

Distinctively Black Names in the American Past

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April 11, 2013

Motivation

- Names are rich with content, potentially containing information about race, family background and other characteristics
- Modern studies have found that distinctively black names are associated with negative outcomes
- We are exploring whether this modern phenomenon has historical roots
- Were there distinctively black names in the American past or did they arise with the Civil Rights Movement?
- If there were distinctively black names in the past, what were the consequences of those names?

Modern Distinctively Black Names

Experimental studies suggest a negative relationship between outcomes and black names:

- Black names lead to lower call-back rates for job interviews (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004)
- Professors are less likely to meet with black-named students (Milkman et al., 2012)
- Teachers have lower expectations of black-named children (Figlio, 2005)

Observational study results are more mixed:

- Controlling for socioeconomic indicators eliminates the effect of a black name (Fryer and Levitt, 2004)
- Names are increasingly unique which has its own stigma (Lieberson and Mikelson, 1995; Laham et al., 2012)

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Distinctively black names from Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004)

Name	L(B)/L(W)	Perception Black
Darnell	--	0.967
Hakim	--	0.933
Jamal	257	0.967
Jermaine	90.5	1
Kareem	--	0.967
Leroy	44.5	0.933
Rasheed	--	0.931
Tremayne	--	0.897
Tyrone	62.5	0.900

Fraction of all births: 3.1 percent

Modern Distinctively Black Names

- This literature on the consequences of distinctively black names is focused on modern decades
- Much of the attention is on black names emerging from the Civil Rights movement
- We want to broaden the scope of analysis and consider a much longer history of black names
- Were there distinctively black names in the past? Were they the same names?
- Were there long-term consequences to these names?

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Identifying Historical Black Names

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A general outline of our approach:

- 1 We use historical census data to identify names that are far more common for blacks than whites
- 2 We then use independent data sources (death records) to confirm that these names are distinctively black
- 3 The death records allow us to test for whether these names are linked to long-term outcomes
- 4 Finally, we identify determinants of these names to understand why they may be correlated with outcomes

Distinctively Black Names in the Federal Census

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Establishing a set of distinctively black names using the 1900 and 1920 federal censuses:

- 1 Start with a 10% sample of black household heads from D.C., Georgia, Michigan and New York (representing Upper South, Deep South, Midwest and Mid-Atlantic, respectively)
- 2 Identify high frequency first names (names appearing more frequently than the median frequency in all states)
- 3 Validate the names by searching for them in the entire federal census and seeing if search results are disproportionately black males

The result is a set of names that are disproportionately held by black males (but are not *unique*).

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Distinctively Black Names in the Federal Census

Share of all males with same first name who are African American

First Name	1900 Census	1920 Census
Abe/Abraham	37.50%	34.62%
Alonzo	14.64%	--
Ambrose	10.70%	8.44%
Booker	85.19%	99.51%
Elijah	28.81%	36.05%
Freeman	37.50%	25.00%
Isaac	19.68%	19.55%
Isaiah	45.56%	49.23%
Israel	15.35%	9.29%
King	57.08%	48.91%
Master	25.00%	31.28%
Moses	36.85%	38.98%
Percey	30.20%	23.40%
Perlie/Purlie/Pearlie	51.10%	80.00%
Presley/Presly	--	53.90%
Prince	78.05%	69.18%
Titus	32.93%	28.94%
Share of all men who are		
African American:	11.60%	9.90%

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Confirming Names in Death Certificates

- Historical census records are problematic when looking at the African American population
- This raises issues of selection bias when analyzing distinctively black names
- We need an independent source to validate names and measure other variables of interest
- Death records provide a compelling option

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Correlation of name death record disproportionality with census disproportionality

Census year	Alabama	Illinois	North Carolina
	1908-1959	1916-1947	1910-1970
1900	0.449	0.665	0.685
1920	0.216	0.627	0.553

Confirming Names in Death Certificates

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Disproportionality of distinctive names in death records (excluding infants)

	Alabama 1908-1959	Illinois 1916-1947	North Carolina 1910-1970
Share of all African American men with an African American name	2.17%	2.11%	2.68%
Share of all white men with an African American name	0.12%	0.79%	0.73%
Relative (black/white) likelihood of having an African American name	18.38	2.67	3.65

The Determinants and Consequences of Black Names

- So it seems that first names could signal race in the past
- While the distinctively black names represent a similar share of the total population as in modern times, the set of names is completely different
- Given that these names exist, the next natural question is whether they had consequences
- The death certificates offer a nice first test of whether the names are correlated with long-run outcomes

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Within-race correlation of African American names and length of life (coefficient on indicator for African American name)

Sample	Dependent variable (OLS estimates)			
	Lifespan	Log lifespan	Death by 10 lifespan	Death by 10 log lifespan
Alabama, 1908-1959	3.486 (0.555)	0.073 (0.013)	0.352 (0.109)	0.021 (0.054)
Illinois, 1916-1947	2.282 (0.569)	0.047 (0.013)	0.996 (0.208)	0.250 (0.101)
North Carolina, 1910-1970	0.926 (0.223)	0.126 (0.015)	0.108 (0.068)	0.046 (0.031)
Controls for county of birth:	yes	yes	yes	yes
Controls for county of death:	yes	yes	yes	yes

The Determinants and Consequences of Black Names

- Distinctively black names are highly correlated with longevity
- Identifying the mechanisms underlying this correlation requires understanding who receives a distinctively black name
- We've just begun to explore the correlates of the names
- Examples of some of the relationships we can get at with the death records:
 - Individuals with distinctively black names are more likely to have a father listed on the death certificate
 - Individuals from more highly segregated counties are more likely to have a distinctively black name

Concluding Remarks

- Distinctively black names are not strictly a modern phenomenon
- A similar percentage of African Americans had distinctively black names in the early 20th century
- However, those names were quite different
- Even more striking is that these distinctively black names were associated with *positive* long-term outcomes
- The task now is to piece together more evidence on the consequences of these names and the underlying mechanisms driving those consequences