

Anti-Racist Language

The following represents comments on the usage of terms by social scientists when referring to work based around ethnicity. It is by no means an exhaustive list, nor a definitive guide. As social scientists should be aware, language is not only powerful as it structures and reinforces beliefs and prejudices, but it is also dynamic. As such, it must be recognised that these and other terms will re-emerge, be revised or disappear at a faster rate than the guidelines may be published.

African-Caribbean

This term is gradually replacing the term Afro-Caribbean to refer to Caribbean peoples and those of Caribbean origin who are of African descent. It should also be noted that there is now some evidence to suggest that the term should not be hyphenated and that indeed, the differences between such groups may mean the terms should be kept separate.

Afro-Caribbean

In Britain, this is a term often used by black West Indians. It is a term associated with a commitment to anti-racism. Afro/Caribbean is preferred to Afro-Caribbean.

American

When referring to America, it is important to be aware of the fact that there is a North America and a South America – not just the USA. Consequently when referring to the USA it is best to be explicit about this.

Asian

Refers to people from the Asian sub-continent – namely India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir, often as ethnic minorities in Britain. However, under some circumstances there may be objections to bracketing together a wide variety of different cultural and ethnic groups with very different positions within British society. Also, some members of particular ethnic groups may object to being referred to by their 'country of origin' when they have been living for several generations in Britain.

Black

This term is often used to refer to a variety of non-white groups. The term has taken on more political connotations with the rise of black activism in the USA since the 1960's and now its usage implies solidarity against racism. The idea of 'black' has thus been reclaimed as a source of pride and identity.

To accept this means that we should be sensitive to the many negative connotations relating to the word 'black' in the English language (black leg, black-list etc).

Some Asians in Britain object to the use of the word 'black' being applied to them and some would argue that it also confused a number of ethnic groups which should be treated separately – Pakistani's, Bangladeshi's, Indian's and so on.

Whilst there are many differences between and within each of the groups, the inclusive term black refers to those who have a shared history of European colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, ethnocentrism and racism. One solution to this is to refer to "black peoples", "black communities" etc in the plural to imply that there is a variety of such groups.

Black is a concept that embraces people who experience structural and institutional discrimination because of their skin colour and is often used politically to refer to people of African, Caribbean and South Asian origin.

It is also important to be aware of the fact that in some contexts "black" can also be used in a racist sense. The capitalisation of the letter "B" in the term "Black British", "British Asian" are shifting ground and it should be stressed that there is a need to be very clear that the use of these terms does not prioritise nor indeed conflate ethnicity and citizenship.

British

Many would argue that one way to denote minority ethnics in this country would be to describe them as 'British Asians', 'Chinese British' etc. One advantage is that by referring to two ethnicity's it avoids any suggestion that a person has to choose between them for their identity. However, the idea of 'British' also implies a false sense of unity. Many Scots, Welsh and Irish resist being identified as British and the territory denoted by the term contains a wide variety of cultures, languages and religions.

Civilised/Civilisation

This term derives from a colonialist perception of the world. It is often associated with the social Darwinist thought and is full of implicit value judgements and ignorance of Third World history. However, in some cases, such as the work of Norbert Elias, civilisation takes on a different meaning without racist overtones. This term can still carry racist overtones which derive from a colonialist perception of the world.

Classifications

The Commission for Racial Equality have produced a list of 'ethnic classifications' for the use of employers and other collecting information for the purpose of Equal Opportunities policies and this is compatible with that used for the 1991 Census. However, they recognise that no single classification system will be relevant to all contexts. The general classification list is as follows:

White
Black – Caribbean
Black – African
Black – Other (please specify)
Indian
Pakistani
Bangladeshi
Chinese
Other (please describe)

These classifications are a confused mixture of skin colour and geographic regions designation. Many people living in particular geographic regions not having the designated skin colour (ie Black or White) are excluded or have to locate themselves in the Other category or the region of their ethnic descent.

There are also real issues with the lack of definition over the term "white", which clearly needs to be expanded and also made clear that there are problems when accounting for people of mixed heritage and the "other" category becomes an amalgam of people who do not feel they fit anywhere.

Coloured

At one time this was considered an acceptable term to use in the USA. However, since the 1960's and the rise of black activism in the USA, this term is seen as offensive to many black people. This term is regarded as outdated in the UK and should be avoided as it is generally viewed as offensive to many black people. When applied to South Africa, the term reflects issues of ethnic divide and apartheid, and needs to be contextualised and used with specificity.

In the United States of America, the term "people of colour" is often used as a form of self-reference for people who suffer from racism and discrimination on the basis of visible skin colour difference to the white Anglo-Saxon (WASP) political majority population.

Developing Nations

This is another term used to refer to Third World or Southern countries. However, it can be seen as prejudicial since there is an implicit comparison with 'developed' countries.

Diaspora(s)

(diasporic- adj) In its contemporary use it refers to colonial and now post-colonial peoples who have been dislocated and scattered to other lands from their countries of origin through the process of voluntary and involuntary migration.

Now settled for many generations in other countries, people of the (black) Diaspora bring with them their own history and cultural experiences from which new (hybrid) group and individual subjectives emerge.

It must also be remembered that the migratory process can occur more than once in the same persons lifetime, and that there needs to be a concept of multiple migratory processes and diasporizations.

Essentialism

Refers to the belief in the real true essence of things. It emanates from the assumption that things, such as different “races” and sexes have transhistorical, immutable, invariable properties which are fixed in nature (see Race).

Anti essentialism is the counter debate which rejects this philosophy of pre-existent human essences, and instead asserts a constructionist notion of social, physical and historical “difference” in understanding the human subject.

Ethnic

Refers to cultural groups of various kinds. Although it is often erroneously used to refer to Black communities only, all people have ethnicity so that white people are also part of particular ethnic groups. To avoid this confusion, it is best to spell out the relevant ethnic groups explicitly, where this is appropriate depends upon the context.

The extent to which a classification of different ethnic groups is appropriate depends upon the context. In some London boroughs for example, it may be more appropriate to distinguish a number of distinct ethnic groups whereas in other area of Britain this may not be so appropriate. (See also the discussion under ‘minorities’).

Ethnocentric

This means a tendency to perceive the world from the point of view of ones own culture. Ethnocentrism can lead to racism when applied to issues of race.

Half-Caste

A dated term that confuses caste with race and is best avoided.

Host Society

Not a helpful term in many cases since former in-migrants soon become part of a host society. It also implies a false sense of unity in the 'host' society and conveys a sense of in-comers as being somehow alien. It is preferable to talk of a society receiving migrants.

Hybridity

See "Mixed Race" and "Diaspora".

Immigrants

Under some circumstances people could correctly be described as immigrants – if they are in-migrants from one place to another. However this is not a useful term for referring to ethnic groups which have been in Britain since the early post-war period in the British context has racist overtones, being associated with immigration legislation.

Indian

In the US context this word is often used to refer to indigenous Americans. However, the term is associated with racism and is also confusing since it also describes people from India. For indigenous Americans use Native American instead.

Indigenous

Under some circumstances this can be used to describe particular ethnic groups originating and remaining in a particular region. The United Nations uses the idea of "indigenous groups" to obtain rights for North American Indians, Aborigines and other groups whose situation has suffered from invading colonists. However, in the British context it is not a helpful term since it would be difficult to identify the indigenous British in this sense.

Minorities

Some prefer 'ethnic minorities' although others suggests that this implies that the majority are not ethnic as well and hence recommend the use of the term 'minorities'. An alternative suggestion is that of 'minority ethnics' which avoids this problem. It is also worth noting that groups traditionally defined as ethnic minorities here in the UK are not a minority in Europe nor the world.

Within a US context it is important to take into account the fact that US sociologists use the term not in a numerical sense but in a power sense. This makes it possible to refer to a numerical majority as a minority if they have minimal power.

Minority Ethnic

Minority ethnic is preferred to ethnic minority as everyone belongs to an ethnic group. Minority ethnic places the emphasis on the minority status rather than the ethnicity whereas ethnic minority places the emphasis on the minority status of the group.

Mixed-Cultural

This is thought by some to be a neutral way of describing the variety of ethnic cultures and peoples in Britain. However, others object to this term on the grounds that it assumes that they are all equal rather than that some are dominated by the racism of others.

Mixed Race

Sometimes used to refer to people with more than one racial origin. However, this is a misleading term since it implies that a “pure race” exists. This term, like its alternatives “mixed parentage”, “dual heritage” or metis (se) metis (masculine): metisse (feminine), refers to people who are visibly identified as embodying two or more worldviews.

It should be recognised that these terms are bounded by the limited concepts and language of a racial discourse that privileges the notion of essential races. There is a need to establish a new vocabulary away from the highly contentious notion of “race”.

The mixing of “races” or the mixing of cultures defined by racial difference, which the current terminology allures to, explains the use of quotation marks. While terms such as mixed parentage still implies that there is a pure race, in these times of global shifts and diasporic movements it is important to recognise the emerging identity of people who call themselves “mixed race”/metis (se).

Often described in terms of hybridity, borderlands, shifting boundaries and multiplicity, such emerging identities produce new cultural spaces which mark post-modern times. (See also Diaspora).

Multi-Cultural

This is thought by some to be a neutral way of describing the variety of ethnic cultures and peoples in Britain. However, others object to this term on the grounds that it assumes that they are all equal rather than that some are dominated by the racism of others.

Native

Native-born is an acceptable term if used to refer to people born in a particular place. Otherwise it has strong colonialist connotations.

Negro/Negress

A rather dated term which now tends to have racist overtones. African American is the preferred term in the US nowadays.

Non-Industrial

An alternative way of referring to Third World countries, but in fact there are very few non-industrial countries and this terminology is quite outdated.

Non White

This may be acceptable where one wishes to refer to, say whites and non-whites. However, continual reference to non-whites could be perceived as racist. With frequent allusion it would therefore be better to use terms like black peoples, British Asians etc since some black groups would rather be identified in their own right than by reference to whites.

Overseas

Some people argue that this is a neutral term. However, most feel that this is a pejorative term since it refers to Britain's former overseas possessions. Also it is rather vague – French people are from overseas as are those from Jersey and the Isle of Man. As in the majority of terms being discussed here, what is key is contextualization which avoids the possession element that this term may imply.

Pagan

A rather derogatory term used to describe the beliefs and religion of non-Christian peoples. The term has racist overtones.

Primitive

This has derogatory overtones and implies an ignorance of the nature of many people from non-industrial countries.

Race

Originally associated with social Darwinism & eugenics and therefore highly pejorative. In a biological sense the word is unhelpful since it does not describe the variety of ethnic groups which sociologists would normally wish to identify. Some have felt that it is necessary to put the word into inverted commas in order to make it clear that these are social distinctions being referred to rather than biological ones and in order to distance themselves from the original meaning of the term.

In the nineteenth century, the concept of “race” was used to argue that there were distinct physical and genetic differences between groups that constituted humankind. It was suggested that these “fixed” biological “differences” were “natural” and evident in skin colour, head shape, facial features, hair type and physique. This led scientists to assert that there was a racial typology with a hierarchy of “races”, and that certain “races” were innately superior to others. The lack of scientific evidence for a racial typology led to such theories being discredited.

In contemporary times “race” is seen as a dynamic social, historical and variable category which is constantly recreated and modified through human interaction. Social attitudes to “race” vary as a way of making sense of the world and experiences.

Racism

An ideology, structure and process in which inequalities inherent in the wider social structure are related in a deterministic way to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different “race” or ethnic group.

Racism is created and reproduced out of a complex set of circumstances. A variety of attitudes, practices and types of behaviour which may not necessarily be overt or intentional but which serve to discriminate against or to marginalise people judged to be of another “race”.

The New Racism

This is premised on the notion of cultural difference and cultural incompatibility. In the discourse of the new racism customary practices including speech, domestic life and worship are taken to be signs of coextensive difference.

Despite the discrediting of “fixed” biological differences between “racial” groups, this particular notion continues to underpin the new racism, with culture serving as a euphemism for “race”. This can be seen in the way that ethnicity is treated as fixed and mutually exclusive. These presumed “fixed” cultural differences are accordingly paraded in public arenas as constituting real grounds for cultural incompatibility. Such common-sense understandings have a tendency to prevent people from recognising cultural similarities. The new racism implies that there is a unified white nation state who participate in a shared British culture, history and identity and who have a common sense of belonging. Those who believe in the new racism argue that there is need to protect the British nation and the national culture from those who are presumed to pose a threat to its existence. Such people have the distinctive feature of being black.

Black groups whether born in Britain or not are not viewed as part of the nation state and as such their alien cultures are thought to pose a threat to its existence. It is against this threat that the majority group identify and unite. This is the frame of reference through which majority ethnic groups make sense of their own identities and the identities of those designated other. The new racism sees alien (Black) cultures as posing a threat to the national way of life.

Third World

This has become the term used to refer to countries outside the ‘old world’ (Europe) and the ‘new world’ (USA, Australia etc). This usually implicitly means poor and developing nations. However, some feel that this puts together too many diverse nations and cultures and that it can be prejudicial under some circumstances. North/South may be a better alternative.

Tribe

A rather Victorian term for referring to non-western ethnic groups. It has derogatory and racist overtones.

Visible Minority

A term deriving from the USA to describe particular groups who, because they are visually distinctive from the majority white groups, have little political power.

West Indian

This term is used to refer to people from the West Indian territories, a region which is highly culturally diverse. It has generally been replaced by “African Caribbean” when referring to people of African descent. However, caution must be applied in using this term as it also homogenises distinct groups of Black people.

Whiteness

Whiteness refers to white consciousness – the “silent”, pervasive, cultural norm that informs and shapes our racial ideology. Whiteness is constructed as a formless, empty cultural space that is neutral, natural and normative.

Whiteness, because it is an unnamed, hegemonic position of privilege and power, becomes the point of reference for measuring others, unlike “blackness” which has been named in the language of white signification. Whiteness has defied scrutiny as it does not seem like a culture as everyone is apparently the same.

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