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Distinctively black names in the American past☆

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Abstract

We document the existence of a distinctive national naming pattern for African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We use census records to identify a set of high-frequency names among African Americans that were unlikely to be held by whites. We confirm the distinctiveness of the names using over five million death certificates from Alabama, Illinois and North Carolina from the early twentieth century. The names we identify in the census records are similarly distinctive in these three independent data sources. Surprisingly, approximately the same percentage of African Americans had "black names" historically as they do today. No name that we identify as a historical black name, however, is a contemporary black name. The literature has assumed that black names are a product of the Civil Rights Movement, yet our results suggest that they are a long-standing cultural norm among African Americans. This is the first evidence that distinctively racialized names existed long before the Civil Rights Era, establishing a new fact in the historical literature.

Keywords: Black names; Demography; Black family
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"[Names] had been their sole identity during bondage, often the only remaining link to parents from whom they had been separated and who had initially named them. No matter how harsh a bondage they had endured, few freed slaves revealed any desire to obliterate their entire past or family heritage, and those whose given names or surnames reflected kinship ties tended to guard them zealously."
[—Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, 1979]

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"As Negroes…we are apt…to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events, the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults; yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable loves through which our names were handed down to us."

[—Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" in *Shadow and Act*, 1964]

1. Introduction

Experimental, audit, and quasi-experimental studies have found that those with racialized first names are negatively affected. Busse and Seraydarian (1977) find that distinctively African American names, names which are held so disproportionately by African Americans that the name itself is a strong signal of being an African American, are viewed negatively. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) find that those with distinctively African American names have lower call-back rates for employment interviews. Milkman et al. (2012) find that college professors are significantly less likely to meet with students with African American names to discuss graduate school. Figlio (2005) finds that teachers have lower *ex ante* expectations of children with distinctively African American names, even those that are not African American themselves, and that this is related to student outcomes and test scores. When recent analysis revealed racial disparities in National Institutes of Health grant awards researchers surmised that grant reviewers, who do not know the race of grant applicants, used first names to infer race (Ginther et al., 2011).

Given the unique social history of African Americans, it is remarkable that the historical development of racialized names has received little scholarly attention. The existing literature on racialized names is surprisingly ahistorical. Black names are assumed to be a modern phenomenon that first appeared with the Civil Rights Movement (Fryer and Levitt, 2004). There have been no studies which investigate the existence or persistence of racialized names in the past. London and Morgan (1994), for example, use census data from Mississippi in 1910 and argue that racial naming conventions did not exist, but their analysis is restricted to the most popular names overall. Even today, the most popular names (John, Michael, James, etc.) are not racially distinctive. Other than studies of the names of African American college students (Eagleson and Clifford, 1945) and reviews of other smaller and non-representative samples (Puckett, 1938, 1975; Gaither, 1920), we know of no study that makes a systematic attempt to identify African American naming patterns before the 1960s.[1] This paper documents the existence of distinctively African American first names long before the Civil Rights Era. Indeed, the pattern we uncover is a *national* naming pattern among African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To our knowledge, this is the first study to find distinct racial naming conventions in the past. No historical narrative evidence we are aware of even *suggests* that such a robust, national naming pattern would exist.

This work brings economic history back to a goal that was first noted in debates over the economics of slavery. As Fogel (1975b) described, the first and second phases of black economic history were concerned with the profitability and operation of the slave system. The third and final phase was the recovery of black history, particularly sociocultural aspects that form the basis for the distinction of African American culture in American history (Levine, 1978). Indeed, Fogel (1975b: 43–44) noted that the third phase "is an exercise in political economy in the fullest sense of the term. This is even more true for the postbellum era than for the antebellum era." The investigation of black naming patterns links to the studies of the black family, cultural development, and the postbellum development of African American identity.

Our work also expands the use of names in economic history. Recently, scholars have looked to first names and surnames as sources of economic information (Clark et al., 2014b). In particular, the distribution of surnames has been used to estimate rates of social mobility in populations as disparate as England and China over several centuries and has been used to analyze the persistence of elites (Clark et al., 2014a). First names have been used to study intergenerational mobility in the United States, with the advantage that names can track the social mobility of women (Olivetti and Paserman, 2013). While such studies exploit trends in name pattern dynamics, we derive a methodology which *uncovers* a name pattern that has escaped pervious documentation.

Documenting the existence of a racial naming pattern in the past is a significant, first-order contribution to American history and historiography; it reorients the discussion of the historical, social, economic and

[1] Other historical naming studies are focused on name adoption immediately after the Civil War or with parent–child naming practices (Litwack, 1979; Costa and Kahn, 2006; Gutman, 1976). These studies do not attempt to identify a naming pattern among African Americans nor the racial distinctiveness of any naming pattern.