


Race and Ethnicity Glossary

Learning language and terminology can be a challenge. Words have meaning and are connected to larger social, cultural, and political histories. We often find ourselves in many conversations where people are at different stages of understanding the social systems and power structures around us. In these conversations, a fear emerges within many of us: Am I saying the “wrong” thing? What does this term really mean? Is this term being misinterpreted in this context? These kinds of questions and fears get in the way of having deep and engaged conversations about identity, equity, and inclusion.



It’s important to remember that language is **always** evolving, often developing new political significance and gaining different meanings and interpretations depending on the identities, lived experiences, and social contexts of individuals. It is often challenging to have robust and meaningful conversations about complex topics like race, ethnicity, nationality, and white supremacy without a shared understanding of common terms. Keep in mind that if you don’t know the term a person uses to self-identify, and it’s an appropriate/relevant circumstance, ask them, don’t assume.

To help you develop a shared understanding of frequently used terms about race and ethnicity, we have put together a glossary! This is an evolving and non-exhaustive list of terms. If there are terms you would like to see included, send us an email at info@whitenessatwork.com


Let’s start with race and ethnicity: It’s common for there to be confusion between the terms race and ethnicity. Both terms refer to concepts that are human invented, used to categorize people, and imperfectly capture the complexity of identity. Both words are sometimes, but not always, used to describe a person’s heritage as tied to their ancestry or place of origin.

Race: Race is a human-invented term used to describe and categorize people into various social groups based on physical characteristics like skin color and physical features. Although race has no genetic or scientific basis, the concept of race is important and consequential. This socially constructed idea has been used to give or deny power and divide people based on the social, economic and political needs of a society at a given period of time.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity refers to groups that share a common identity-based ancestry, history, religion, traditions, language, or culture generally associated with a specific geographic region. Ethnicity is generally used in reference to a person’s cultural attributes, not their physical appearance. Two people can share the same race but have different ethnicities. For example, among two white individuals one might identify as South African and another as

Italian-American or among two Black individuals one may identify as African-American and another Haitian.

POC: This term stands for People of Color. This term became more frequently used in the late 1970s as a unifying and more inclusive framework to refer to all racial groups that are not White and to address the racial inequities experienced by them. While [POC](#) can be a useful term, it often conflates and equates the experiences of many different racial and ethnic groups, each of which have distinct and specific experiences with race.




BIPOC: This term stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. [BIPOC](#) centers and leads with Black and Indigenous identities to address anti-Black racism and the erasure of Indigenous communities. This term uplifts the collective power of all people of color, especially Black and Indigenous people and is also committed to advancing racial justice and dismantling White supremacy.

African American: an American with Black African ancestry. Not all Black people who reside in the United States identify with the term African American. While the US census groups Black or African American as one category, there is a clear distinction between the two.

Black: relating or belonging to any of the various human populations characterized by dark skin pigmentation, specifically the dark-skinned peoples of Africa, Oceania, and Australia. In the United States this term most often refers to people of African descent, including African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latino, and African immigrants living in the United States. The term Black has a specific political significance in the race discourse in the United States as it covers a broad range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS): This [term](#) refers to all Black Americans who are descendants of formerly enslaved people and are committed to seeking reparations for chattel slavery and its ongoing consequences including the racial wealth gap, incarceration, systemic inequities in education and healthcare, redlining, and gentrification all of which disproportionately affect Black people in the United States. ADOS are also committed to advocating for policies that eliminate the discrimination experienced by Black people of all backgrounds in the US.



Native American: This [term](#) came into use in the 1960s referring to the over 2,000 tribal groups and their descendants that are native to the land of what became the United States and its territories through European colonization. Native American is not a monolithic term; there are numerous languages, cultures, and tribal membership systems within Native American communities.

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Indigenous: “Indigenous people are composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them and, by conquest, settlement, or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial condition; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic, and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they now form part, under a State structure which incorporates mainly national, social, and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant.” (From [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#), United Nations)

For example: Maori people are the Indigenous people of New Zealand, Mexicans are the Indigenous people of what is now considered Texas, California, New Mexico etc.

First Nations: This term came into usage in the 1970s, replacing the use of Indian or Native, and First Nations refers to the groups of people that are officially recognized as Indians under the Indian Act of Canada. First Nations also refers to the separate nations that occupied the unceded territory before European colonization. There are over 630 First Nations in Canada. For instance, the [Okanagan Nation](#) is composed of seven member communities including the Penticton Indian Band, Okanagan Indian Band, Westbank First Nation, and Upper and Lower Similkameen Indian Bands.


Chicano/Chicana: This identifier is for people of Mexican descent born in the United States. The term became popularized by Mexican Americans during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s.

Latino/Latina: describes the people and culture of Latin American descent. Including people from countries like Brazil, Martinique, Haiti, Saint Martin, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, Chile, and others. This term excludes the people and culture of Spain.

LatinX/Latine: LatinX was created as a gender-neutral alternative to “Latinos,” not only to better include those who are gender fluid, but also to push back on the inherently masculine term used to describe all genders in the Spanish language. The usage of the term LatinX is derived from academia and is not common practice and it is widely debated about its [appropriateness](#) in a gendered language like Spanish. This led to an increase in usage of the term, [Latine](#), which provides a gender neutral ending in Spanish.

Afro-Latino: individuals who have roots in both African and Latin America and/or the Caribbean. [Six million Americans](#) identify as Afro-Latino.

Hispanic: The term, Hispanic, is used to describe people and their descendents from Spanish speaking countries, including many Latin American countries *and* Spain. However, this term excludes people and descendents from Latin American countries that do not speak Spanish, such as Haiti and Brazil. The term Hispanic is widely critiqued for centering Spain as the origin without fully recognizing the cultural, linguistic, and social differences between Latin America and Spain.



AAPI: This [term](#) stands for Asian American Pacific Islanders, which consists of over 50 ethnic groups that speak over 100 distinct languages, with ancestries connected to Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, India, Sri Lanka, Hawaii among others. According to the 2020 census, 24 million people identified as Asian and nearly 1.6 million individuals identified as Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander.

Asian: This term refers to individuals from all parts of Asia, including Central Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Southwest Asia. However, each of these parts of Asia are composed of distinct nations with different cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial groups. The term Asian often overlooks and conflates the myriad racial and ethnic identities within Asia. For instance, many people who identify as Arabs or Arab Americans are from nations in Southwest Asia such as, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates etc, and their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups are drastically different from Southeast Asia or South Asia.

Asian Americans: This term was first coined in the 1960s with the intention of channeling the power of individuals of Asian origin. There are over 20 million Asian Americans in the United States, almost all of them trace their roots to 19 origin groups from East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. The six [most represented](#) ethnic groups among Asian Americans in the United States include Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese. A smaller segment of Asian Americans trace their roots to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Thailand.

South Asians: [These](#) individuals trace their roots to 8 nations—Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. South Asian communities are far from homogenous with its people speaking over 650 distinct languages, practicing several religions, and possessing different immigration histories. Approximately, 5.4 million South Asians live in the United States.

Southeast Asians: [Southeast Asians](#) are people who trace their roots to nations that are south of China and East of India. This includes Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Laos, Indonesia, Burma, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste. Southeast Asians make up the largest share of the total Asian immigrant population in the US.

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East Asians: East Asians trace their roots to China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Mongolia. Chinese Americans account for [24% of the Asian population](#) in the US, making them the largest Asian origin group.

Arab Americans: [Arab Americans](#) are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from Arabic speaking nations in North Africa and Southwest Asia who also identify as American. This includes individuals from 22 modern day nations such as, Egypt, Palestine, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Somalia, Djibouti etc. There are nearly 3.7 million Arab Americans in the US today.

MENA: This term refers to the geographical region of Middle East and North Africa, which is composed of 22 nations— Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Mauritania, and the Comoros Islands.

White: The top classification of the socially constructed and structurally reinforced racial categories. Those both perceived and categorized as white are granted social, cultural, institutional, psychological and material resources. Most often white people are of European descent.

White supremacy: White supremacy is a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. -Frances Lee Ansley

White dominant culture and norms: The National Museum of African American History and Culture describes “how white people and their practices, beliefs, and culture have been normalized over time and are now considered standard in the United States. As a result, all Americans have all adopted various aspects of white culture, including People of Color.” This definition is predicated on an understanding of whiteness and white racial identity as the way white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared. White dominant culture is broadly enacted across society and within the context of social entities such as organizations.