participants referred to me is that it would have eliminated any preconceptions or expectations on *my* part. What could instead occur is to create a standard recruitment of participants that suspends my individual search. Ideally participants should be selected by their own declaration that they are of African descent. For further research on this topic, perhaps selecting students based on racial or ethnic selections on official documents would allow for the individual to declare the identity they associate with, which would suspend any initial assumptions. This change in methodology allows for this study to be seen at a level that is not fixed or provoked but instead naturally brings people into the dialogue and conversation about racial and ethnic labels.

A second limitation in this study occurs in the conceptual argument in regards to focusing on people of African descent. The experiences highlighted in this thesis, and in the initial framework, focused on two groups in America, African Americans and African immigrants. Under the broader umbrella of people of African descent, these two groups are not the entirety that makes up this diverse population. In the selection to focus on African Americans and African immigrants, which are the largest and second largest black populations in America respectively, there is an elimination of other people that fit under the large category of people of African descent. From that elimination, the black experience is then shrunk and not reflective or inclusive of all black experiences in America. Other populations include Afro-Latinos from

Central and South America as well as African descendants in the Caribbean, all of which are present in America and fall under the scope of people of African descent. This study could receive a richer and more heterogeneous perspective of the black experience in America as well perhaps as an increase in the span of labels that are being employed. In expanding this study to reflect a more accurate depiction of the population in America that originates from African ancestry, the content and deeper understanding of this body of people would be more concrete.

This all matters, because without the personal voices all of the racial and ethnic labels would cease to have meaning. Participants shared deep insights and experiences that have connected them to a label and in fact showed how they would rather choose a different label than express their preferred label since there is not a socially accepted space to explain their racial or ethnic identity. Some interviewees expressed that because there is not a platform to openly talk about their labels in a deeper fashion, they'd rather fit into societal norms and employ the "socially accepted" labels that exist in more places. The power of the personal voice by participants gave insight not only to their labels but how they see themselves in society. The influence of how others perceive them affect their level of comfort which in turn affect their labels of choice. There is a lack of dialogue that occurs which leaves the judgment of employing racial and ethnic labels to the individual but not in a supportive role. As these eight have expressed, their concerns for the employment of their labels point to the social responsibility we have as a society. Instead of accepting just the prominent narratives of what it means to be "black" or "African American" there needs to be a larger outreach to hear narratives that reflect more people of African descent.

The use of these labels can serve a purpose but can also be detrimental by homogenizing people of African descent and therefore overlooking individuality. Our society needs to decipher

the purpose of these labels that help to generally categorize and document for sake of representation in population and engagement in society. Beyond these purposes, racial and ethnic labels need to be employed with caution, as they will not address the entire population of people of African descent. Rather, these labels project how one sees an individual, which ignores their right to determine that for themselves. Although not everyone may view the employment of labels to be this detrimental, by adopting a cautious perspective to the labels that are already employed, we begin to look beyond the label and more so to the individual. We allow for the individual to create their personification and understanding for themselves instead of reiterating the ready-made labels available in our society. The shift into this mentality can break apart stagnant and archaic designs of racial and ethnic labels, which can begin to promote individuality in the right sense and eradicate homogenization or the assumption of a collective identity.

The start of this research simply pinpoints labels into different pockets of the American way of life. Out of these eight individuals, there were many similarities in responses and reactions to labels as well as significant differences in how and why they employed their labels. The similarities and differences are reasons enough to extend the research and discovery of these labels. To stop and try to understand only the similarities would ignore and invalidate the differences that create such a heterogeneous group of people. It would also ignore the similarities and differences that are unclear in terms of documentation. There are far more stories and experiences behind the common labels that exist. The experience of being a person of African descent in America is only slightly touched on, but there is more. In finding these untold experiences, a creation of authenticity when utilizing labels for a group of people can form. An intentionality in employing these labels will be born. This research is not only valuable for the

individuals to express their untold histories but to us the scholars and citizens who employ these labels toward about ourselves and others around us.

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