



Race and ethnicity terminology

Language is constantly evolving and there are a number of terms in use around race and ethnicity. Using these terms depends on the context in which you are using them, why you are using them and how you have decided which terms to use.

If your institution is trying to decide on terminology to use then it is best to involve your staff and students and carry out an impact assessment. This will ensure you are using appropriate terms, highlight to people that your institution is aware of the sensitivities and complexities involved and has a good rationale for why it uses the terms it does.

Involvement and consultation may also have the added benefits of getting people talking about race equality and possibly improving disclosure rates. Discussing language and terminology helps to open up wider discussions on race and ethnicity, breaking down possible taboos and building awareness.

Race

ECU approaches race equality from the assumption that 'race' is a social construct:

“Its changing manifestations reflect ideological attempts to legitimate domination in different social and historical contexts. Racism is therefore not about objective measurable physical and social characteristics, but about relationships of domination and subordination.”

Bhavnani, R., Mirza, H. S., Meeto, V. 2005. Tackling the roots of racism. The Policy Press (p.15)

The concept of race is rooted in colonisation and empire building to justify differential treatment of human beings, for example through slavery.

Race extended in the 19th and 20th century as concepts of evolution were applied to humans and developed into eugenics. Eugenists believe(d) in the advancement of the human population through the eradication of some genetic traits and the advancement of others. This led to wide ranging policies in the 20th century justifying policies such as forced sterilisation.

As this [brap briefing paper](#) explains, genetic differences within ethnic groups are actually greater than the genetic differences between different ethnic groups and there is no biological basis for defining differences by race.

Consequently, some organisations put the word race in inverted commas to emphasise the fact that it is a social construct. ECU understands the rationale for this approach, however, we use the terms race and ethnicity so frequently that we have chosen not to use inverted commas.

Despite there being no biological merit in the concept of race, racism is still prevalent in UK society, and racial discourses persist. Character traits are still very much linked to racial groups and seen as being biologically and genetically inherent, without recourse to cultural and geographical explanations.

Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably but it is useful to be clear about the difference. As described above, race is a socially constructed term without biological merit that has historically been used to categorise different groups of people based on perceived physical differences.

[Universities Scotland](#) refer to a 1983 House of Lords decision that suggests an ethnic group would have the following features:

- = a long shared history of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups and the memory of which it keeps alive
- = a cultural tradition of its own including family and social manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance
- = a common, however distant, geographical origin
- = a common language and literature

White minority ethnic groups?

Bhavnani et al (2005, p. 213) point out that it is common in our language and media for 'ethnic' to be synonymous with not-white or not-western, for example with 'ethnic clothes' or 'ethnic restaurants'. This is not the case and it is important to remember that everyone has an ethnicity and 'White British' is an ethnic group.

Furthermore, there are many different white ethnic groups, and their experiences of higher education can differ.

Both staff and students may identify with white minority ethnic groups, for example, Jewish, Arab, Gypsy/Roma/Traveller, Irish, other European. There may be issues specific to those groups.

For example, [DWP research](#) highlights that people with non-traditional British names are less likely to be shortlisted for jobs than those with traditional British names. It's possible that people with white minority ethnic names may also face this discrimination.

It is important to know if this is the case and to understand any trends that exist for different groups of people.

BME and BAME?

BME stands for Black and minority ethnic. BAME stands for Black, Asian and minority ethnic.

Both have their limitations, including:

- = They imply that BME/BAME individuals are a homogeneous group
- = Both BME and BAME single out specific ethnic groups, this can be divisive and exclusionary
- = They can be perceived as convenient labels that are placed on minority ethnic groups of people, rather than identities with which people have chosen to identify
- = They ignore the fact that Black, Asian and other visible minority ethnic groups in the in UK are actually a global majority
- = They have a tendency to be perceived as referring to non-white people, which does not consider [white minority ethnic groups](#)

Minority ethnic or ethnic minority?

One issue with 'ethnic minority' is the emphasis it places on ethnicity as the main issue. There can be a tendency in our media and language to see 'ethnic' as synonymous with not-white and so the term could be perceived as implying the issue is with people being not-white, or non-white people being the issue.

As a consequence the term tends to be reversed to refer to minority ethnic groups to highlight the fact that everyone has an ethnicity and the issues being referred to relate to minority groups in a UK context and the discrimination and barriers that they face.

However, that in itself can be an issue, as referring to people as being from a minority group carries its own additional connotations and can problematise those groups.

People of colour/academics of colour

Following on from the above, one of the benefits of the term is a move away from the term 'minority':

*“Critics of [ethnic minorities as a term] insist that the word pathologizes the various groups perceived to be members. *Minority*, in some people’s view, implies the “putting down” of a group of people by self-categorization as “less than” .”*

Salvador Vidal-Ortiz via academia.edu:

https://www.academia.edu/2078986/_People_of_Color_Race_Ethnicity_and_Society_by_Schaefer

(However, Vidal-Ortiz points out that this is a confusion in itself as the term minority does not necessarily refer to actual numbers, but to those without institutional or political power and resources.)

Vidal-Ortiz continues to highlight one of the main advantages as being the focus on commonalities and the choice of self-defining with the term, rather than having a term placed upon the individual:

“the term has possibilities of moving outside of the census-defined (and institutionally bound) racial and ethnic categories imposed by the state.”

The term benefits from the ability to self-define and be part of an empowered collective.

However, it still doesn't escape from setting 'people of colour' against the white population, which become inadvertently homogenous.

Should I avoid using any of these terms?

Using these terms depends on the context in which you are using them, why you are using them and how you have decided which terms to use. It is also important to remember that language evolves and terms change, and whatever your institution uses will need to change and reflect that.

For example, ECU is focussed on advancing equality and eliminating discrimination and as a consequence regularly refers to the barriers and discrimination faced by minority ethnic groups. For our data and research to be relevant and useful, we adopt BME as a commonly used term to ensure consistency with other public bodies and to benchmark against their data.

However, we are aware of its limitations and try wherever possible to put information in context, or disaggregate the data where relevant.

The most important thing is that people are discussing ethnicity, race and advancing equality. The more it is talked about the more comfortable people will become in those discussions.