



VERSITI

Essential terminology for conversations about diversity



In businesses large and small, leadership teams are quickly learning that *diversity* is one of the most important issues affecting their business. For many, however, it's also one of the hardest conversations to have as it's loaded with fear – of getting it wrong, and making costly mistakes.

Approach diversity the wrong way and – at a minimum – you risk causing great offence to both staff and customers, losing your best talent and most valuable customers, seeing a drop in revenue, or experiencing significant reputational damage. It takes courageous leaders to admit to being part of a flawed system. On many occasions, we have seen leaders not daring to enter into the conversation due to a lack of confidence and know-how, leaving the real issues and problems unresolved.

As a society and as business leaders, we need to be able to have the difficult conversations that enable us to reflect and change. Recent conversations with even our most progressive clients have highlighted that even they struggle with finding the right terminology to navigate the subject of diversity. They recognise that words have power, that language is never fixed, and that the labels people use to describe themselves and others can vary a great deal from one situation to another, serving different purposes – all of which makes navigating the world of diversity and inclusion daunting.

Countless times, our clients have approached us seeking advice on the language they should adopt.

In response, we decided to start a glossary of terms that we feel will help those unsure of the appropriate language to use, and of its impact. We see this as a living, breathing document to which we will be adding over time, so be sure to bookmark it and check back later.

We hope this goes some way to explain the assumptions that are embedded in the words we use so that we can all make active choices: say what we mean and mean what we say, with an awareness of how this could be interpreted.

Protected characteristics

Typically, when working in the field of diversity and inclusion, businesses and organisations will focus first on the social groups or characteristics that are protected by law. In the UK, discriminating against people on the grounds of 'age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation' is unlawful.¹ These 'characteristics' are protected by law because a wealth of evidence shows that they are associated with structural discrimination and personal prejudice. Legal protection aims to provide some redress for historical and contemporary social injustice against specific groups.²

But even the language used in the Equalities Act 2010 is not as straight-forward as it seems...



About disability

Disability and disabled people

Technically, a person has a disability if they have a physical, mental or sensory limitation which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

That definition suggests that the impairment itself stands in the way of a person's full social and economic participation. Most people living with a 'disability', however, feel that it is less the impairment that holds them back, and more a mixture of public attitudes, social norms and physical arrangements that prevent full 'participation'. They therefore prefer to refer to themselves as 'disabled people': people who are disabled by a world that doesn't allow them to participate fully and to flourish.

Thus the term 'people with a disability' is more biomedical and legal, while the term 'disabled people' is more political.

1: We will not discuss definitions and usage of the following protected characteristics, as we believe these are less ambiguous: age, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity.

2: Of course, there are other groups that experience discrimination, such as people from lower socio-economic groups, refugees, etc. Each organisation needs to consider whether there are groups that experience systematic disadvantage and to make relevant provisions, based on its specific remit.



About skin colour and ethnicity

Race

It is surprising to us that the law should still be referring to race. Scientifically, the concept of race has been discredited at least since the Human Genome Project found that 99.9% of the genome is identical in every person around the globe. It is therefore absurd – and toxic – to continue to use the notion of race. This, of course, is not to say that people do not experience ‘racism’: they certainly do. However in an ideal world we move away from using ‘race’ as a descriptive word because it tends to promote the idea that specific ‘groups’ or behaviours are the result of biology, and that other ‘superior’ groups have a natural right to dominate.

This in turn leads people to think that certain actions or beliefs are therefore natural and acceptable, and not in fact the result of societal factors that can be changed. Words have power, and even the smallest can cause ongoing problems.

Mixed parentage or dual heritage

As descendants of the large migration waves from the 1950s onwards marry with the local population, and social norms continue to shift, there is a growing number of people born of parents from mixed ethnic groups. As discussed above, the term ‘mixed race’ is inappropriate to refer to this group of people, especially as the term implies that some ‘pure race’ might exist. The expressions ‘mixed parentage’ and ‘dual heritage’ are better descriptors.

People of colour (POC)

More recently, the expression ‘people of colour’ (POC) – coined in the USA – has gained currency among some ethnic minority people in the UK, precisely because it draws attention to the specific discrimination that people who are not of White or European heritage face because of their skin colour. It is now regarded as the most politically correct generic term.

Not to be confused with ‘coloured people’, a now derogatory term associated with Jim Crow Laws in the USA and with apartheid in South Africa.

Black

Many people of black African and Caribbean origins prefer to be referred to as ‘Black’ (with a capital letter). For them, there is little in common between the history and experiences of Black people and those of other minority ethnic groups. ‘Black’ is not a simple description but an essential political reference to the history of slavery, the civil rights movement, the emergence of ‘Black Power’, the reframing of Black as ‘Beautiful’, and the continuing experiences of discrimination, especially in the criminal justice system, that plague the lives of Black people. The ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, which campaigns against the violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and right-wing nationalist vigilantes, perfectly encapsulates this.



Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)

BAME, the acronym for 'black, Asian and minority ethnic' (sometimes shortened to BME), is the way in which government and large organisations in the UK refer to people who are not White British.

While this term has wide currency and is understood by all, more and more people from ethnic minority backgrounds object to it, on different grounds. Some simply dislike the fact that any attention should be drawn at all to someone's ethnicity. They demand the right to be treated as individuals, not as members of a 'minoritised', disempowered group. Others feel that the label fails to distinguish between the very specific experiences of minority ethnic groups by lumping them all together. This is especially the case for white ethnic groups who experience marginalisation and discrimination, such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller people.

A key problem is that the expression 'BAME' was created for administrative purposes by people in positions of power in order to talk about largely undifferentiated groups of people who are 'minoritised' and disempowered by the very term. It is an ascribed (or given) identity, not an acronym that people from ethnic minority backgrounds use to refer to themselves. Instead, they tend to speak of themselves either by their skin colour, nationality, ethnicity, culture, faith, citizenship or some combination of the above (e.g. as Black, Nigerians, Gypsy, Jews, British Asians, etc).

While these objections are understandable, it remains essential that organisations have a way of capturing the experiences of people who belong to ethnic minority groups, because there are systematic differences and disadvantages linked to ethnicity. Unless we measure this specifically, there will be no awareness of the problem, no appropriate solution and no way to measure progress.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a social construct that divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as shared group membership, values, behavioural patterns, language, political and economic interests, history and ancestral geographical base. Unlike race, 'ethnicity' is a psychological, sociological and historical construct unrelated to biology. It may or may not be part of people's self-concept.

Typically, people take their own ethnicity for granted unless they are in a situation where it is brought to the fore: when groups with different norms come into contact, at times of competition or conflict, etc. Ethnicity is also a notion that majority groups often do not think applies to them (it does) unless they perceive that ethnicity to be threatened. For example, our research has found that some White English people resent filling ethnic monitoring forms, for instance, because they interpret this as making their majority ethnic status equivalent to that of minority ethnic groups.



About sex and gender

Sex

Sex refers to the medically-constructed categorisation of human beings as male or female, based on the appearance of the genitalia or on genetic markers, either via ultrasound or at birth. One of the political aims of the LGBT+ movement is to challenge the notion that someone's sex is a fixed, binary biological fact that should be associated with a specific gendered sexual identity. They do so by giving a strong voice to people whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex, who are gender non-conforming, non-binary, whose sexuality is fluid or otherwise unaligned with societal expectations associated with the female or male sex.

Sexuality and sexual orientation

Sexuality refers to the components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual practices, etc.

Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction or non-attraction to other people. Sexual orientation can be fluid, and people use a variety of labels to describe their sexual orientation.

Gender

Gender can refer to the role of a male or female in society, known as a gender role, or to an individual's concept of themselves, or gender identity.

Gender roles can be very prescriptive but they remain open to social change – a key aim of feminism being to change the reductive and oppressive gender norms and roles associated with being female.

Gender reassignment

This is a decision to change one's gender identity when an individual feels that their assigned sex at birth does not match their gender identity, a recognised medical condition called 'gender dysphoria'. Gender reassignment refers to individuals who have either undergone, intend to undergo or are currently undergoing medical and surgical treatment to alter the body to the desired sex, or who simply wish to live permanently in a different gender from their assigned sex at birth (without undergoing surgical or hormonal treatment).

'Transition' is the process and/or the period of time during which gender reassignment occurs (with or without medical intervention). People who have undertaken gender reassignment are sometimes referred to as Transgendered, or Trans.

It's important to note that sexual orientation and transgender are not related: a person's sexual orientation will not change as a result of gender reassignment.



LGBT+

This is the umbrella acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people. The plus (+) sign is there to include people of any sexual orientation or gender identity that is not included under LGBT – such as people who refuse a binary or fixed gender identity. It represents the steps these communities have taken to include people with fluid sexual preferences or gender identities. LGBT is still commonly used as shorthand – but using LGBT+ or the more extended LGBTQIA (see below) demonstrates an understanding and alliance with the present history of sexual and gender orientation equality.

LGBTQIA

This extended acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual.

It expands the LGBT terminology to overtly include and represent people who identify as queer, intersex or asexual. This reflects the movement's own efforts to self-reflect and open up to being more inclusive. Perhaps organisations trying to speak to these communities could follow suit.

It is interesting to note that the word 'queer' – until recently a term of abuse towards gay people (especially effeminate men) – has been reappropriated by the LGBTQIA community as a shorthand to capture the experiences and fluid identities of people who are openly exploring their sexuality and gender, who challenge fixed, binary sex categories and associated gender identities and sexual orientations. Indeed, some 'straight' people may be queer while many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals do not identify as queer. Again, the use of the word 'queer' is inherently political. It asks questions about the very nature of sex, gender and sexuality as social constructs.



About religion, faith and belief

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that unite people who adhere to them into one single moral community: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, etc.

Religion is an institution, while faith or belief are inner attitude, conviction or trust relating human beings to a supreme God or ultimate salvation. The requirement of 'faith' is at the heart of both Christianity and Islam but it is not a central part of all religions. For example, in Hindu and Buddhist Yoga traditions, trust is primarily in the guru or spiritual preceptor, and not necessarily in God.

The law provides protection for a person's religion or belief (including a lack of religion or belief) which typically impacts their life choices. While British institutions are secular and a growing number of British people declare that they are non-believers, the number of Muslims and Hindus, in particular, is increasing. Atheism (an active disbelief in the existence of God or gods), agnosticism (the view that nothing is known or can be known about God and therefore neither faith nor disbelief in God) and humanism (an ethical stance that emphasises the value and agency of human beings and promotes rationalism and empiricism over acceptance of religious faith or superstition) are also on the rise.

Organisations that seek to support their staff in bringing their 'whole selves' to work must understand that, for some people, religion is a primary identity. It is not something they can or should 'leave at the door' once they arrive at work. Cultivating a culture of religious literacy (being able to understand the role and function of religion and beliefs generally) is far more important than religious education (knowing the specific festivals, rituals and customs of the main religions). Religious literacy gives employers the confidence to respond to issues around religion and belief as they arise, and helps ensure that individuals who have religious beliefs feel respected and can openly discuss any sensitivities with their employers.



Closing thoughts

We cannot emphasise enough how important it is to remain attuned to changes in terminology, and to ensure that you take your lead from diverse voices within the communities themselves.

Having worked for more than 20 years in the field of diversity and inclusion (for statutory, charitable and private sector clients with very different aims and levels of sensitivity to these issues), we have been at the heart of debates, constantly learning and helping to shape the discussion. It's clear to us that there are often important differences in the ways in which insiders of a community talk about themselves and how outsiders refer to these same individuals. Within any one community, there are also different levels of identification with the group and degrees of political awareness. As we saw in relation to terms like 'queer' or 'Black' (not to mention 'Negro' – a term Martin Luther King used in an affirmative fashion but which is now utterly unacceptable), the connotations of a word can change radically over time, often as a result of reclaiming an identity that was once denigrated by others. By overwriting the terminology that was once used to persecute, marginalised communities move our society forward through sensitive, attuned, confident use of language.

As the language around diversity constantly evolves – paying attention to terminology by staying curious, asking around and being informed and self-aware is a significant way to respect, engage with and support the development of diversity in our world.



Contact us

Inclusive Transformation Specialists

We are well aware of the challenges in relation to diversity and inclusion. Our award-winning researchers, strategists and consultants thrive on tackling difficult challenges around sensitive subjects. For each one of our clients, there is a lot at stake. So we work in close collaboration to understand the context and sensitivities around each brief. We aim to give our clients the confidence to transform their organisations, reach new audiences and go boldly where others have not, knowing they are in capable hands.

Dr. Marie-Claude Gervais
Co-Founder & Director
marie-claude@versiti.co

Dr. John Whittle
Senior Research Strategist
john@versiti.co

Hirra Khan Adeogun
Researcher
hirra@versiti.co

Visit our website at: [versiti.co](https://www.versiti.co) or call us on **+44 (0) 20 3515 3301**

“

Working with Versiti has been absolutely brilliant! We felt supported from the first meeting. They brought innovative thinking, methodological rigour and creativity to the project. It has generated a wealth of actionable insights. Versiti's commitment went well beyond contractual obligations and we feel they have been fantastic at combining the real depth of thinking that academics usually bring, the pace and practical mindset of business, and the values and passion more usual in the third sector. I recommend Versiti wholeheartedly and would be really enthused about working with them again.

Dr Catherine Dennison, Senior Manager, Policy & Research, RNIB

”

VERSITI