

Semantics and terminology

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Introductory notes

Words change in their meanings and implications over time, and mean different things to different people.

Changes of language occur partly because the outer world changes; partly because understandings of the world change; and partly because various groups and communities gain greater power and influence than hitherto and are in consequence able to insist their voices, viewpoints and self-definitions are listened to and taken into account.

In consequence, there are worries and concerns about avoiding offence, and about so-called political correctness.

This paper recalls some of the principal debates and discussions which have taken place in relation to equalities over the years.

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GENERAL

Equality/diversity

As moral and political values, these may be seen as two sides of the same coin – neither without the other is complete. But they can be current in different contexts, since discourse of diversity may be preferred by those who do not wish talk about racism and unequal power relations. In UK and European law, the preferred term is equality. A phrase using both words is in increasing use.

DISABILITY

Disability/impairment

In the field of disability equality, words vary in their meaning and implications according to the context, framework or theoretical model within which they are used.

The term ***social model of disability*** has been developed by disabled campaigners and their non-disabled allies over the last 30 years to emphasise that disability should be seen as a social process, not as a characteristic of an individual. The social model sees disability as arising from barriers, beyond the person, of attitude, organisation and environment. An ***impairment*** is a long term loss of physical or mental function.

Through the Disability Discrimination Act duties to promote disability equality and to provide reasonable adjustments, and through subsequent guidance issued by the Disability Rights Commission and the Office for Disability Issues, the social model of disability is enshrined in UK legislation.

The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities enshrines this paradigm shift from medical model to social model thinking. It was ratified by the UK government on 8 June 2009.

According to the social model, someone who has an impairment is disabled by barriers in society, essentially, not by the impairment itself. The effects of these can be ameliorated by reasonable adjustments and changing attitudes and practices, but to be fully included disabled people need activities, services and environments to be planned and designed to be barrier-free. For this reason the term *disabled people* is increasingly preferred in the UK to the term *people with disabilities*.

The term *disabled*, it has been said, should be seen as a verb not as an adjective – it refers to things being done to people, not to what or who they are.

The term *disablement* is sometimes used to refer to the social, physical and attitudinal processes which lead to certain people becoming seen and treated in disabling ways.

Special educational needs

SEN and *SEND* are nouns and should never be used as adjectives (as in 'SEN children').

However, it has also been argued they should never be used at all, for they risk locating problems in children and young people rather than in barriers, including attitudinal barriers, in the social and school environment. From the point of view of the social model of disability (see above), children who have what are called special educational needs may be more accurately described as disabled.

ETHNICITY

Race/ethnicity

The term **race** appears in legislation, as for example in the terms *race equality*, *race relations* and *racial group*, and also therefore in much administrative usage. There is no scientific basis for dividing the human species into races, however. The term **ethnicity**, which implies cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of identity as well as (sometimes but not always) visible differences, more accurately reflects the intentions in race relations legislation. Also, it is more consistent with the understanding that forms of cultural racism (for example, Islamophobia and antisemitism) can be as serious in their effects as colour racism. It is increasingly the preferred term in DCSF usage.

Statistical breakdowns published by the DCSF in recent years have always used the term *by ethnicity* in their titles, if appropriate, not *by race* or *by racial group*. This is also the established practice in other government departments.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission, amongst others, often uses the composite term *race/ethnicity* implying it sees the two terms as interchangeable, or considers that neither term is sufficient if unaccompanied by the other.

The term 'BME'

The term *BME* (short for 'black and minority ethnic') can be useful for providing a broad-brush overview in order to refer to all people not categorised as 'white British'. It is seldom if ever helpful, however, for clarifying the practical measures which need to be introduced to make improvements in provision.

Further objections to the term include:

- it runs the risk of dehumanising, as does any such use of an abbreviation
- it implies Black people are not of a minority or minoritised background
- it cannot be used grammatically as an adjective before a noun such as 'person' or 'people'

- it reflects a simplistic majority/minority distinction that is frequently inaccurate or inappropriate
- it is arguably no more than code for the discredited term 'coloured'.

'Group'

The term **group** is used by statisticians when referring to tabulations based on the categories in the 2001 Census (as, for example, in 'the Black Caribbean group'). It also appears in legislation ('*racial group*'). In most or all other contexts, however, it can be subtly demeaning. Terms such as **background**, **heritage** and **community** are preferable.

Racism/xenophobia

Arguably the same, though also corresponding to visible/invisible differences amongst those who are targeted by racist prejudice and discrimination, and to the distinction between colour racism and culture racism. The term *xenophobia* is much more used in other European countries than in UK.

Islamophobia/anti-Muslim racism

The latter term is arguably clearer, since it does not imply a mental disorder. But the former is now current and is useful for referring to a general climate of opinion. Like antisemitism, it refers to a form of racism. In certain international organisations the preferred term is ***intolerance and discrimination against Muslims***.

FAITH

Religion/faith/belief

Historically, **religion** has referred to a general tradition and ethno-religious identity, whereas **faith** has referred to inner beliefs and commitments (as in '*faith, hope and charity*'). Recently, this distinction has been changing, with *faith* being used increasingly to refer to ethno-religious tradition or to institutions with religious connections (as for example in '*faith schools*') rather than, necessarily, to inner beliefs.

However, the term in legislation, derived from EU directives, is *religion or belief*.

GENDER

Gender/sex

The former term refers to social and cultural roles and expectations, the latter to biological differences. The original legislation in the UK refers to '*sex discrimination*' but more recently the legal duty is to promote '*gender equality*'.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

The self-definition preferred by people who are targeted by homophobia and transphobia, and who are now protected by anti-discrimination legislation, is *lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans*, frequently abbreviated to *LGBT*. The term *homosexual* is not seen as acceptable, since it was originally coined to imply deviance or a medical condition. Older members of the LGBT community, however, may be more comfortable with its use than younger.

The legal term to describe the grounds on which unlawful discrimination takes place, derived in part from EU directives, is **sexual orientation**. This term covers heterosexual, lesbian, gay and bisexual people whether or not they are celibate. Many LGB people nowadays prefer the term **sexual identity**.

The terms **homophobia** and **heterosexism** refer to two sides of the same coin, the latter describing the presumption that all meaningful sexual relationships are between people of different sexes.

The term **heteronormativity** has been coined as being more accurate and expressive than *heterosexism*. It is used by some writers to refer to widespread taken-for-granted assumptions about what is 'normal' in relation not only to sexual identity but also to other equality strands, for example disability, ethnicity and gender.

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Source: Adapted slightly from documentation provided at a conference organised by the Education and Diversity Unit (EDU) at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), February 2009.

For a fuller discussion of semantics and terminology in relation to equality issues, see *The Language of Equality: a discussion paper* by Ziauddin Sardar, published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in August 2008, available in Word or PDF from <http://edit.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publicationsandresources/Pages/TheLanguageofEquality.aspx>