Language and Terminology

Background

Following discussions at initial Race Equality Task Force (RETF) meetings about categorisation, language and terminology in relation to 'race', a small group of RETF members convened in January 2021 to interrogate this further and make recommendations to the wider RETF. This note was produced to reflect the group's discussion and share recommendations for language and terminology with respect to 'race' and the racial categories in which each of us are placed. The document is not intended to be exhaustive, and reflects the scope and nature of the small group conversation. The wider RETF provided input and approved the approach, as outlined below. This document is a reflection of our particular moment in time, and we recognise that as language and terminology change and evolve, we must also continue to critically examine, debate and revise our understandings and usages.

Preamble

Our use of language as a means of communicating information, expressing ourselves and understanding the world, cannot be separated from the power structures within which we all live and operate. The words we use and the meanings we ascribe to them define our reality – how we fit into the world and how we feel about ourselves and others. Often those words are imposed, sometimes negotiated, and sometimes subverted. Language can be an instrument of domination and oppression, and equally of self-determination and solidarity. Language matters, and we should be intentional in its use.

We recognise that language is constantly changing. New terms arise, others fall out of favour, and some are redefined – each has its unique history born out of a specific context. Therefore, we need to be continually self-critical and open to an ongoing process of refinement, being agile enough to review and change our terminology as needed. With our existing vocabulary on 'race' and 'race equality', we all have learning (and unlearning) to do. Personal preferences for self-identification are innumerable. Our small group discussion itself demonstrated how challenging it is to agree shared terms and how limiting our terms continue to be. It is therefore important that the RETF use this opportunity and platform to encourage the university community to embrace these challenges and engage staff and students in a conversation about 'race' and racism. The objective must be to *increase* dialogue on these important issues – rather than demonise usage deemed incorrect but used in good faith.

We understand race to be a social construct without biological basis. It is a proxy for ancestry but there is no one gene or set of genes that determines a person's race. What can seem real in the form of physical appearance – skin colour, hair, facial features – and family history, does not translate into separate races at the genetic level. The limiting categories by

which we have organised human life were constructed and rooted in specific historical contexts and created a racial hierarchy privileging those considered 'white'.

It was agreed that while the act of categorising people into races (and defining those categories) is itself an exertion of power that continues today, we cannot yet abandon using existing racial categories. Not only do we need to operate within public and other regulatory systems that require using specific terminology (e.g. BME/BAME) we also need to categorise in order to help identify and redress discrimination and inequality.

Guiding principles

In our consideration of the language we wish to use as a Task Force, we suggest that the following guiding principles should inform our approach.

1. We aspire to resist reductive and 'homogenising' racial categories wherever possible (e.g. placing all 'non white' groups under one heading). The terminology we use should be as precise as possible, context specific and relevant to the groups and issues we are addressing. For instance, using 'Black' could mean people of African or Caribbean heritage, born in the UK or abroad, or those of mixed heritage, so those particular details could be clarified as appropriate.

2. Where bureaucratic, legal or regulatory frameworks require the use of specific terminology, we will adhere to those requirements as needed, but believe that the University should move beyond these limited frameworks and use terms preferred by our community, taking our lead from those with lived experiences of racism and/or other forms of prejudice.

3. As an educational institution, we strive to enable more research and dialogue on these issues and engage all of our staff and students across the collegiate University. We want to ensure that we are addressing discrimination across the board – examining data by individual racial or ethnic groups and not in aggregate form as much as practically possible.

Recommendations

- Limiting our use of 'BME/BAME' to situations and contexts deemed appropriate, for example, for bureaucratic functions such as data collection required for external bodies.
    - *Reasoning*:
        - These reductive acronyms mask variation among different racial and ethnic groups, and in some instances can be used by institutions to obscure information (e.g. hiding relative disadvantages faced by certain racial or ethnic groups, and not differentiating between national and international status);
        - The terms can suggest that white people do not have an ethnicity;
        - The terms are commonly misunderstood by international staff and students.

- Preference for using the term 'racialised' as opposed to 'race', and using quotation marks around 'race'
    - *Reasoning:*
        - To underscore the active social construction of 'race' rather than perceptions of 'races' as fixed and static categories;
        - To emphasise that we do not have 'races', and instead we have people who have been actively racialised (including white people) – assigned a race by those with the power to enact these categories.

- Suggest that the following terms and phrases could be used. Individuals should be asked how they prefer to be identified. We acknowledge limitations of these terms and deliberately provide a range of terms to emphasise that there is not one right term:
    - People racialised as _____ (Black, White, Asian, etc.);
    - People of _____ heritage (East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, etc.);
    - People of colour – this is a widely used US phrase created within the US context as a more affirming term to counter the use of 'coloured' or 'non-white' or 'minority', but we recognise it is still essentialising, lumping many groups together, and can be used to obscure information;
    - People of colour, racialised as BME – a blend of US and UK terminology;
    - Global majority – this is a more affirming and less victimising phrase, but can be interpreted in many ways and is very broad.

- Minimise the use of 'othering' and potentially denigrating language like 'minority' (implying 'lesser status') or 'not/non-white' (describing a group by what they are not), and avoid using overly broad terms to refer to individuals (e.g. 'the diverse candidate').

- Recognising that while terms such as 'people who experience racism' and 'Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC)' are being used within our University community given its international nature, they were not preferred phrases. The former was felt to be too broad, and the latter is a US phrase that has limitations in its use in the UK, particularly with respect to the term 'indigenous' (which can be used by far right, anti-immigrant groups claiming indigeneity).

Specifically with respect to RETF work, the group suggests that we use any wider University engagement/consultation activities, including the RETF engagement activities with staff and students and the external consultant process, to ask our University community how they identify, to help gain greater clarity over accepted and accessible language used by our staff and students. Additionally, we can develop a more detailed 'position' paper on '*Race' as a social construct* as part of the RETF work if a lead can be identified.

It follows from the preamble to this paper that maintaining a vigilant, open and self-reflexive debate on the implications of language should underpin and inform everything we do. This is an ongoing process, which will enrich our work. We will not let the provisional and contingent nature of terminology slow down our discussions or the development of other anti-racist recommendations.

Resources:

- **Inc Arts' #BAMEOver statement**: https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vQkg5IIoeAqMjMF6VW-eIEtEUEgK3GLudW1meE2DILbJPZYPiP0dO3Qwx6YVxBFxOhI1KEp5swpok80/pub
- **The Only Accurate Part of 'BAME' is the 'and',** by Dr Foluke I Adebisi https://folukeafrica.com/the-only-acceptable-part-of-bame-is-the-and/
- **Race Fluency, Getting the language right,** by Doyin Atewologun, PhD, Fatima Tresh, PhD, Joy Warmington, PhD, MSc, Cert Ed http://deltaalphapsi.com/our-insights/race-fluency/