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Nicknames, Coal Miners and Group Solidarity

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Over 60 years ago H. L. Mencken in his classic work, *The American Language*, noted that nicknames were an important and deeply embedded cultural element in American society.[1] He even suggested that nicknames would make an exciting topic for a doctoral dissertation. Few individuals have followed his lead. Regardless of discipline, surprisingly little research has been reported in the literature concerning American nicknames.

The object of this report is to investigate the prevalence of nicknames among members of one occupational group, coal miners. It is suggested that the use of personal nicknames in coal mines has a special meaning and function which is related to the nature of the work situation.

For purposes of this report, a nickname is a name which is not derivative from a person's given name or a diminutive of it. It is a name which is substituted for, or used alternatively with a person's given name. "Buddy," "Sonny," and "Doc" are common nicknames given to American males. Under this definition, "Don" used instead of Donald, or "Brownie" instead of Brown does not qualify as nickname.

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[1] H.L. Mencken, *The American Language*, 4th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1980).

The former is a diminutive, and the latter is a derivative.

The term nickname is derived from the Middle English *ekename* based on the verb *ecan* meaning to add or augment. Nicknames, then, provide a richer and more explicit denotation.[2] Nicknames tell more about an individual than just the fact that he is Harold Jones. Sometimes they serve as thumbnail character sketches or illustrations of aspects of an individual's personality, physical appearance, or mannerisms.[3] For instance, the gangsters Alphonse Capone and Benjamin Siegal had the nicknames "Scar Face"[4] and "Bugsy"[5] respectively. In other instances, a nickname may serve as a capsule history of an individual by selecting and amplifying some incident in life which is of particular significance. For example, the jazz musician Edward Ellington as a young man received the nickname Duke because of his immaculate style of dressing.[6]

The little research that has been published indicates that nicknames may be more common during the school years than in adulthood, and more often used for males than females.[7] During their early school years, many American boys receive descriptive and often derogatory nicknames from their peer group such as "Fatty," "Tiny," "Luny," "Smarty," and so forth. In a study of one high school class, Busse found that nicknames were not uncommon at that age either. Fifty-five percent of the boys had nicknames and forty percent of the girls. He discovered, however, that usage was highly variable. In some cases a single person used the nickname, in others, family or friends, and in still others family, friends, and acquaintances. Most commonly, a segment

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[2] R. Harris, "What's In A Nickname?" *Ebony*, (July, 1979), 76-82.

[3] J. Morgan, *et al., Nicknames: Their Origins and Social Consequences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

[4] J. Mitchell, " Al Capone," *In America*, 1 (1982), 91-07.

[5] J. Hanna, *Bugsy Siegel* (New York: Belmont Tower Books, 1974).

[6] J. Collier, *The Making of Jazz* (New York: Dell, 1978).

[7] H. Van Buren, "The American Way With Names," In R.W. Brioslin, ed., *Topics in cultural learning*, vol. 2 (Honolulu: East-West Center, Hawaii University, 1974), 67-86; E. Smith, *The Story of Our Names* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1970).

of the peer group used the nickname.[8] In most cases these types of nicknames appear to be age-specific; that is, they are discarded by adulthood. All that remain are short names: Jim for James, Jack for John, Nan for Nancy, and so forth. Yet in studies of college students, both Dexter[9] and Lawson[10] not only discovered nicknames, but found they had social meanings which may affect behavior. Along this line Harré states that on occasion nicknames have had such a powerful influence on individuals that they have undertaken programs of self-reform to remove the stigma, while in other cases individual have spent years trying to live up to the characteristics of their nicknames.[11] Skipper found instances of feminine nicknames affecting the careers of baseball players.[12]

Several writers have suggested that people feel closer to individuals when they use nicknames for them even though they may not be acquainted with them personally.[13] Nicknames indicate intimacy. Skipper was able to demonstrate that nicknames known to the public for major league baseball players,[14] notorious criminals and deviants,[15]

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[8] T. Busse, "Nickname Usage in an American High School," *Names*, 31 (1983), 300-306.

[9] E. Dexter, "Three Items Related to Personality: Popularity, Nicknames, and Homesickness," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 30 (1949), 155-158.

[10] E. Lawson, "Men's First Names, Nicknames and Short Names: a Semantic Differential Analysis," *Names*, 21 (1973), 22-27.

[11] R. Harré, "What's In A Nickname," *Psychology Today*, 31 (January, 1980), 78-79, 81-84.

[12] J. Skipper, "Feminine Nicknames; 'Oh You Kid,' From Minnie to Tilly to Sis," *Baseball Research Journal*, 11 (1982), 92-96.

[13] S. Grosshandler, "Where Have Those Grand Old Nicknames Gone?" *Baseball Research Journal*, 7 (1978), 61-63; D. Schlossberg, *The Baseball Catalog* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, 1980); R. Blount, "Games," *Esquire*, 87 (1977), 46-47.

[14] J. Skipper, "The Sociological Significance of Nicknames: The Case of Baseball Players," *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 7 (1984), 28-38.

[15] J. Skipper, "Nicknames of Notorious American Twentieth Century Deviants: The Decline of the Folk Hero Syndrome," *Deviant Behavior*, 6 (1985), 99-114.

and jazz musicians,[16] have declined steadily since the end of World War II. The reason is that there has been a loss in the degree of the public's feelings of identification, closeness, and intimacy, either positively or negatively, with individuals in these occupations. The decline parallels the more general process of transition of American society from a *gemeinschaft* model characterized by a sense of solidarity, a common identity rooted in tradition and personal relationships, to a *gelsellschaft* type in which individualism, mobility, and impersonality are common features.

While this exhausts the little empirical research which has been reported on the use of American personal nicknames, Harré has suggested that nicknames may be more prevalent in closed circles of friendship, secret societies, and other tightly-knit groups. One of the functions of nicknames is to demonstrate the exclusiveness and separateness of the group. Individuals, through their knowledge and use of nicknames, unknown to outsiders, demonstrate their membership in the group. In sociological terms, nicknames help build and are symbols of solidarity among group members. One might hypothesize that the greater the need for solidarity in a group, the more likely the use of nicknames. Groups which face an external threat to the group itself, or to its individual members, and which can best maintain the existence of the group and the safety of its members through a cooperative effort, are likely to have a high degree of solidarity. If they don't, they are not likely to last long. Military combat units are an example. If this line of reasoning is correct, one would expect to find nickname usage to be high in such groups.

A civilian occupation which seems to meet these criteria is coal mining. The work of coal mining is quite different from that of most occupations. It is an entirely different world hundreds of feet below the surface of the earth. Miners are completely cut off from the life above. They face many dangers while working in cramped space sometimes less than three feet high. Light, of course, is usually dim. The threat of cave-ins, gas explosions, and flooding is always present. Even working with heavy equipment powered by electricity can be a hazard underground as is the ever present rock and coal dust. To accomplish their

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[16] J. Skipper, "Nicknames of Folk Heroes and Jazz Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* (In Press).

task of extracting coal, as well as to protect themselves, members must act as a cohesive work group. Mining coal safely requires a cooperative team effort, especially from each work group unit.[17] Each individual unit commands its own loyalty from its members and develops group work expectations for behavior. In this milieu individualism breeds danger, and is strongly discouraged. Under such conditions, solidarity at the work unit level is high among coal miners,[18] and it might be predicted that the use of nicknames would be high. This, then, is the point of departure for the research.

Procedure

As part of another project concerned with the mental health of coal miners, contact was made with 45 miners and informal interviews conducted. Of the 45, six men refused to discuss nicknames. Six of the remaining 39 were women. All respondents were Caucasian. They ranged in age from 19 to 56, with 25, 64%, between 21 and 30. Twenty, or 51%, claimed to have at least a high school education. All but one had worked in the mines for at least 18 months. Six separate mines were represented. Four were located in West Virginia and two in Southwest Virginia. All were members of work groups whose job was to extract coal. Several of the respondents were acquainted with each other. With the exception of the six men who chose not to talk about nicknames, the miners were cooperative and the interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of congeniality. Often, the conversation strayed to other aspects of coal mining behavior. Each respondent was asked if he or she had a nickname used in the mines, why they were nicknamed

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[17] M. Wardell, *et al.*, "Underground Coal Mining and the Labor Process: Safety at the Coal Face," in C. Bryant, *et al., The Rural Work Force: Non-Agricultural Occupations in America* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Pubs., 1985), 43-58.

[18] For an extended discussion of these points, see R. Althouse, *Work Safety, and Life Style Among Southern Appalachian Coal Miners* (Morgantown: West Virginia University, 1974); I Janis, "Group Identification under Conditions of Extreme Danger," in D. Cartwright and A. Zander, eds., *Group Dynamics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 80-90; C. Vaught and D. Smith, "Incorporation and Mechanical Solidarity in an Underground Coal Mine," *Sociology of Work and Occupations,* 7 (1980), 159-187.

Table 1. Nicknames of Coal Miners

SEX	NICKNAME IN MINE	NICKNAME CHARACTERISTIC	ORIGIN OF NICKNAME	ATTITUDE TOWARD NICKNAME	ESTIMATED % OF NICKNAMES IN GROUP	NICKNAME OUT SIDE OF MINE
F	Big 'un	Physical	Alleged size of vagina	Hate	75%	-
F	Flat Chest	Physical	Small size of breasts	Don't mind	100%	-
F	Sloppy Seconds	Behavioral	Loose sexual morals	Dislike	All	Bunny
F	Preacher Woman	Behavioral	Always trying to stop pranks	Like	100%	-
F	Red Cheeks	Physical	Buttocks were red when pants were stripped during prank	Don't care	Almost everyone	-
F	Pointer	Physical	Buttocks seem to come to point when bent over	OK	60%	-
M	Pot Head	Behavioral	Always using joints	OK	100%	Bud
M	Brute	Physical	Big and strong	Like	100%	Tiny
M	Flash	Behavioral	Once caught showing penis to woman	OK	Never thought about it	-
M	Pussy	Behavioral	Kidded about not being able to have sexual relations with women "can't get none"	Dislike	50%	-
M	Duck Butter	Behavioral	Accused of masturbation in mine	Hate not true	80%	-
M	Bubble Eye	Physical	Has large wide eyes	Like	Every one	-
M	Doc	Behavioral	Always taking pills	Like	90%	Doc

Table 1 (continued)

SEX	NICKNAME IN MINE	NICKNAME CHARACTERISTIC	ORIGIN OF NICKNAME	ATTITUDE TOWARD NICKNAME	ESTIMATED % of NICKNAMES IN GROUP	NICKNAME OUTSIDE OF MINE
M	Pecker Tracks	Behavioral	Leaves spots on pants after urinating	Don't mind	could not say	-
M	Willy Wampus	Behavioral	Talks very slowly	Don't care	100%	-
M	Ground Hog	Behavioral	Digs very rapidly with hands	Like	100%	-
M	Nose Job	Physical	Has long pointed nose	Like	60%	-
M	Cock Man	Physical	Large penis	Like	All	Buddy
M	Pop Eye	Behavioral	Always complaining - Popping off	Like	Half	-
M	-	Behavioral	Called Fred for Frederic	-	Just a few	Sonny
M	Donald Duck	Behavioral	Always talking - Quack Quack	Like	75%	-
M	Bloody John	Physical	Once had blood in urine and screamed	Don't mind	50%	Brownie
M	Pot Hang	Physical	Has large stomach	Like	100%	-
M	-	-	Called Jimmie for James	-	75%	-
M	Uncle Droop	Physical	Has long penis that droops	Like	All have names	-
M	J. Jack Off	-	Don't know	OK	Could not say	Mac
M	Ruby Red	Physical	Color of penis	Like	75%	-
M	Tim	Physical	Looks like someone else	Like	50%	-

Table 1 (continued)

SEX	NICKNAME IN MINE	NICKNAME CHARACTERISTIC	ORIGIN OF NICKNAME	ATTITUDE TOWARD NICKNAME	ESTIMATED % OF NICKNAMES IN GROUP	NICKNAME OUTSIDE OF MINE
M	Big Balls	Behavioral	Tells bosses off	Like	Everybody	"
M	Kidnapped	Behavioral	Often got lost when first entered mines	Like	100%	"
M	-	"	"	"	none	"
M	-	"	Called Billy for William	"	50%	"
M	Kermit	Physical	Looks like Kermit the Frog	OK	60%	-
M	Baby Don	Behavioral	Always complaining	Fine	75%	-
M	Sonny	Physical	Looks very young	Like	75%	-
M	Pops	Physical	Worked in mines for a long time	Like	90%	-
M	-	-	Called Barn for Bernard		75%	-
M	Jack Red	-	Don't know	Dislike	75%	Spit
M	-	-	Called Jack for John	-	Don't know	-

M Refused to give information

M Refused to give information

M Refused to give information

M Refused to give information

M Refused to give information

M Refused to give information

that, whether they liked or disliked the nickname, what percentage of their work group they thought had nicknames, and if they had a nickname outside the mines. These data are summarized in Table I.

Findings

Of the 39 miners, 33, or 84.6%, reported they had a nickname used by others while working in the mines. All the women had nicknames and 81.8% of the men. Sixteen, or 48.5%, of the nicknames were based on physical characteristics, 15, or 45.5%, on behavioral characteristics, and two were of unknown origin. Four of the women's nicknames were derived from physical characteristics compared to 44.4% of the men. Over half, 54.5%, of the miners professed to liking their nicknames, 15.2% disliked them, and 30.3% were neutral about them. Only one of the women liked her nickname compared to 63% of the men. Two of the women disliked their nickname and just over one-quarter of the men, 25.9%, had negative feelings toward theirs. Almost two-thirds of the miners, or 64.1%, estimated that at least three-quarters of the members of their work groups had nicknames. Eight, 20.5%, of the respondents estimated the percentage of their work group members with nicknames ranged from 50% to 67%. One miner stated that no one in his work group had a nickname; another said "just a few" and four others "did not know." Generally, the miners who did not have nicknames gave lower estimates for the percentage of their work group with nicknames than the miners with nicknames. The women's estimates of the percentage of nicknames in their work groupd was just slightly higher than the men's estimates. Nine, 23% of the miners, 24.2% of the men, and one of the women had nicknames which were used outside of the mines. In only one case was the nickname used in the mines ("Doc") the same as the nickname outside the mines.

The nicknames may be classified as to their positive or negative connotations. Conservatively only nine ("Preacher Woman," "Brute," "Doc," "Ground Hog," "Donald Duck," "Tim," "Kermit," "Sonny" and "Pops") might be considered to have positive or neutral connotations. Thus 24, or 72.7%, of the nicknames have definite negative connotations.

The nicknames may also be classified as to whether they have sexual connotations or not. Fifteen, or 45.5%, of the nicknames have sexual

reference. They are "Big 'un," "Flat Chest," "Sloppy Seconds," "Red Cheeks," "Pointer," "Flash," "Pussy," "Duck Butter," "Pecker Tracks," "Cockman," "Uncle Droop," "J.Jack Off," "Ruby Head," "Big Balls," and "Jack Rod." Five of the six women's nicknames had sexual connotations compared to only slightly over a third of the men's nicknames.

Discussion

The sample of respondents from which the data of this report are derived is too small and too restrictive to make any definitive generalizations about the use of nicknames among coal miners, let alone any larger population. However, given the paucity of our knowledge of personal nicknames in American society, the data are useful in suggesting a number of hypotheses worthy of further investigation and research.

Although not all coal miners have nicknames, and the prevalence may vary from work group to work group, the use of nicknames in coal mines appears to be common practice. Most of the miners were acutely aware of their own nickname and its derivation. Their willingness to talk about it to an outsider even though many of the nicknames had negative or sexual connotations is significant. It is an indication of how the nicknames are symbols of the integration and solidarity of the work group. The coal miners wear them like a badge of membership. As one respondent put it: "It shows you belong and others know it." Another stated: "Only other miners know your nickname and what it stands for. Outsiders wouldn't understand." A third commented: "I did not feel I was a miner until they got a name for me." Note that the vast majority of miners stated that they liked or accepted their nicknames even though many of them were far from complimentary.

It is safe to say that in most instances and in most groups nicknames, such as "Flat Chest," "Big Balls," "J.Jack Off," and "Pecker Tracks," would be objected to strongly by recipients. In fact, even one male coal miner mentioned, "I would not take kindly to being called 'Pussy' on the street." This of course does not occur, since the nicknames are not used outside the mines. In this respect they are occupation-situation specific. Only miners know the nicknames, and the miners do not use them outside the mines. This can result in awkward situations. Since the miners often do not know the given names of other miners, they find it difficult to introduce them to family or friends should

they by chance meet outside of the mines. As one female miner put it, "How can I say to my mother 'I would like you to meet my friend Ding Dong'"?

In the mines *being nicknamed* becomes more important than what the nickname may have originally designated. In other words, over time the negative implications of the nickname loses its meaning and the nickname becomes more a symbol of acceptance and group membership.[19] This is true even though the coal miners themselves are quite aware of how they received their nicknames.[20] This is probably due to the traumatic circumstances of the nicknaming process. Most of the coal miners interviewed received their nicknames shortly after they started mining in what may be called an initiation or rite of passage. An integral part of initiation involves involuntarily forcing the neophyte to expose his or her genitals for inspection, and subjecting them to such pranks as judgment contests or "greasing" ceremonies. (Greasing consists of applying grease to the genitals and then sprinkling them with rock dust.[21]) Such incidents account for at least some of the nicknames with sexual connotations. Women who choose to work in the coal mines face the same initiation procedures as the men do. As degrading as they are at the time, their effects fade rapidly as the new miner becomes integrated into the work unit and becomes an active participant in future initiations. It is the nickname that lives on.

Approximately one-quarter, 23%, of the miners had nicknames outside the mines. Unfortunately, there are no available data to indicate whether this percentage is higher, lower, or the same as the general population. It does, however, indicate that nicknames are in use for at least one type of adult population. Furthermore, the data suggest that a higher percentage of males than females may be nicknamed outside the mines. In the coal mines exactly the reverse is true. All of the women had nicknames compared to just over 80% of the men. There may

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[19] This phenomenon is not unique to coal miners; it probably occurs in many other group contexts.

[20] This is not always true with nicknames. Sometimes a recipient is not sure or cannot recall the origin of the nickname. For the case of the famous baseball player George Herman "Babe" Ruth, see J. Skipper, "Baseball Babes: Ruth and Others," *Baseball Research Journal*, 13 (1984), 24-26.

[21] For a vivid description of these procedures, see Vaught and Smith, 163-173.

be a special reason for this. Women working in coal mines are a relatively new phenomenon.[22] They are still a tiny minority and are the subject of hostility and resentment in what was once an all male occupational work environment. Note that five out of the six females have nicknames with negative sexual connotations. Note also that only one of these women reported that she liked her nickname. This is probably not due to chance. The nicknaming is done by males as the nicknames suggest. A woman, for example, is not likely to nickname another woman "Sloppy Seconds." What is occurring, is that men are making it clear that if women are going to work in coal mines, women are going to have to abide by the time honored traditions of a male work group. Nicknames are an important part of that tradition. And this tradition has a significant function in inducing and symbolizing the solidarity of the work group so necessary for both production and survival in the coal mines.

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[22] With rare exceptions, women did not begin to work in coal mines before the 1970s. As late as 1978 less than 2% of coal miners were female (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, *Employment analysis report. ee o-1 Report Summary of Nationwide Industries [Bituminous Coal and Lignite Mining]*), 1979.