Race fluency: Getting the language right

In this article, we discuss the complexity of language when talking about 'race', present the history and implications of using some of the most familiar terms, and provide practical suggestions for future use while acknowledging more work needs to be done before we can decide on what the 'right' race terminology should be.

Prevalent reports of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people being at greater risk of Covid-19 have once again flung the issues of difference, structural racism and social identities into the fore. The notion that the virus is far from a great leveller, but in fact shows clearly the already stark differences in life experiences and outcomes by racio-ethnic category, is now familiar.

In business, politics and in the National Health Service (NHS), the disparity in outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) professionals compared to their white counterparts is well-documented, from underrepresentation in management and leadership positions to the ethnicity pay gap. What is also understood in diversity practice is that a lack of confidence with conversations around race or 'race fluency' has prevented or hindered action to reduce these disparities. Research shows that while we have made significant inroads on the journey towards gender equality, there is far to go with regards to ethnic diversity.

Past research conducted by Dr Doyin Atewologun[1] showed that many employees and senior leaders are not 'diversity fluent'. 'Diversity fluency' refers to "how confident and proficient people are in understanding and articulating differences in career outcomes for diverse groups, for example: women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees; disabled; and BAME staff" (Atewologun, 2018). Many leaders can rapidly cite statistics to explain the gender problem and share examples for what they are doing to address this in practice. In contrast, though, her research found that when talking about race at work, people tend to speak less, to use more broad-brush comments and to hesitate more.

It is important to increase our diversity fluency beyond gender to make progress for achieving equity from an intersectional perspective and for other underrepresented groups. In light of the differential impact of Covid-19 on minority ethnic groups, it is more important than ever to bring the conversation about race fluency to all sectors, services and to broader society.

With respect to language, possibly none is more complex than the language we use to describe people of different 'races.' 'Race' itself is a social construct – in biological terms, we are all one race, but how we use the term has given it meaning beyond this. Because race is a social construct, there is no universally accepted way of describing those of different 'races.' Language is intensely personal, and it is important to check its use to communicate effectively and respectfully.

[1] Atewologun, D. (2018). Minority ethnic careers in professional services firms. In *Research Handbook of Diversity and Careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Why race confidence is particularly important in the Covid-19 context

Alarming statistics highlighting the risks of Covid-19 to minority ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people makes the need to communicate effectively about race and ethnicity more pressing than ever. Increasingly, the acronym "BAME" to denote "Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic" communities has been adopted in mainstream media, government briefings and medical communications to convey greater health risks associated with race and ethnicity. However, what is potentially overlooked are the assumptions made when using the term "BAME" to refer collectively to Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic individuals. This grouping of races and ethnicities makes a number of unhelpful assumptions, including that:

- Minority ethnic people are one homogenous group
- Minority ethnic people have the same identities and experiences, including shared experiences of being stereotyped
- Minority ethnic people are affected by societal inequalities in the same way

Research shows that many minority ethnic individuals do not identify with the term "BAME." A study by the Race Disparity Audit on the use of terminology regarding ethnicity found that only 2 of 300 people recognised the acronyms "BAME" (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and "BME" (Black and Minority Ethnic) and only 1 person knew their meaning. Using a term that is removed from people's everyday lives can have serious consequences for engagement with communications and information, particularly when it is specifically targeted at their demographic (e.g. in the case of Covid-19).

So, what can we do about it?

Language is one of the most important ways that we seek to communicate and understand one another. When it comes to trying to describe people, how we choose to describe someone else reflects our own values or beliefs, whether consciously or unconsciously. Language, then, is also connected to power, and changes in language reflect both the overt and covert designs of society and/or government.

Below, we describe common labels, why they could be problematic and offer some advice on each term's usage:

BME: Black and Minority Ethnic

- Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME) entered the language arena in the 1990s and appears to have stemmed from academic usage. They are contested umbrella terms to describe people from ethnic heritages or backgrounds who constitute a statistical minority in the UK. BME is currently the favoured term used by the UK government.
- ***Why could it be problematic?*** Since the 1970s, there have been questions raised about the census classification and the confusion between the categories. Categories, as they are currently expressed, use a confusing mix of descriptions that conflate skin colour, ethnicity, nationality and religion. In the early 2000s, researchers recognised that 'black' was a polarising term for many people, especially those of Asian heritage. Another

problem is that in some parts of the UK and indeed, sections of other countries in the world, reference to 'ethnic minority' may not ring true, given that some ethnic groups do constitute a majority in certain regions.

- ***Advice on its usage*:** Despite its challenges, BME has become the general umbrella term to describe those that experience persistent inequality and discrimination based on skin colour in the UK - it is, then, probably the best of a bad lot. Remember, however, that many individuals wouldn't describe themselves as "BME".

BAME: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

- This term entered the landscape somewhere in the 2000s and is seen to address and to recognise the growing number of people who categorise themselves as being Asian. As with BME, this classification seeks to include all those from ethnic heritages and backgrounds who constitute a statistical minority in the UK.
- ***Why could it be problematic?*** It's difficult for many of the same reasons BME is (see above). Furthermore, the use of the "A" may be seen to be a concession to politics, rather than adding any more meaning. This has resulted in some minority groups rejecting the term as they refuse to be re-labelled.
- ***Advice on its usage*:** It is difficult to avoid the term BAME as it has increasingly slipped into the language. If you must use it, write the acronym after you have used the term in full (that is, spell it out first). Avoid using it in conversation as an adjective (e.g. BAME people…) because it makes a number of assumptions indicating homogeneity and shared experiences of a heterogenous, diverse group with different experiences.

Asian

- In the UK, common and significant use of the term 'Asian' can be traced back to the 1960s and 70s. It has been used as an umbrella to categorise people whose geographical ethnic family origins can be traced back to the Indian sub-continent and East Asia.
- ***Why could it be problematic?*** It is inadequate under many circumstances because it subsumes the diverse social, geographical, cultural and religious differences of the people incorporated in this term, making it virtually meaningless.
- ***Advice on its usage*:** Probably wise to avoid this term – it would be more meaningful to refer to specific groups, such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Chinese - depending on your context.

'Black'

- The *positive* use of the term 'black' can be traced back to the 1960s when it was deliberately reclaimed as a category or description in a number of campaigns and movements of the decade. Since then, it has been used as an umbrella term to unite and describe people who have been the subject of, or experienced, racial discrimination on the basis of the colour of their skin. Used in this sense, it is a 'political' term and bears no association to actual skin colour.
- ***Why could it be problematic?*** Very few people understand the political context in which the term 'black' is used. Most people are unaware of its historical development and as a

consequence, it is not seen as an inclusive term. Because it refers to racism based on skin colour, many groups that experience racism based on their ethnicity - such as Irish people, travelling communities and Eastern European people - reject it as a term for themselves. Additionally, many people also continue to identify 'black' as a derogatory term and not comparable with other terms such as Asian or Indian, which identify people with place.

- ***Advice on its usage*:** Many people from African and African Caribbean communities may refer to themselves as 'black' – but are also just as likely to describe themselves for example as British-Ghanaian, African or African Caribbean. If you are using the term 'black' – it might be wise to be explicit when you are using it in a political sense and to write it in inverted commas.

Overall, language, although complex, has often been used as an excuse for why talking about race can be challenging. Furthermore, our level of comfort and familiarity with our histories (including the colonial past) may also contribute to inhibiting our race fluency. However, this article demonstrates that engaging with the complexity associated with language around race is not necessarily beyond our grasp.

It is necessary to have an understanding of why talking about race and ethnicity is complex and uncomfortable for a number of reasons. The language that we use reflects our values and beliefs. Our descriptors can unintentionally prescribe who an individual or group is, rather than allowing individuals to inform this themselves. During this pandemic, the language that we use to communicate messages of greater risk and disparate outcomes for minority ethnic groups risks disengagement and misunderstanding from the very members of society that the communications are speaking to. Until society's approach to talking about race and ethnicity has progressed beyond this, acronyms such as "BAME" to denote Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups/communities are best used alongside the full description and not as an adjective.

While we have provided suggestions for some of the more common terms, we are not yet 'there' with regards to 'race' terminology. If we are to make real progress in this regard, rather than just knowing what to call someone (or not), we first need to examine the thinking and assumptions behind the terms that we use to label people.

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