

# Nickname Usage in an American High School

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## Abstract

In reply to a questionnaire, 114 boys and 149 girls in a suburban, public high school in the northeastern United States reported on their nicknames. Of the boys, 55% reported having nicknames; of the girls, 40%. The largest category for boys was variations or short forms of the surname, as Mort, for Moriarty. The next category was nicknames based upon physical characteristics, as Torch (for red hair) and Shorty. The remaining boys had nicknames of varied origins. For girls, physical characteristics ranked first, last name variations next. Thirteen percent of the boys and six percent of the girls did not know why they received their nicknames. A number of examples of nicknames in the different categories are given.

## Spitznamengebrauch in einer amerikanischen "High School"

In Antwort auf eine Umfrage berichteten 114 Jungen und 149 Mädchen über ihre Spitznamen. Fünfundfünfzig Prozent von den Jungen schrieben, dass sie Spitznamen hatten; von den Mädchen 40%. Die häufigste Art der Spitznamen für die Jungen war Veränderungen des Familiennamens. Auch häufig waren Spitznamen, die sich auf irgendwelche körperliche Eigenheiten bezogen (zB. Torch: Fackel, für rotes Haar; Shorty: für einen kleineren Jungen).

Unter den Mädchen waren körperliche Züge die häufigste Art. Familiennamenveränderungen waren an zweiter Stelle. 13% der Jungen und 6% der Mädchen wussten nicht warum ihnen die Spitznamen gegeben wurden. Mehrere Beispiele der Spitznamen werden unter den verschiedenen Kategorien angeführt.

Most of us know someone with a demeaning nickname — Wart, Cackle, Elephant, Squirt, or Fats. But not all nicknames are derogatory. A boy named "Speed" because of his swiftness afoot might well be proud of this appellation. Indeed the Greek philosopher, Aristocles, was nicknamed Plato (meaning broad) by one of his teachers, and it is by this nickname that we know him today.<sup>1</sup>

There is no general agreement on what constitutes a nickname.<sup>2</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup>R. Katz, *Psychologie des Vornamens*. Bern: Verlag Hans Huber, 1964.

<sup>2</sup>Compare, for example:

J. Franklyn, *A Dictionary of Nicknames*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962.

E. D. Lawson, "Men's First Names, Nicknames, and Short Names: A Semantic Differential Analysis," *Names*, 21(1973), pp. 22-27.

J. Morgan, C. O'Neill, and R. Harré, *Nicknames: Their Origins and Social Consequences*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

H. Van Buren, "The American Way with Names." In R. W. Brislin (Ed.), *Topics in Cultural Learning*, Vol. 2. Honolulu: East-West Center, Hawaii University, 1974. Pp. 67-86. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 097 256)

example, it is arguable whether short forms of first names and short forms of last names (e.g., Dog from Dogan) qualify.

For purposes of this research a nickname is considered to be a name given to a person in addition to his/her legal given names. However, accepted short forms of first names — Jim, Tom, Dick — and “ee” derivatives of first names — Jimmy, Tommy, Dicky — are *not* considered to be nicknames.

There has been a flurry of recent psychological research which attempts to understand the usage and effects of first names.<sup>3</sup> But nicknames, as defined above, have remained largely unstudied by American psychologists.<sup>4</sup>

It is the goal of this research to gain some insight into the role that nicknames play in the social life of American adolescents. In particular, this research attempts to clarify the kinds of nicknames being used, the extent of nickname usage, and the adolescents’ feelings about their own nicknames.

## METHOD

The entire senior class of a suburban high school in the Northeastern United States was given a questionnaire about nicknames. This school serves a substantially middle-class population, but includes a sizeable minority of students from blue collar families. Ten per cent of the students are Black. The questionnaire was completed by 114 boys and 149 girls. This sample was comprised of virtually all of the students who were present on the day of administration.

The students were asked if they had nicknames. If so, what they were? Why were they given these nicknames? Who used them? The students also rated their nicknames on a 1 to 9 scale with 1 being “Don’t like at all,” 5 representing “neutral,” and 9 representing “Like very much.” When a student gave two or more nicknames, only the one listed first is treated here.

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<sup>3</sup>For a summary of this research see: T. V. Busse, *The Professor’s Book of First Names*. Elkins Park, Pennsylvania: The Green Ball Press, 1983. (Available from P.O. Box 29771, Elkins Park, Pa. 19117)

<sup>4</sup>Two older American works exist: S. Habbe, “Nicknames of Adolescent Boys,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 7(1937), pp. 371–377; S. Z. Orgel and J. Tuckman, “Nicknames of Institutional Children,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 5(1935), pp. 276–285. There are, however, several more recent foreign works. See, for example: R. Katz, 1964; Morgan, O’Neill, and Harré, 1979; M. Seeman, “Names and Dream-Work,” *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 24(1979), pp. 243–246.

**Table 1**  
**The Origins of Boys' Nicknames**

N	Percent	Origin	Example
22	19%	Variation or short form of last name	Mort from Moriarty
9	8%	Physical characteristics	Torch ("Because I have red hair.")
3	3%	Initials	J.C. from first and last names
2	2%	Some connection with first name	Marko from Mark
2	2%	Sports ability	Night Train ("Because when I'm going in for a layup, I don't stop.")
2	2%	Indirect connection with last name	Tree from Pyne
1	1%	Clothes worn	Klopp from a name of jacket
1	1%	Sports figure	Cheesie ("Because I like Gerry Cheevers, the goalie for the Boston Bruins.")
1	1%	TV program character	Bodine from "Beverly Hillbillies"
1	1%	Musical ability	Johnny Lightning ("Because I play guitar and sing.")
1	1%	Newspaper cartoon figure	Zonker from Doonesbury cartoon strip ("Because my hair is similar to Zonker's")
1	1%	Name of previous school attended	Tucker from Tucker High School
1	1%	Father's first name	Little Richard ("Because I am like my father.")
1	1%	Personality or behavior	Turtle ("Because I walk slowly and casually.")
15	13%	No reason known to bearer of name	
51	45%	Do not have a nickname	
114	100%	Totals	

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fifty-five per cent of the boys and 40% of the girls reported having a nickname. In Tables 1 and 2 the origins of these nicknames as reported by the students can be perused. No less than 19% of the boys had nicknames based on variations or short forms of their last names. Eight per cent had nicknames derived from physical characteristics. The remaining boys possessed nicknames of varied origins. For girls the two chief sources of nicknames were reversed. Physical characteristics ranked first and accounted for 9%. Variations and short forms of last names were responsible for 5%. The other girls' nicknames were drawn from diverse sources. It is noteworthy that 13% of the boys and 6% of the girls do not know why they received their nicknames.

Table 2  
The Origins of Girls' Nicknames

<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>Example</i>
14	9%	Physical characteristics	Squirt ("Because I'm the youngest and the shortest.")
8	5%	Variation or short form of last name	Skee from Zaremski
6	4%	Initials	Tee from Tracy
5	3%	Personality or behavior	Dizzi ("Because of the things I do.")
5	3%	Some connection with first name	Katis from Katharine
4	3%	Nonsensical baby name	Baskoco ("Because when I was little they would ask me my name and I would say, 'Baskoco'.")
3	2%	TV program character	Charlie's Angel ("Because people say I look like Shelly Hack.")
2	1%	First and middle name	Beefy from Beth Ann
1	1%	Sports ability	Jenny Bug ("Because I liked to swim when I was younger.")
1	1%	Indirect connection with last name	Private Joke (rhymes with last name, Koch)
1	1%	Cooking ability	Dumb Italian ("Because I make good meatballs.")
1	1%	First, middle, and last name	(Nanny) Goat from Nancy Ann G.
9	6%	No reason known to bearer of name	
89	60%	Do not have a nickname	
149	100%	Totals	

The finding that 40% of the girls have nicknames is surprising in light of the comments of one English writer: Franklyn wrote in his *Dictionary of Nicknames* that nickname usage is predominantly masculine.<sup>5</sup> His work and that of Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré lead one to believe that nickname usage in England is quite different from that in America.<sup>6</sup>

How well are nicknames liked? Only 5% of the boys and 15% of the girls who possessed nicknames reported disliking them even to some degree, whereas 70% of the boys and 68% of the girls approved of their nicknames to at least a small extent. The remainder were indifferent.

The relationships between nickname origins and nickname like-dislike ratings were also examined. For example, do girls with nicknames based upon physical characteristics tend to especially like or especially dislike their nicknames? No relationship was discernible for either boys or girls.

The small percentages of students disliking their nicknames suggest that persons have substantial control over what they are called. Presumably a student who dislikes his or her nickname can control its usage by

<sup>5</sup>Franklyn, 1962. P. xvii.

<sup>6</sup>Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré, 1979.

refusing to answer to it. A bit of friendly persuasion should not hurt either. It can be expected that most unwanted nicknames will wither before passive but friendly resistance. However, if name bearers directly and forcefully attack unwanted nicknames, they may only provoke further use, particularly if competition or conflict exists between the name-giver and the name-recipient as, for example, between siblings.

Table 3 displays nicknames that were highly liked or disliked by the students in this study. The "liked" nicknames received a rating of 9 (Like very much) on the above-mentioned scale. The "disliked" nicknames received ratings which ranged from 1 (Don't like at all) to 3 (Don't like) on the same scale. It is easy to understand why some names merit the disliked category. Names such as Slyme for boys and Beefy or Burt for girls are unlikely to endear themselves to their afflicted possessors.

Table 3  
Nicknames Liked and Disliked by Those Who Bear Them

Liked Nicknames*	
<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
A. J.	A. V.
Bodine	Buzz
Cheesie	C. C. (Crazy Cat)
Clyde	Chicken
Gotz	Cricket
Pizon	Dee
Quack	Fergie
Seb	Frack
Sig	Goat
Squat	Nickerbockerbeets
Tone	Pecosa
Tucker	Shortcake
	Shorty
	Skee
	Squirt
	Tange
	Tee
	Whoopie
Disliked Nicknames@	
<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Leads	Beefy
Slyme	Burt
	Haaanegan
	Roxy
	Thatch

\*Given a top rating of 9 on the 1 to 9 scale.

@Rated 1, 2, or 3 on the scale.

On the other hand, it is surprising to find that boys like nicknames such as Quack and Squat, or that girls like Chicken, Goat, Shorty, Squirt, and Whoopie. But they do. Franklyn correctly analyzed this phenomenon two decades ago: "Many nicknames that sound to the polite ear offensive, even cruel, are not so intended, and the person who answers to them does not feel himself either insulted or hurt."<sup>7</sup> A nickname can be a sign of affection between friends, however repulsive it might be to others.

High variability characterized the use of these nicknames. One boy and six girls possessed nicknames that were used by only one other person. The boy's nickname (Sicgon) was used only by a single friend. Three girls' nicknames (Frack, Dumb Italian, and Skee) were also used only by a single friend, one (Peach) only by a boyfriend, "Jenny Bug" only by the mother, and "Big J" only by the father. On the other extreme, four boys and four girls possessed nicknames that were used by "everybody." The boys' nicknames were: A.J., Chip, Murph, and Point. The four girls were nicknamed: Cesa, Dee, Katis, and Tee.

Generally speaking, nickname usage patterns fitted one of three types: (1) those used only by friends and acquaintances, (2) those used only by family members, and (3) those used by family, friends, and acquaintances. The majority of nicknames were coined and used exclusively by friends and acquaintances. Of these, most were used by only a subsample of friends. Responses such as the "guys in the trumpet section," "mostly close, older friends," "softball friends," "some wrestlers," and "a few friends" exemplify such nickname usage patterns. Very few students reported nickname usage by teachers.

It is most interesting to contrast the opinions of Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré about American nicknaming practices with the present findings. These English authors in their book, *Nicknames*, have written: "We found that in America, at least in the north-east, mid-west and west, nicknames were rare or even unknown in the state school system, at all ages. Extensive enquiries in some twenty states failed to turn up evidence of any elaborated systems at all."<sup>8</sup> It is not clear what these "extensive enquiries" entailed, but it is apparent from the present findings that nicknaming practices are flourishing in at least one public, suburban high school in the American Northeast.

A small part of the discrepancy between the Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré statement and the present findings might be attributable to differences in nickname definitions. Without being completely explicit, Mor-

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<sup>7</sup>Franklyn, 1962. P. xvii.

<sup>8</sup>Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré, 1979, p. 48.

gan and coauthors reserve the term nickname for those “ ‘eke-names’ [extra names], which are invented mostly by a child’s own companions and classmates, a prisoner’s cellmates, and so on.” These authors directly exclude “pet names,” defined as names “invented by parents for very young children.”<sup>9</sup> It is likewise unclear to what extent the English authors view short forms and variations of last names as nicknames. But even omitting all possible pet names (none of the American boys, 3% of the American girls) and all short forms and variations of last names (19% of American boys, 5% of American girls), there still remains a substantial percentage of American students labeled with nicknames in the present sample.

It seems necessary to close with a call for more research on the American use of nicknames, since very little has yet been done. First, it would be highly desirable to isolate the effects that a nickname has on the formation of self concept. In particular, does the possession of a derogatory nickname result in a more negative self concept? Conversely, does a favorable nickname improve one’s self concept? Second, to what extent do certain types of persons attract undesired nicknames? For example, children with unusual physical characteristics would seem to be prime candidates. Third, the role that ethnic heritage plays in the nicknaming process needs to be examined. For example, Irish-American men were sometimes indiscriminately named Mick or Paddy; German-American women, Gretchen; and Italian-American men, Pizon (or Paisan, etc.). It is possible that such nicknames are used in attempts to identify and thereby facilitate control of social and/or cultural outsiders.

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<sup>9</sup>Morgan, O’Neill, and Harré, 1979, p. 31.