DIVERSITY

The Evolving Language of Diversity

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"Language not only expresses ideas and concepts but actually shapes thought."

Robert B. Moore in *Racism in the English Language*[1]

This fact sheet explores the evolving language used to describe and define people as members of groups. We all know that there are still people who intentionally express bias and prejudice when speaking about members of groups; however, we can assume that most people want to use the most respectful terms. Since we have inherited a system that routinely perpetuates prejudicial attitudes and beliefs about groups, we often hear well-intentioned people unconsciously reinforcing those beliefs through their use of words. At a recent workshop that I was facilitating, I heard several participants who saw themselves as enlightened on issues of difference still using terms like "girl" when describing a woman in a support staff position in their agency. At a meeting of change agents working on organizational change, I heard the term "sexual preference" used when referring to a gay man. The more we take responsibility for unlearning misinformation we learned about others, the more our language will reveal this change in attitude.

Although we know that the cycle of oppression is universal, for simplification the discussion and examples in this fact sheet are based only within a U. S. context. In addition, it can be assumed that we all have more to learn about language and that we all will ultimately benefit from the change. In the past, the discussion of diversity in the United States often focused on only one or two identities—mostly gender and race. This left people seeing themselves as either completely dominant or completely excluded. By looking broader—thus, at multiple identities that include age, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and immigrant status—we come to see ourselves in many identities and recognize that all of us have identities that are both dominant and excluded. For example, I am a white heterosexual woman, raised in a working class family with Italian ancestry. In my white, heterosexual dominant identities, I can learn to use language that empowers people of color and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as they also work to empower me in my ethnic, gender, and class identities.

Because language is evolving, speaking in a respectful way about groups in the United States can be as unnatural as learning to drive a standard shift car with a clutch. At first it feels cumbersome and exhausting in the amount of mental energy it takes to think about each motion needed to prevent the car from jerking and stalling. After years of driving a stick shift, this effort becomes almost invisible. No one was born knowing how to drive and no one was born knowing how to name every group and the process for figuring it out. Therefore, any blame or guilt associated with not knowing needs to be avoided. We learned to speak in the context of a society that has been divided for a very long time. To break divisions and create a more harmonious future, we are being asked to unlearn and relearn all the time. It is work for all of us, but with time, the process will feel as natural as driving a standard shift car: we will feel more at ease trying new terms, asking questions comfortably, and not letting mistakes interfere with our willingness to build relationships across differences.

After years of working on issues of difference, I have learned that one consistent way for facilitating change is to encourage and create safe spaces for the conversations about difference to occur. This requires language and word "tools." We need to know how to name what is all around us and to do it in ways that will keep everyone involved. Having an understanding of the overall dynamics of a dominator society with a history of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, adultism, etc. allows us to engage each other in what to do about it. Using words that describe groups more accurately is a part of this process. The biggest challenge is how to bring members of dominant groups into the conversation and the solution.[2] Our tendency is to be "swallowed up in a sea of guilt and blame or rush into denial and angry self defense."[3] Instead, I challenge the reader to stay present and breathe deeply and know that if the people who came before us had this knowledge, they would have used it, and we would have less unlearning to do. What a gift we can give to the next generation.

This fact sheet is not intended to cover the breadth of terms that are in current use and evolving. It instead presents a foundational way of thinking about language with some examples from some group identities. Early in the fact sheet there is an extensive section on race/ethnicity and origin with illustrations that can be applied in a broad sense to the section on other identities that is less extensive. There is ample literature on terminology for each of these groups that goes into greater depth, and I invite the reader to investigate further as your curiosity is sparked by something you read here. It is a good tool for use by those who are

eager to create relationships across differences, are conscious about the importance of the words used, and want a quick introduction into a vast topic.

Don't get too comfortable

All language evolves. Language changes with time to reflect society, and the language of diversity must also evolve. Therefore, the language of diversity is dynamic—it changes as groups who have been excluded learn to reject rejection and act from an empowered place of self-determination. For example, terms to describe people of African descent in the United States have been colored, Negro, black, Afro-American, and African American. Some of these terms reflect this evolutionary process of naming and renaming. The word "black" had been chosen by some members of the community in the '50s and '60s in resistance to the historical negative stereotypes that were associated with other words. It was a word that implied a reclaimed pride in group identity stating, "Black is beautiful." In the '80s further steps in reclaiming pride brought an understanding that "black" was not a precise term—implying only color or racial differences rather than a cultural and geographic base. Claiming this more accurate identity in the term African American then can be viewed as another step in the path toward full empowerment. The evolution of terms and their use by members of other groups acknowledges this development, the historical injustices of the past, and the forced separation from a land of origin.

One must also be mindful that people of any group do not think or feel the same way about identity words. There is a variety of preferences and opinions about words and the meanings that they hold. For some people of African descent, their association with all things "African" long depicted by Europeans as the "dark continent where savages swung from trees" feels negative and demeaning. Still others prefer the term "black" because its use holds claim to its association with civil rights, desegregation, and resistance. Only by honest association, sincere inquiry, and a willingness to take risks will we be able to transcend the historical oppression imbedded in our language. It is important in this process to acknowledge that the cumbersome changes are not the fault of the group doing the renaming, but instead

the result of centuries of domination with all of its assumptions about the right of some to define others. Recognizing evolution of the language of diversity as natural and the outcome of a divided society leads us to regularly seek new knowledge about members of other groups, be aggressive listeners, act on our good intentions, and be willing to change our language accordingly.

Language of Race, Ethnicity, and Origin

Sonia Nieto in her book *Affirming Diversity* recommends that we base our choice of terms on two major criteria:[4]

1. What do the people in question want to be called?
2. What is the most precise term?

People of Color and White People: The term "people of color" has been created by groups who experience present day and historical racial exclusion and refers to any people who have "other than white" European ancestry: African Americans/Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos(as), Asian Americans, Native Americans/American Indians, Middle Eastern people, and people of "mixed" ancestry (ancestry from any of the named groups plus white European). "People of color" is a generic descriptor often preferred in lieu of the term "minority."[5] It is a political term and is thus limited in its ability to define a group completely. It also causes confusion because it is often taken literally in a genetic sense of color (amount of melanin in one's skin). However, this is not the case. For example, people who look white but are members of the groups listed above are still people of color. At the same time, dark-skinned Europeans, like southern Italians or Greeks, are not people of color. Genetic reality has nothing to do with this term. Since we cannot truly categorize people based on race, all designations have been created for political reasons only.

This history of whiteness and it fluidity is very much a history of power and its disposition.[6] The term "white people" to mean people of European ancestry is a political term and therefore limiting in defining the varied cultural groups that it encompasses. The term "European-American" defines people from Europe through an ethnic identity with a geographic base like the term "African American." The term "white" first came into usage in the 1600s to

describe English people and then later all Europeans in opposition to black Africans. "In the United States after about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term of self-identification appeared—white."[7] Lately, some people have readopted the term "Caucasian" to mean white people. This term is not equivalent to white and yet has a long history of usage in the United States connected to being designated "white."[8] This is an outmoded term and is not recommended.[9] In the mid-20th century, in the context of a growing eugenics movement in the United States, immigrants from Europe with questionable racial categorization like Celts, Hebrews, Slavs, and Mediterraneans became "Caucasian." This process of defining groups greatly affects every immigrant group that enters the United States and they are then given their status based on a set of fluid rules. Jacobsen, in *Whiteness of a Different Color,* states that "The European immigrants' experience was decisively shaped by their entering an arena where Europeanness—that is to say, whiteness—was among the most important possessions one could lay claim to."[10] "A color line was drawn around Europe rather than within it."[11] Our confusion about race and words to name what we are is understandable with this history. Just look at the emotional response people have to any census or data collecting forms that ask us to identify ourselves. The clumsy language on these forms insults people and their sense of self.

That said, both of these terms, "people of color" and "white people," have usefulness in that they allow us to acknowledge, speak about, and deal with the outcomes of racial and color divisions of the past and present, while moving toward a more genuine partnership in the future, where political terms don't define us. We should always remember that we are never only one thing, but instead members of many groups. For example, by claiming my whiteness *and* my Italian ethnicity, I can both acknowledge the white privileges that I and my ancestors have gotten as well as lay claim to pride in the hard work of my immigrant grandparents that also helped
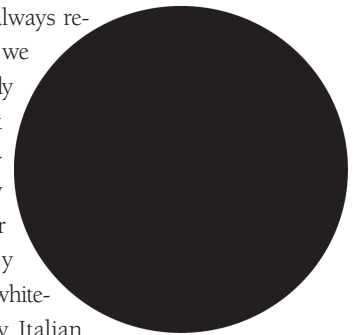
me to succeed. I have noticed in some white people reluctance to accept the term "white" as a descriptor of our group. This may in part be due to not liking to think about us as belonging to a group at all. White has been shown as the "norm" and everyone else as the "different other." So naming our group forces us to think of ourselves as one among many groups.[12]

It is always best when speaking about a specific group to refer to the ethnic name of that group. One caution here is to never guess at an ethnic identity or assume a place of birth. For example, it is insulting to ask a Puerto Rican who was born in the United States where they came from. It is also hurtful to make assumptions about a person by guessing their identity and potentially confusing them with a group with which there is a history of conflict; for example, asking a Chinese person if they are Japanese. The preferred way that I have learned to do that after many failed attempts and shocked and angry looks is to ask, "What ethnic group are you a part of?"

Latina(o), Hispanic, Chicano(a): Controversy and debate have surrounded the use of all of these terms, which illustrate how limited they are in accurately describing the culturally varied groups of people of Latin American and Caribbean heritage whose ethnic origin includes 26 countries. Members of this group prefer terms related to their specific national origin (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.).[13] However, when speaking of the group of people of different Latin American nationalities as a whole, Latino(a) is the preferred self-defining term.[14] In the 1970s the Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) created the term "Hispanic." In the 1980 U.S. Census the term "Hispanic" was chosen by the government to describe people with Spanish surnames of Latin American descent.[15] Hispanic, therefore, is a word created by the United States that does not recognize ethnic differences as well as countries of national origin. In the countries under that generic umbrella are still many combinations of ethnic identities: Spanish, African, and Native. For example, in countries like Puerto Rico, most people are a combination of Spanish, Native/Indigenous, and African; in countries like Mexico and Guatemala, many individuals are purely Native. The Spanish language and a history of Spanish colonialism

are the common denominators for those countries. The political term "Chicano" has been used to describe Mexican Americans in the United States. Length of time in the country—first or second generation—will also make a difference in self-defining terminology. The second generation will often use Mexican American, Colombian American, Cuban American, etc., while the first generation may simply use Mexican, Colombian, Cuban, etc.

Native American/Indian/American Indian/First Nation: All of these terms are in common usage among groups of people who were indigenous to the Americas. In the '60s it was felt that the adoption of the term Native American reflected people's determination to name themselves in opposition to the years of being identified by the term "Indian" which was a misnomer based on the miscalculations of Columbus. Many Native people still embrace the term Indian and/or American Indian. Some people use it because it was never abandoned and others use it in opposition to the term "Native" which is also used by some to mean a citizen of the United States whose ancestors came from Europe. It is often preferred to use the more accurate term of the specific nation or people when referring to this diverse group of indigenous people, i.e., Seneca, Iroquois, Aleut, Inuit, Cree, Cherokee, Navaho, Pueblo, Mayan. Currently, there is a movement among Native people to return to group names that were used prior to the coming of Europeans. These are newly emerging and the best practice is to ask.

Middle Eastern: This group includes people from the countries of Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen. Many stereotypical assumptions are made about members of this varied group. One assumption is that all Middle Easterners are Arab—the countries of Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Cyprus are not Arab. Another is that all Arabs are Muslim. In fact, most Muslims live elsewhere—in Asia, Indonesia, Africa, and North America. Again, this term lumps together a tremendous number of diverse cultures, so it is always best to state the specific ethnic identity when addressing people from this area of the world.[16]

Asian American/Pacific Islanders: This group includes people indigenous to Australia, Baluchistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Java, Malaysia, Nepal, New Guinea, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Tibet, Vietnam, and all the islands between the Asian continent and North and South America. The term "oriental" conjures up many negative stereotypes and therefore is rejected by people indigenous to the continent of Asia.[17] As with many other groups, it is best to use the specific ethnic identity when addressing people from this part of the world.

Language of more "isms"

Gender: The English language has many mechanisms that reinforce an assumed male superiority. The generic (he) is the most common. Although it feels cumbersome at first, substituting he/she or they is the most obvious change needed for inclusion. The use of the word "girl" (as in "the girl at the desk will help you") when talking about grown women is offensive. Try calling your male boss "boy" and see how well it goes over. This identity group has a wide body of literature that explores language and gender issues.

Class: Our assumption of a classless society makes any mention of class differences uncomfortable and clumsy. The most accurate terms to describe groups are simply: poor, working class, middle class, and owning class—never "lower class."

Sexual Orientation: The word "homosexual" is loaded with stereotypes which feed homophobia, so the preferred terms are "gay" (men or women), "lesbian," "transgender," and "bisexual." Terms like "queer," "queen," "dyke," "fem," and "butch" are examples of words presently used only inside the group to describe each other. There is a growing body of literature that explores the evolving language preferred by this group.

Abilities: The word "disability" can imply a negative connotation of not having abilities. The reality for people who think, move, speak, and listen differently is that they have a wealth of abilities; therefore, the term "differently abled" is a more accurate terminology. However, "disability" is still the word most commonly used in legal and health fields.

A general rule of thumb is
to put the "person" first.

Say: person with a disability; not: victim, suffers from, deformed

Say: person who is differently abled; not: unfortunate, poor

Say: person with cerebral palsy or epilepsy; not: cerebral palsied or epileptic

Say: person with mobility impairment; not: crippled, invalid

Say: uses a wheelchair; not: wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair[18]

Age: Young people is a word that works to unite all people who are not adult age. It is preferable to "kids," which seems to have a "less than" notion to it. "Older adults" and "elders" denote dignity and wisdom.

Religion: Only 30 percent of the world's population is Christian, yet in the United States we often assume everyone is Christian, alienating those of different belief systems. The truth is that the United States is not a Christian country—there are millions of Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Wiccins, Native Spiritualists, and Traditionalists.[19] Yet, in the yellow pages of our local phone book, Islamic and Buddhist places of worship are listed under the category "churches." That is one small illustration of the way a dominant group defines others through their language. Learning about local faiths, proper addresses for faith leaders, and places of worship creates avenues for good communication. Some terms may be pejorative rather than descriptive in some contexts: *born-again, cult, evangelical, fundamentalist, sect.*[20] Reference to African, Native American, or Eastern religions as "superstition" or "myths" is disparaging.

Misused terms

American: People of the Caribbean, Central America, and South America question the usage of the term "American" to mean people within the United States, thus ignoring the geographic reality that much of this hemisphere is filled with Americans from the continents of Central and South America and the Caribbean nations. It is still awkward to find a word to mean the people of the United States—U.S.ers has been tried, or simply U.S. people. In some cases it will be difficult to substitute terms, so in this time of transition, "Americans" is still used sparingly and sensitively.

Anglo: This word describes people in the United States who have English heritage and is inaccurate in defining all white people in the United States. This term is often used to contrast English speakers from speakers of other languages and obviously leaves out other European American groups such as Irish, Italians, Germans, and others as well as African Americans.

Ethnic: Everyone has an ethnic culture. Because white Europeans have seen themselves as the "norm," the term "ethnic" gets attached to only "other" groups who are seen as more "exotic." All white people have cultures grounded in the values, beliefs, and mores of Europe. No matter how many cultures people of European descent claim in their ancestry, they still retain an identity that is based in European traditions, celebrations, rituals, survival strategies, dance, and music.

Code words: Many unexamined, stereotypical words that have fallen into common use promote assumptions about a group's skills, abilities, and attributes. For example, recently I heard people use terms like "culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged," and "underclass." These words still have a blame-the-victim overtone. Use of these terms reflects the ongoing contradictions that we live with—attempting to appear more sensitive while holding onto unconscious stereotypical assumptions about a group. These "loaded" words conjure up negative connotations and place responsibility for the condition on those being described. Perhaps "economically exploited" is more descriptive. They are hurtful euphemisms for poor, unemployed people relegated to lives in the ghetto due to historic and present inequality and discrimination.

Terms that don't work

We're all American: One of the recent attempts at ethnic/racial harmony is to disavow our ethnic/racial differences and to group everyone living in the United States under the label "American." This renewed attempt at the melting pot concept is offensive for groups who have never felt included under this term. It is felt to be ingenuous at this time to accept this inclusion without the work of creating the social, economic, and political justice to match it, and thereby ignoring the daily experiences of exclusion.[21] The basic contradiction is captured in the words of W. E. B. DuBois from the turn of the century, yet is still relevant today:

> "One ever feels his two-ness; an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[22]

Non-White: Terms that define a group as "other than the norm" are destructive to the identity of the "non" group. One way for white people to experience this concept of otherness is to think about how it would feel to be identified as non-black.

Minorities: This word has a wider implication than just numbers and connotes a value judgment of "less than." It is also value-ridden in that it was never used to describe other ethnic minority groups in the United States such as Swedish Americans and Albanian Americans, but only used in reference to racial/ethnic minorities.[23] Finally, if we think in terms of the world's people (and soon, in terms of the United States), the majority of the people in the world are people of color.

Illegal Alien: This term emphasizes a person's "otherness" like an invader from outer space versus their humanness. It is more respectful to say "undocumented person or worker."[24]

Macho: This is a Spanish language term that is neutral in terms of value or power. But when used in English as an alternative to the word "sexist," it tends to conjure up negative stereotypes of Latino men, leading to implications that somehow they are more sexist than men of other cultural/racial groups.[25]

Words or phrases that will probably be met with anger

- The use of "those people" and "you people" when speaking to an individual about their identity group. Those phrases convey otherness, criticism, judgment, and worst of all an assumption that all people of a group think and behave alike.

- The terms "boy" and "girl" used in relation to African American men and women are hurtful and demeaning and have historically been used to devalue, undermine, and imply inferiority.

- Handicapped: a word that originates from "cap in hand" or someone who needs to beg. The term handicap may be used, however, to describe an imposed barrier that restricts a person.

- Gay or homosexual lifestyle: this term perpetuates the stereotype that there is a monolithic heterosexual lifestyle that is appropriate, natural, and normal; and that gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender lifestyles are significantly different from heterosexual ones.

- Sexual preference: used improperly as a synonym for "sexual orientation," which implies that sexuality is something chosen rather than a crucial aspect of one's identity.

Language is not neutral—it perpetuates stereotypes:

- Use of "jew" as an adjective
- Speaking of early white settler "victories" and Native people's "massacres" [26]
- Gyp (Gypsy) as to cheat or swindle
- Reference to clothing of various groups as "costumes"
- Fag—derived from a "bundle of branches bound together" that were used in the extermination burnings of homosexuals in Nazi Germany
- Whom do we call "freedom fighters" and whom do we call "terrorists"?
- Words such as "savage" or "primitive" when applied to groups are meant to dehumanize and imply a "less-than" status

Note about terminology

In closing, here are some things to keep in mind about terminology:

- We choose to use words that convey sensitivity and understanding not because we want to be "correct" but because how we use words affects people—their concept of themselves and members of their group and the ability to create and maintain authentic relationships across differences.

- Words we use affect how we think and perpetuate attitudes about groups, continuing a cycle of oppression.

- Terms will continue to evolve as groups redefine themselves. Making and staying in cross-cultural relationships is an important part of truly understanding each other.

- Assisting others to understand the power of words should always be done with respect and in ways that allow the person their full dignity. We have all learned the "isms." Only in an atmosphere free of blame can we really unlearn them.

- Because all of us are influenced by the prevailing attitudes of the society and the power of the message, we need to recognize that even within our groups we have internalized the same misinformation and negative stereotypes about members of our groups. The dynamics of internalized oppression create people who choose to use words that continue the perpetuation of misinformation and disparaging attitudes about members of their own group.

- This list of terms and explanations is intended to help with the confusion that we experience as things change and evolve, not as a strict "do" and "don't" list. We always have choices to create the kind of society that we want.

Endnotes

[1] Robert B. Moore *Racism in the English Language*, Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1985, p. 5

[2] Allan G. Johnson *Privilege, Power, and Difference,* California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001, p. 11

[3] Johnson p. 11

[4] Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: A Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education,* New York: Longman, 1992, p. 15

[5] Nieto p. 17

[6] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 9

[7] Winthrop Jordan, *White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 52

[8] Elsie Y. Cross and Margaret Blackburn White, *The Diversity Factor Language Guide,* A Publication of Elsie Y. Cross Associates, Inc. Third edition, 1999, p. 5

[9] Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-Free Language of the Association of American University Presses, *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing,* Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 57

[10] Jacobson p. 8

[11] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s.* New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 65

[12] Cross p. 23

[13] Rodolfo O. de la Garza, et.al., *Latino Voices: Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on American Politics*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992

[14] Cross p. 11

[15] Institute for Puerto Rican Policy (e-mail article) 1996

[16] Cross p. 2

[17] Amoja Three Rivers, *Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well-Intentioned*, Virginia: Market Wimmin, 1991, p. 3

[18] *Communicating with People with Disabilities,* CCE Comprehensive Guide to the Americans with Disabilities Act

[19] Amoja Three Rivers, p. 14

[20] Swartz et al. p. 45

[21] *The Color of Fear,* video

[22] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: The New American Library, 1969.

[23] Nieto p. 17

[24] Cross p. 9

[25] Cross p. 12

[26] Moore p. 11