

# PROPOSED LANGUAGE TO USE WHEN TALKING ABOUT RACE: WHAT YOU WANTED TO KNOW BUT DIDN'T WANT TO ASK

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VANESSA GONLIN, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### VANESSA GONLIN

Vanessa Gonlin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Georgia. Her research and teaching areas explore racial discrimination, colorism, racial identity(ies), interracial relationships, and social demography.

Race is the elephant in the room on our campuses across the United States. As necessary conversations take place in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the insurrection at the Capitol building by White supremacists, we, as educators, must nurture learning about race – including how and why to use certain words when talking about race.

On the second day of my *Race and Ethnicity in America* course, I teach undergraduates the rationale behind and significance of language choices we make when referring to various racial groups. Following the class, I often receive an outpouring of emails from students expressing their appreciation for the opportunity to learn something that so many feel they are expected to know and are therefore too afraid to ask about. This document features what I shared with them.

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

There are numerous tribal communities and bands of people across the continent that may fall under the category of Indigenous peoples, including Native Americans or American Indians & Alaska Natives (AIAN), Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians, First Nations peoples, and/or Natives. While there are similarities among these groups, we must recognize that tribal communities and bands have important differences and histories; whenever possible, it is best to refer to tribal communities by name (e.g., Yuchi, Cherokee, Muskogee/Creek), rather than use an all-encompassing term.

In the United States, the terms “Native American” and “American Indian & Alaska Native” (AIAN) are most commonly used (see *Indian Country Today's* [article](#)), but the preference for each term can vary by individual. AIAN is the Census terminology for this population, and focuses on a connection to geographic space. “American Indian” is an imposed term used by the government to homogenize different groups of peoples, but was reclaimed during the Red Power Movement because, since this is the term used in U.S. laws and treaties, Movement leaders wanted to be very clear about which racialized group they were fighting for. Michelle Jacobs (2015) finds that her U.S. interviewees most often refer to themselves as “American Indians,” “Indians,” “Indigenous peoples,” and “Natives.” Note that terminology varies by location; for example, in Canada, other terminology is used, including First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and Salish.

## WHITE PEOPLE

For at least the last 200 years, White people have been the majority racial group in the United States. They are often used as the comparison group against which other groups are measured. Often, this group is referred to as “Caucasian,” “White,” “White American,” and “American;” however, the term “Caucasian” has a racist history and “American” invokes the idea that only White people are Americans. “Anglo” is also commonly used, particularly in southwestern states such as Texas and New Mexico (though notably not all Whites are Anglo-Saxon, the term from which “Anglo” is derived).

Originally used to reference people of the Caucasus Mountains (between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea), the term “Caucasian” later [shifted to the idea that Whiteness meant northern and western Europeans](#) and was used to assert White superiority. It was used in Blumenbach’s five race taxonomy, in which Ethiopian (black i.e., Africans, excluding lighter-skinned North Africans), Malayan (brown i.e., Aborigines and Pacific Islanders), and American (red i.e., AIAN) were “primitive” races, Mongolian (yellow i.e., Asian) were more advanced, and Caucasian (white) were the most advanced. Caucasians were seen as the ideal human, the most beautiful race, and all others were considered to be “physically and morally degenerate forms of God’s original creation,” an idea that was used in the U.S. to justify slavery and racial discrimination.

Sometimes “White American” is used in order to be consistent when discussing “Black Americans,” “Asian Americans,” and other racial groups. However, “White American” focuses on U.S. citizenship and is not inclusive of White immigrants. Some people even say “American” when they mean “White.” This discounts the multitude of racial minoritized peoples in the U.S. and suggests that only White people are “true” Americans. In addition to being racist, this is factually inaccurate when we consider the indigenous peoples who were/are caretakers of this land, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in which the U.S. gained states in the southwest and west that were previously Mexican territory. “White” is most commonly used (generally, U.S. citizenship is assumed). It is more inclusive and indicates a shift away from identifying with national origin and, rather, the forming of a collective White identity as immigrant groups assimilate into dominant White U.S. culture. While many European immigrant groups intentionally work(ed) towards assimilation into the dominant White culture (Roediger 2005), there is unclear evidence as to whether or not a White collective identity has been formed purposefully or not.

Finally, currently Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Americans and immigrants are classified as “White” in the U.S. Census. This Census decision has been met with outcry among these populations (for example, see the [movement to have Iranians be counted](#)), which tend to prefer to be recognized as their own group and therefore will be discussed as such below. Also, Latinx people are considered an ethnic group rather than a racial group and encouraged to select a race on the Census, and often choose “White,” “Black” or “Other.” Our current Census methods of categorizing MENA and Latinx people hides the experiences of these group members by subsuming them into the White category, and makes the “White” group appear larger than if MENA and Latinx people were not included.

## BLACK PEOPLE

Words used in the U.S. to refer to Black peoples have evolved over time. Historically, “Colored” and “Negro” were the most pervasively used. Groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) were formed when “Colored” and “Negro” were mainly in use and have elected to keep these names to remain tied to historical accomplishments of these groups. However, “Colored” and “Negro” are imposed words, remnants from slavery and Jim Crow, and have largely fallen into disuse.

Contemporarily, “African American,” “Black American,” and “Black” are often used interchangeably to refer to the descendants of enslaved Africans. However, some people are very specific about which terminology they prefer to use and be called because there are important differences. “African American” emphasizes a connection to Africa, the homeland. “African American” is also often regarded as politically correct, though it is not the only socially acceptable term. “Black American” is inclusive of Black people in the U.S. who are and are not from Africa. “Black” is even broader – though “Black” is often used in reference to Black people who are descendants of enslaved Africans in the U.S., it can also include Black immigrants, legal permanent residents, and citizens. Notably, “the Blacks” is a term often met with disdain by members of Black communities. This is because this phrase de-emphasizes personhood by reducing people to their color and ignores their humanity.

Instead, “Black people” is a term that emphasizes the humanity of a population denied human rights through most of U.S. history. For example, I am not worried that when I say “White” there may be an association with non-humanness, and therefore I do not need to emphasize their personhood, whereas Black people in the U.S. were deemed non-human and then 3/5ths human, leading me to determine that we might need to emphasize that Black people are, in fact, people. Finally, “Black peoples” emphasizes the global diaspora and within-group heterogeneity.

## ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER PEOPLE

“Asian” refers to people who are native to or originating from Asia. It replaces the term “Oriental,” which is an outdated colonial term historically used by Western scholars studying “Near and Far Eastern societies, cultures, languages,” which frequently reproduced stereotypes of peoples of Asia and their customs as exotic, abnormal, and barbaric. There is debate among scholars as to whether Pacific Islanders – those native to or originating from the Pacific Islands – should be categorized as Asian, or if the histories of peoples of this region are distinct enough to be considered a separate racial group. Though often lumped in the Asian category due to proximity of location, Pacific Islanders are sometimes classified as Indigenous, and other times are discussed as a discrete group.

“Asian American” is used to emphasize the U.S. citizenship of people who have historically been and contemporarily continue to be seen and treated as “forever foreigners.” In the United States, “Asian” and “Asian American” are frequently assumed to refer to people who are from or whose ancestors are from East Asia. In order to make sure that other Asian groups, especially South Asians and Pacific Islanders, are included, some people explicitly describe additional groups when referring to Asians. Such terms include “Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI),” “Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American (APIDA),” and “Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI).” Some people treat “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI)” as a separate category from Asians, while others argue that NHOPIs are Asians and should be included in this category. It is best to use individual identities (e.g., Japanese American, Indian American, etc.) or the term that most explicitly describes the group you are referring to. When possible, it is best to refer to specific indigenous communities (e.g., Samoans, Chamorros, Fijians, etc.).

## HISPANIC AND LATINA/O/X PEOPLE

“Hispanic” focuses on language, while “Latino/a/x” emphasizes geography. Hispanics are people who are from or whose ancestors are from predominantly Spanish-speaking countries – this includes Spain and excludes Brazil. “Latinx” refers to people who are from or whose ancestors are from Latin America – this excludes Spain but includes Brazil. Someone may be both Hispanic and Latinx. “Hispanicity” refers to Hispanic identity and “Latinidad” indicates Latinx identity. When possible, respect individual identities (e.g., Mexican American, Cuban American, etc.).

Latina/o, Latin@, Latinx, and Latiné are all generally acceptable, though some people are opposed to “Latinx,” which breaks from the tradition of “Latina/o,” while others are in favor of Latinx because of its inclusiveness. “Latin@” and “Latiné” are the least commonly used terms. “Latina/o” differentiates from broadly using the masculine term “Latino” and is intended to highlight women (Latinas). It operates within the gender binary, allowing for the options of woman or man. This term has evolved in recent years to be more encompassing of other genders. “Latin@” is more inclusive by not putting one gender before the other and encompassing genderqueer and nonbinary people, but it is difficult to use in speech. “Latinx” (I’ve heard this pronounced Lat – tin – ex as well as Lah – teen – ex) is even more inclusive by de-emphasizing the gender binary, and instead emphasizing personhood. Finally, Latiné (pronounced Lah – teen – ay) is easier to use and incorporate when speaking Spanish, but it has not caught on in popularity the way that “Latinx” has.

Similarly, terminology regarding the largest Hispanic/Latinx group, Mexicans, has shifted in recent years. “Mexican” is inclusive of Mexican immigrants, legal permanent residents, and citizens. It is used by people originating from or who have ancestors from Mexico. “Mexican American” is specific to people who are U.S. citizens with Mexican ancestry. It is generally used by people whose ancestors have been in the U.S. for decades, if not centuries. “Chicano/a/x” is a political and social identity. It is a term used by people who wish to clearly connect themselves with the Chicano Movement. Not all Mexican Americans identify as Chicano/a/x or wish to be connected with this movement. Think of Mexican American as a broader category, in which some Mexican Americans specifically identify as Chicano/a/x. Among those who align themselves with the Chicano Movement, there are variations in the punctuation used at the end: “Chicano/a” focuses on and restricts people to the gender binary. “Chican@” is more inclusive by not putting one gender before the other and encompassing genderqueer and nonbinary people, but it is rarely used and difficult to say when speaking. “Chicanx” is more inclusive than Chicano/a, as it emphasizes personhood and does not conform to the gender binary. “Xicano/a” purposely deviates from the imposed European spelling of this word, choosing instead to emphasize the indigenous spelling and pronunciation. Xicano has a softer pronunciation (schee-cahn-no) than Chicano (chee-cahn-no).

While Mexicans are the largest Hispanic/Latinx subgroup in the United States, they are followed by Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Salvadorans, and other Latin American groups. As always, it is best to use the clearest, most specific terms possible when describing these populations (e.g., Taínos, Guanahatabeys, Pipil peoples, etc.).

## MIDDLE EASTERN, NORTH AFRICAN, AND ARAB PEOPLE

“Arab” and “Arab American” emphasize connection to language, while “Middle Eastern/North African” focuses on connection to a geographic region. “Arab” refers to people who are from or have ancestors from a predominantly Arabic-speaking country, and is inclusive of immigrants and citizens. “Arab American” highlights the U.S. citizenship of people who are often assumed to be foreigners. “Middle Eastern/North African” (MENA) describes people who are from or whose ancestors are from the Middle East or North Africa.

Though Northern Africa is, of course, part of the African continent, some people assert that North African histories and cultures are more similar to Middle Eastern histories and cultures and therefore should be discussed together. Someone may be both Arab and MENA. As always, refer to someone's specific identity (e.g., Iranian American, Egyptian American) when possible.

While often discussed interchangeably, remember that Arab does not mean Muslim. Arabic is a language and Islam is a religion; while some people may be both Arab and Muslim, not all Muslims are Arabs, and not all Arab peoples are Muslim (many are Christian, Buddhist, Baha'i, etc.).

## BI- AND MULTIRACIAL PEOPLE

Recognizing the brutal history of the U.S. toward bi/multiracial peoples, it is necessary to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate terms used to describe this population.

"Biracial" refers to people with two racial groups in their ancestry. "Multiracial" technically refers to people with three or more racial groups in their ancestry, but is often used for anyone who has more than one racial group in their ancestry and thus may be inclusive of biracials. "Mixed ancestry" or "mixed-race ancestry" refers to people who are cognizant of having two or more socially constructed racial groups in their family histories (Pew Research Center 2015; Roth 2016). "Multiracials" and people aware of "mixed-race ancestry" are not perfectly overlapping groups; someone may be aware of having mixed ancestry but not identify as multiracial. For example, Barack Obama is aware of having Black and White ancestry (i.e., mixed-race ancestry) but identifies as Black (i.e., as monoracial). "Mixed" is a colloquial term that technically means the same thing as "multiracial" but in practice is generally used when referring to Black/White biracials.

The term "mulatto" has fallen into disuse once the degrading historical nature of this term was brought to light. It refers to a mule, or the mix of donkey (Black person) and horse (White person). This derogatory term asserts that the offspring of a Black person and a White person are created by different species breeding. Another term referencing specific groups mixing together is "hapa," which refers to someone who is of part Asian or Pacific Islander decent. Hapa is a Hawaiian word that is used colloquially, and is also used in many Asian countries, including Japan and China.

Our language has evolved to use the words bi/multiracial, mixed-race ancestry, and mixed people (instead of mulatto but in addition to hapa). As shown with the 2000 Census, which was the first time that respondents were able to check more than one racial group, our idea of race and racial categories is shifting. There remains pressure on people of mixed-race ancestry to choose one racial group to identify with, but there is also greater opportunity to identify and be seen as multiple races at the same time (thus asserting a bi/multiracial identity).

Above all, respect the term someone asks you to call them.

## POC v. BIPOC

Often times there is confusion as to whether the acronym People of Color (POC) or Black, Indigenous, and/or other People of Color (BIPOC) is most useful. Both refer to racially minoritized people. There has been a shift from referring to someone by what they lack (e.g., "non-White") to emphasizing what someone offers. POC is often misused to refer to Black people – some people say "POC" when they mean "Black." Remember, Black people are POC, but not all POC are Black. The acronym POC emphasizes that all racially minoritized groups are marginalized to an extent by White supremacy, and works to de-center Whiteness.

BIPOC (I've heard this pronounced "bi-pock" or "bi-p-o-c") has been introduced as an amendment to POC. Yes, Black and Indigenous people fall under the definition of POC. However, "BIPOC" is intentionally more specific to describe those arguably most marginalized under White supremacist systems of power. Slavery and genocidal colonization uniquely affect Black and Indigenous peoples. Thus, "BIPOC" highlights the advantages that non-Black and non-Native POC hold in sociopolitical spaces. Some people who use BIPOC do so to emphasize the obligation of non-Black and non-Native POC as allies to combat anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, and colorism within their communities. Others use BIPOC to highlight that Black and Indigenous peoples are severely harmed by systemic racial injustices.

## CAPITALIZATION

You will most often see one of these four capitalization options used when describing or referring to various racial groups. The fourth option is used the least often.

*Option 1 - Lowercase everything that is not a proper noun:* black, white, indigenous, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern/Arab American. This option follows the rules of the English language and is used by many publication outlets.

*Option 2 - Capitalize all racial groups:* Black, White, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern/Arab American. Capitalizing all racial groups provides respect and equality by recognizing all groups as legitimate. For example, “south” is lowercase when referring to direction, but we capitalize “the South” when referring to a specific location; similarly, we lowercase “black” when discussing a color and capitalize “Black” when referring to a specific group.

*Option 3 - Capitalize BIPOC, lowercase white (see Crenshaw 1991; Du Bois 1898; Dumas 2016; McKinnon 1982):* Black, white, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern/Arab American. Black and Indigenous are capitalized because they refer to collective group identities. Here, “white” is not capitalized because 1) as the majority they tend to not see themselves as a specific group, and 2) whites may indicate they are Irish, German, Italian, Scandinavian, etc., which is a luxury not always available to Black and Indigenous peoples who have thus formed collective identities.

*Option 4 - Capitalize White, lowercase black:* black, White, American Indian, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern/Arab American. Used most often by White supremacist groups, this emphasizes the White race as a collective identity and discounts black people as an equal racial group.

The key takeaway is that word choices denote respect (and therefore, can also indicate disrespect). If you are unsure of which terms to use, ask people what they would prefer to be called. Let someone know you would like to show respect to them and their community by using the language of their choice. Finally, recognize that what is comfortable for one person or group may be uncomfortable for another person or group; rather than assume that one person or group speaks on behalf of their community, consider that there may be differences within a group, and that you might have a certain relationship with one person that you do not have with the rest of the group. Asking people what they prefer to be called shows that you value them, consider that there might be within-group heterogeneity and there is not one spokesperson for the entire group, and acknowledges that you do not always have all the answers. As our ever-changing languages and terminologies evolve, we hopefully let go of derogatory or unhelpful words and bring in word choices that are fitting to our diverse societies.

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