

Glossary of Equity Terms

2nd Edition



COLORADO
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Department of Public Health
& Environment



In an effort to provide common language, the Office of Health Equity has compiled a list of terms relevant to the work and movement to advance equity. Take note that evolving language is a positive sign in social justice movements. To that end, this list will be modified on an ongoing basis.

If a term exists that you'd like to further explore or you don't quite agree with, we encourage you to browse the internet for additional articles, blogs, etc. on the topic. Just as language evolves over time, our opinions and beliefs may also evolve.

Ableism: The discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. It is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require "fixing" and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as "less than," and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities.

*Adapted from [Access Living](#)

Ally: Someone from a dominant group (who experiences unearned access and/or power) who acts in support of non-dominant group members. Allies practice genuine **allyship**. That is, they take action, reflect on their own thinking and beliefs, seek out learning opportunities, take initiative in interpersonal relations, and work to create systems of equity.

Anti-Racism: Some form of focused and sustained action, which includes inter-cultural, inter-faith, multi-lingual and inter-abled (i.e., differently abled) communities with the intent to change a system or an institutional policy, practice, or procedure which has racist effects.

*Adapted from the [Anti-Racism Digital Library](#)

BIPOC: Acronym for Black, Indigenous People, and People of Color; the term is used to acknowledge that Indigenous and Black people have been most impacted by whiteness, both historically and in the present day. This

shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context.

*Adapted from [The BIPOC Project](#)

Black Liberation Movement: The specific movements in the U.S. that have focused on addressing the oppression of Black people, including the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the current Black Lives Matter movement.

*Adapted from [Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation](#) by Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens and Jasmine Syedullah

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

Classism: The discrimination and oppression of individuals based on several variables that determine one's socioeconomic status, such as income, wealth, race, power, position, occupation, and education. It's important to note that there is an inextricable link between classism and racism and that one cannot be addressed without the other.

* Adapted from the [Luna Jiménez Institute for Social Transformation](#)

Climate Justice: The acknowledgement that communities of color and low-income neighborhoods are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis as a result of systemic racism and class discrimination both here and abroad. Climate justice supports a just transition for communities and workers away from a fossil fuel economy. It focuses on making the necessary systemic changes to address the unequal environmental burdens on these communities as they are forced to adapt to a changing climate.

*Adapted from the [Climate Justice Alliance](#)

Colonialism: The expansion and domination of one group over another

along with the theft of their land and resources. In social justice work, the term often refers specifically to **settler colonialism**, which operates by replacing Indigenous populations with invasive settlers that develop a distinct identity and sovereignty. It recognizes that colonialism is not a project of the past but is rather an ongoing effort to oppress and exploit indigenous people, their culture, and native lands.

* Adapted from [Settler Colonialism](#) by Adam Barker and Emma Battell Lowman

Community: Groups of people who are impacted by policies and programs. In the context of equity work, “community” refers to people who have historically been left out of the decision-making process. A community is not necessarily limited by geographic boundaries.

Community Engagement: A two-way exchange of information, ideas and resources that offers opportunities for communities to exercise power in decision-making. It considers the diversity of communities, including culture and race, and creates an inclusive and accessible process.

Covering: When members of marginalized groups downplay their unique identities for fear of drawing unwanted attention or making others uncomfortable.

Cultural Appropriation: A dominant culture’s adoption of items or practices from an oppressed culture with the goal of profiting or gaining social status from their acquisition (e.g., non-Indigenous restaurant owners selling Indigenous cuisine, white people in Black hairstyles). Unlike respectful forms of cultural exchange, cultural appropriation does not honor other cultures and is an act of theft in which an oppressed group is stripped of its unique cultural heritage.

Cultural Responsiveness/Responsivity: The ability to relate to, and hold in

equal regard, individuals in one's own culture as well as other cultures. It requires recognizing and honoring diverse ways of communicating and being and strives to create an environment where all people can understand and be understood.

*Adapted from the [National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems](#)

Decolonization: The long-term process of unsettling bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological colonial power. Decolonization is not a metaphor for other social justice objectives, and most closely relates to the return of specific lands and resources to specific Indigenous peoples. Decolonization also refers to valuing Indigenous worldviews and dismantling systems and ideologies that uphold settler-colonial supremacy. (See **colonialism**.)

*Adapted from [Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples](#) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and [Decolonization is Not a Metaphor](#) by Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang

Deficit Mindset: The belief that an individual's deficiencies are solely determined by their cultural background and/or their own actions and behavior. It fails to recognize how the norms of a dominant group place barriers to success for oppressed groups because of their varied life experiences. The term is often used in the context of the education system to describe when academic deficiencies in students of color are blamed on the students themselves or their communities rather than structural inequities.

*Adapted from [Dismantling Deficit Thinking](#) by Chelsea Heinbach, Brittany Paloma Fiedler, Rosan Mitola and Emily Pattni

Disparities: Measurable differences among groups of people. Inequities cause disparities.

Displacement: A process by which families involuntarily have to move, generally to a new neighborhood or city, because they can no longer afford the high costs of new development. Oftentimes, families affected by displacement are low-income families and/or families of color who may have lived in a neighborhood for generations. In an international context, the term refers to the most vulnerable populations of a nation fleeing to become refugees as a result of political instability, persecution, violence, or human rights violations.

Diversity: A description of differences usually based on identities such as race, gender, ability, etc. Diversity \neq Equity and does not always happen intentionally.

Dominant Identity: Category of a social identity that automatically provides access to power, opportunity, and privilege.

*Adapted from [The Complexity of Identity: "Who Am I?"](#) by Beverly Daniel Tatum

Environmental Justice: The principle that all people and communities have a right to live, work, and play in a safe and healthy environment. Environmental justice recognizes that, due to racism and class discrimination, communities of color and low-income neighborhoods are the most likely to be disproportionately harmed by toxic chemicals, exposures, economic injustices, and negative land uses, and the least likely to benefit from efforts to improve the environment.

*Adapted from the [Climate Justice Alliance](#)

Equality: Assures everyone is treated the same regardless of the starting point or context. Equality \neq Equity.

Equity: When everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has the opportunity to thrive. This requires eliminating barriers like

poverty and repairing injustices in systems such as education, health, criminal justice and transportation.

Ethnicity: A social construct that groups people by shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs. While race is often considered part of one's ethnicity, it is only one aspect of ethnicity among several others.

*Adapted from [The American Sociological Association](#)

Forms of community organizing:

- **Grassroots:** A movement where community members self-organize to take action on an issue on behalf of their community.
- **Grasstops:** A movement where an individual or organization that has working relationships with people in positions of power represents the interests of a community and advocates on their behalf.
- **Astroturf:** An attempt by organizations to mask their messaging to make it seem as if it originated from a grassroots or grasstops organization. The messaging is typically a symbolic gesture that isn't followed up with substantial action.

Gentrification: The process of supposedly improving a neighborhood through new development such as food stores, bike lanes, and health services, which may lead to the displacement of long-time residents.

Implicit Bias: Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions. People are usually unaware of their own biases because they operate at the subconscious level.

Inclusion: What you do with diversity to ensure individuals have the opportunity to fully participate in decision-making processes. It intentionally promotes a sense of belonging where the inherent worth and

dignity of all people are recognized and leverages abilities, unique qualities and perspectives of individuals.

Indigenous: Refers to a distinct pre-colonial culture, society, or people. It's important to note that "Indigenous" is capitalized to identify unique, ethnic communities with political representation. There are Indigenous people all over the world, but in most contexts "Indigenous" should be used to reference the Indigenous people of a specific land or territory. Indigenous is more than an ethnic identifier; it is connected to sovereignty and nationhood and is not a subcategory within other identities.

*Adapted from [The Native American Journalists Association Style Guide](#) and resources from the [Meztli Project](#)

Individualistic versus systemic framing: In communications, individualistic framing refers to the interpretation of outcomes as a result of individual will and initiative while systemic framing focuses on root causes and the context in which people live. Individualistic framing fails to recognize the social determinants of health and behavior and contributes to implicit bias.

*Adapted from [Beyond Training and the "Skills Gap"](#) by RaceForward

Inequities: When systems, policies, and practices create less opportunity between groups that are systemic, avoidable and unjust. These could be in health, education, housing, criminal justice, etc. and are based on factors like gender, race, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation or immigration status.

Intersectionality: The compounding effects of discrimination for individuals and communities who have more than one social identity that is oppressed on the basis of gender, race, class, age, ability, religious status, sexual identity, education level, language, etc. These intersecting identities lead to greater inequities (e.g., [Native American women](#) or white

gay men with disabilities).

Language Inclusivity: Avoiding expressions that discriminate or show bias against groups of people based on race, gender or socioeconomic status. It is the intentional use of impartial speaking and writing that resonates with audiences of diverse backgrounds.

*Adapted from [How to Use & Promote Inclusive Language at Your Organization](#) by Caroline Forsey

Language Justice: An approach that creates inclusive, multilingual spaces in which all languages are honored equally and speakers of different languages benefit from sharing with one another.

Latinx: A gender-neutral, non-binary, inclusive way of referring to the ethnic and racial identity of Latin Americans (and their descendants) that resists defaulting to the masculine form of the word. The “x” does not imply a specific gender - as would the ‘o’ (masculine) or the ‘a’ (feminine) for nouns in Spanish and Portuguese. It is used to disrupt the grammatical binary that is inherent in these Romance languages. The Latinx identity includes those who choose to identify as Latina or Latino.

*Adapted from [What Does Latinx Mean, Exactly?](#) By Irina Gonzalez

LGBTQ+: An acronym for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer (or questioning), as well as individuals with non-conforming gender identities (i.e., genderqueer) and sexual orientations (e.g., asexual, pansexual).

Marginalized Identity: Category of social identity that is likely to experience oppression or marginalization in mainstream society.

*Adapted from [The Complexity of Identity: “Who Am I?”](#) by Beverly Daniel Tatum

Microaffirmations: Brief or casual comments/exchanges, verbal and non-verbal, that send affirming and inclusive messages to individuals from a marginalized or oppressed group in order to foster healthy relationships.

Microaggressions: Brief or casual comments/exchanges, verbal and non-verbal, that send degrading messages to individuals because of their membership in any marginalized or oppressed group.

Oppression: Unjustly preventing an individual or community from having the same level of opportunity to thrive as more privileged groups. It's important to note that, colloquially, the term is usually only used to describe the most severe forms of subjugation (e.g., slavery), but in equity work the term refers more broadly to all forms of unjust deprivation.

Person of Color: A person who does not identify as white or with European heritage.

Power: Our ability, as individuals and as communities, to produce an intended effect. Power manifests in both positive and negative ways and shows up formally and informally.

Race: A social construct that artificially groups people by skin tone and other physical traits. The concept, which has no genetic or scientific basis, was created and used to justify social and economic oppression of people of color by white people.

*Adapted from [Luna Jiménez Institute for Social Transformation](#)

Racial Equity: A social framework in which institutions and systems give people of all races an equal opportunity to thrive. This requires dismantling systemic racism to uplift people who are members of oppressed races. The ultimate goal of racial equity is to ensure that the color of one's skin is not a determining factor of life outcomes.

Racial Imposter Syndrome: One's sense of not belonging to a particular race due to anxieties or fears that they do not adequately meet the socially accepted criteria or conform to the stereotypes of that race (e.g., not feeling Black enough while growing up in a predominately white suburban neighborhood, not feeling Hispanic/Latinx enough as a monolingual English speaker, feeling "not Black or white enough" as a biracial individual).

Redlining: A practice by the Federal Housing Administration from the 1930s-70s in which neighborhoods where people of color lived were deemed too undesirable and "risky" for housing development. Banks also denied home loans to people of color who sought to move to more desirable neighborhoods. As a result, people of color could not buy homes or live where they wanted, and developers were prevented from improving neighborhoods where people of color lived. While the practice is now illegal, its legacy has meant that most people of color have been excluded from acquiring generational wealth.

Savior Complex: An attitude in which someone in a position of privilege thinks they can use their knowledge and resources to save oppressed peoples from their misfortune while excluding them from decision-making processes. This attitude holds a deficit mindset and objectifies oppressed peoples. It also fails to acknowledge the structural factors of oppression, interferes with efforts to advance equity, and is often self-serving.

Social Determinants of Health: The social and economic factors that determine where we live, work, play, and pray. These factors demonstrate that one's health is not merely a result of individual behavior, but largely due to barriers in systems and institutions that prevent oppressed groups from thriving.

Stereotype Threat: A situation in which one feels at risk of confirming or

conforming to negative stereotypes about their social group and thus underperforms. Prominent studies (such as Steele & Aronson, 1995) have demonstrated that this phenomenon is a contributing factor to underachievement in students of color.

*Adapted from [Stereotype Threat: An Overview](#) by Steve Stroessner and Catherine Good

Structural Racism: When our institutions, such as housing, education and transportation, collectively create systems and policies that work better for white people than for people of color. Structural racism limits opportunities for some, but contributes to poor outcomes for all. Other forms of structural discrimination may relate to classism, ableism, heterosexism, etc.

The Three Levels of Racism:

- **Interpersonal racism:** Prejudiced assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intents of others by race that lead to discriminatory actions based on those assumptions.
- **Institutional racism:** Discriminatory policies and systems that create differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race.
- **Internalized racism:** The implicit acceptance by stigmatized “races” of the negative assumptions about their own abilities and intrinsic worth.

*Adapted from [Levels of Racism: A Theoretical Framework and a Gardener's Tale](#) by Dr Camara Jones

Thrive: When a person has the opportunity to make healthy choices, afford food and housing, have good jobs that can sustain a family, attend quality schools for better education, and fulfil their potential.

Tokenism: The practice of making only a symbolic effort to be inclusive to

members of marginalized groups, especially by making use of a small number of people to represent the entirety of that group and to give the appearance of racial or sexual inclusion.

Transactional vs Transformational Work

- **Transactional**: Solutions “transact” with institutions to get a short term gain, but leave the existing structure in place. Transactional work tends to be: Issue-based efforts and helps individuals negotiate existing structures.
- **Transformational**: Solutions alter the ways institutions operate, thereby shifting cultural values and political will to create equity. Transformational work tends to be policy initiatives that cross multiple institutions and shifts efforts towards proactive solutions.

*Adapted from [Advancing Racial Equity and Transforming Government](#) by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity

Transgender: A person whose gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth.

Tribal Sovereignty: Tribal Sovereignty is the right of Native American Tribes to govern themselves. Sovereignty rights are often, but not always, legally recognized by the federal government. Specifically, the US Constitution recognizes that Tribes are distinct governments and they generally have the same powers as federal and state governments to regulate their internal affairs. Tribal Sovereignty is not delegated by the US government; it can be affirmed or infringed upon by federal and state governments, but it is inherent to Tribal nations.

Undocumented: Refers to immigrants and refugees who do not hold any official residential status within the country they reside in. The term is used in place of "illegal", which is a derogatory label used to exclude undocumented residents from the national community and the privileges

thereof.

White Exceptionalism: The belief held by some white allies that they are the exception to white racism even though they fail to address the implicit ways in which they perpetuate white supremacy. These individuals are often more interested in not seeming racist than actually improving the lives of people of color. This is sometimes referred to as **fakequity** (Erin Okono).

*Adapted from [Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor](#) by Layla Saad

White Fragility: Discomfort and defensiveness, often triggered by feelings of fear or guilt, on the part of a white person when confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice.

White Supremacy: A historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of nations and people of color by white peoples of European descent for the purpose of establishing, maintaining, and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.

*Adapted from [Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation](#) by Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens and Jasmine Syedullah

A note on capitalizing “Black”

When referring to a person or community, “Black” is capitalized to convey a shared sense of history and identity among people in the African diaspora and within Africa. This puts the term on equal racial, ethnic, and cultural footing as terms like Latinx, Asian American, American Indians & Alaska Natives, etc.

While some publications have also chosen to capitalize “white”, many others have taken a stance against this on the principle of equity. Capitalizing “white” could be seen as a symbolic nod to white supremacy, and it’s important to note that the majority of white Americans do not see themselves as a collective ethnic group the same way that Black Americans do.

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