

## Empowering Language- Terminology

### "ISMS" AND RELATED TERMS

**Ism:** The combination of prejudice and power that creates a system of advantages based on dominant structures and ideology/ideas.

**Ableism:** Ableism is a system of oppression based on ability. Ableism is any attitude, action, or institutional practice backed by institutional power which subordinates people because of their perceived ability. It is any social relations, practices, and ideas that presume that all people are able-bodied. The mere presumption that everyone is non-disabled is effectively discriminatory in itself, creating environments which are hostile to people with disabilities.

**Ageism:** Ageism is a system of oppression based on age. Ageism is an attitude, action, or institutional practice backed up by institutional power which subordinates people because of their age, usually directed towards old(er) people and young people.

**Agency:** The capacity to make choices and the ability to impose those choices in the world.

**Ally:** Someone who understands the many layers of oppression, can identify positions of privilege that they hold, and actively works to rectify inequity. This includes people who mutually understand and recognize each others' oppressions and work towards building coalitions in order to address inequity.

**Anti-Semitism:** Over time, anti-semitism has come to represent oppression of the Jewish community and Jewish people. In fact, a "Semite" is formally defined as a descriptor for people who come from and/or speak one of a group of related languages that are thought to come from a common language, Semitic. Semites, therefore, include Arabs, Canaanites, some Ethiopians, and Aramaean tribes, in addition to Hebrews. Semitic people have a shared history in the Arab peninsula, the Mediterranean coast, Mesopotamia, the Nile River delta, and Palestine. They have also been similarly, although not identically, targeted in modern societies.

**Classism:** Classism is a system of oppression based on class status. Classism is any attitude, action, or institutional practice that subordinates people due to their economic condition. A person's class is determined by access to a mix of resources including, but not limited to money, culture, contacts, and formal education. Class includes food, clothing, language, cars, entertainment, work, and much more.

**Citizenship Discrimination:** Citizenship discrimination denies people access to resources based on their citizenship status. This access to resources is generally denied based on being born outside of a particular country and/or not going through outlined legal processes to gain citizenship status. This practice can exclude or systematically deny benefits or access to undocumented people working or living in that country.

**Colonialism:** The domination/enslavement of one people or nation by another people or nation for the sole benefit of the oppressor nation/state. Colonialism actively removes people's access to independence by denying them avenues to create and maintain ownership and/or control over products, family, and culture. This process occurs through, but is not limited to, the exploitation of people, labor, land, and resources.

**Disability Discrimination:** Also referred to as "Ableism" or "Disablism," disability discrimination is discrimination against people based, most often, on the physical ability of their bodies. An "ableist" society is said to be one that assumes non-disabled individuals to be the standard of 'normal'. Continued discrimination results in public and private

architectural structures, places, and even services, including education and social work, that are built to serve 'standard' people, thereby excluding those with disabilities. It is also a system by which mainstream society denigrates, devalues, and thus oppresses those with disabilities, while privileging those without disabilities.

**Heterosexism:** Heterosexism is a system of oppression based on one's sexual orientation and/or not conforming to a gender binary (a social construction of gender allowing only two gender expressions). Heterosexism is any attitude, action, or institutional practice backed by institutional power which subordinates people because of their sexual orientation and/or a gender presentation/identity that does not maintain the gender binary. This includes **Homophobia**, which is the fear or hatred of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer people. It is also fear of being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer and/or fear of being perceived as any of those identities.

**Institutional racism:** Discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and inequitable opportunities and impacts—based on race—produced and perpetuated by institutions (e.g. schools, mass media, etc.).

**Internalized Oppression:** An experience of oppression as internal and personal that occurs for people who are subjected to oppression. The internalizing of oppression can look like a belief in the prejudices and stereotypes about the identity group that the person is a member of. This is exhibited in attitudes, behaviors, speech and self-confidence. A person who has internalized oppression may alter their practices to reflect the stereotypes and norms of the dominant group. Internalized oppression can create low self-esteem and self-doubt. It can also be projected outward as fear, criticism or distrust of one's own identity group.

**Islamophobia:** Islamophobia refers to unfounded fear of and hostility towards Islam and Muslims. Such fear and hostility leads to discrimination against Muslims, exclusions of Muslims from mainstream political or social process, stereotyping, the presumption of guilt by association, and hate crimes.

**Jewish Oppression:** Jewish oppression is a combination of historical and cultural practices that marginalizes, blames, and alienates Jewish people. Such practices include cultural invalidation, punishment, pogroms, concentration camps, and forced assimilation. Jewish oppression has come to be synonymous with anti-semitism. Please see below.

**Privilege:** Privilege operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels and gives advantages, access, favors, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of marginalized groups. In the United States, privilege is granted to people who have membership in one or more of these social identity groups: white people, able-bodied people, heterosexuals, cisgender people, males, Christians, middle or owning class people, middle-aged people, and English-speaking people, amongst others. Privilege is commonly invisible to or taken for granted by people who have it. People in dominant groups often believe that they have earned the privileges that they enjoy or that everyone could have access to these privileges if only they worked to earn them. In fact, privileges are unearned and they are granted to people in the dominant groups whether they want those privileges or not, and regardless of their stated intent.

**Racism:** Racism is a system of oppression that consists of racial prejudice and discrimination – supported by institutional power and authority – used to the advantage of one race and the disadvantage of another race or other races. The critical element which differentiates racism from prejudice and discrimination is the use of institutional power and

authority to support white supremacy, reiterate prejudices, and enforce discriminatory behaviors in systematic ways with far-reaching outcomes and effects.

**Religious Bigotry:** Holding blindly and intolerantly to a particular religious creed, opinion, prejudice, or narrow-mindedness.

**Religious Discrimination:** Religious discrimination is a system of disadvantages, which are bestowed upon people who are not part of a specific religious group. These disadvantages generally arise from the assumption of one (or more) religion as the social norm. This leads to the exclusion of people who do not practice that or those religions through institutional discrimination alongside neglecting their cultural and religious practices and heritage.

**Sexism:** Sexism is a system of oppression based on prejudice against one's gender. Sexism is any attitude, action, or institutional practice – backed up by institutional power – which subordinates people because of their (real or perceived) gender.

**Structural racism:** Structural racism is the normalization and legitimization of dynamics (historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal) that systematically give advantage to white people while producing negative outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy—the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of people of color. Structural racism encompasses 1) the history that laid the foundation for white supremacy, 2) the culture that we live in that normalizes and perpetuates racism, 3) the interconnected institutions and policies across society that provide legitimacy and reinforcement to racism.

**Transphobia:** The irrational fear, loathing, hatred and discriminatory treatment used to take power away from people who are perceived to break or blur stereotypical gender roles (transgender, two-spirit, gender-queer, Male to Female or Female to Male transsexuals).

### **PEOPLE AND IDENTITY RELATED TERMS**

**African American:** Refers to people of African descent who were born in the United States. The term is preferable to "Afro-American" because African heritage is clearly identified and named. This identity often refers to a shared history of forced migration as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and/or ancestors who were enslaved in the Americas.

**Arab:** Refers to people who are born in or descendants of one of the 22 Arab Nations (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritanian, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) as defined by the League of Arab Nations. The term "Arab", depending on the context, can refer to a range of identity-related factors including geography, citizenship, language, politics, ethnicity, and race.

**Asian American:** Refers to people of Asian descent living in the United States, including people of Indian, Pakistani, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Hmong, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Chinese descent, etc. Please note that the term "Oriental" is considered obsolete and pejorative.

**Black:** A term referring to people of African descent who may be from any part of the world.

**Bisexual:** People who form primary loving and sexual relationships with women and men. Many people avoid this term because of its implication that there are only two sexes/genders thus reinforcing a binary gender system.

**Cisgender:** Cisgender is the state of one's gender identity matching one's 'assigned sex.' Cisgendered individuals' assigned sex (male or female) largely match the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that society considers appropriate for one's sex. These individuals have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity. Cisgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation.

**Gay:** Someone who is primarily and/or exclusively attracted to members of their own sex or gender. In certain contexts, this term is used to refer only to those who identify as men.

**Indigenous:** This term has different meanings depending on country and context. It can be applied to any ethnic group inhabiting the geographic region with which they have the earliest historical connection. A contemporary working definition will include ethnic groups (and their descendants) who have an historical continuity or association with a given region, or parts of a region. Those who formerly or currently inhabit the region before its subsequent colonization or annexation, or lived alongside other cultural groups during the formation of a nation-state may also identify as Indigenous. People can also identify if they lived independently or largely isolated from the influences of the claimed governance by a nation-state; and who, furthermore, have maintained at least in part their distinct linguistic, cultural and social/organizational characteristics, and in doing so remain differentiated in some degree from the surrounding populations and dominant culture of the nation-state.

**Intersex:** A general term used to self-identify or describe a person who is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the narrow medical definitions of female or male. The terms male and female are social constructs that depict specific physiology (female equals breasts, labia, etc. and male equals penises, testicles, etc.). Intersex represents the variation within the sex anatomy spectrum. The term "hermaphrodite" is considered pejorative by many intersex folks, and has been historically used to medically identify a person with combined female and male genes and/or genitalia.

**Latino:** Refers to people from Mexico, Central America (such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador), South America (such as Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay), and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (such as Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Cuba). The term also includes Chicanos (Mexican Americans). The term Latino refers to a shared cultural heritage (Black, Native American, and Spanish), a history of colonization by Spain, and a common language (Spanish). The term does not refer to people from Spain. In addition, the term "Hispanic" is one of the several terms of ethnicity employed to categorize any person, of any racial background, of any country and of any religion who has at least one ancestor from the people of Spain or Spanish-speaking Latin America, whether or not the person has Spanish ancestry. The preference for the classifier, Latino, over Hispanic partly derives from its emphasis on heritage from Latin America and not Spain.

**Lesbians:** Women who form primary loving and sexual relationships with women. Some women may also use the term "gay" to describe themselves.

**Men:** A gender identity that can be connected to maleness, masculinity, and non-male gender identities/expressions. Not all males identify as men and not all men identify as male. In some contexts adult males are not seen as "boys" and should not be referred to as such.

**Middle Eastern/Southwest Asian:** The Middle East/Southwest Asia is a historical and political region of Africa and Eurasia with no clear definition. The term "Middle East" was popularized around 1900 by the British, and has been criticized for its loose definition. The Middle East includes countries or regions in Southwest Asia and parts of North Africa. This

term is widely used to refer to Persian countries as well as Arab nations. Middle Eastern or Southwest Asian can refer to people who are born in or descendants of these regions.

**Minority:** See definition below for People of Color.

**Multiracial:** People whose ancestries come from multiple races. Unlike the term biracial, which often is only used to refer to having parents or grandparents of two different races, the term 'multiracial' may encompass biracial people but can also include people with more than two races in their heritage. Some transracial adoptees (a person adopted by parents of a different race) also identify as multiracial.

**Native American:** Refers to the descendants of the people who originally inhabited the North, South, and Central America prior to conquest by Europeans. There is still a debate as to whether the term Native American or Indian is preferred. Many Native Americans do use "Indian" and "tribe" in referring to their own people. However, many other Native Peoples suggest that "Indian", "tribe", and a host of similar words are incorrect and carry derogatory connotations in our society. It is recommended to refer to a particular people or nation by name, such as Cherokee, Hopi, and Seminole.

**Pacific Islander:** Refers to people from the islands of the Pacific, specifically within the region of Oceania (composed of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia) such as Samoa, New Guinea, Fiji, Guam, Tahiti, etc. It is helpful to remember that not every person born in or descended from this region identifies as Pacific Islander, so it is better to ask them how they identify.

**People of Color:** A term of solidarity referring to Blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, Arabs, Middle Easterners, Pacific Islanders, and those who may identify as Multiracial. This term is preferred to other terms often heard, such as **minority** and **non-white**. While people of color are a numerical minority in the United States, they are the vast majority—nine-tenths—of the world's population; White people are the distinct minority. Use of the term "minority", therefore, obscures this global reality and, in effect, reinforces racist assumptions. To describe people of color as "non-white" is to use the White race as the standard against which all other races are described or as a referent in relation to whom all others are positioned. It is doubtful that White people would appreciate being called "non-black" or men would like being called "non-women". The term "people of color" was born out of an explicitly political statement that signaled solidarity among progressive African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. People may choose to identify this way due to a variety of factors including race, ethnicity, culture, physical appearance, class, and political perspective.

**People with Disabilities:** People who do not possess the capacity (in particular, physical, mental, or psychological capabilities) to do something or get something done. "People with disabilities" is the preferred term, not "handicapped". Labels such as "crippled," "retarded," and "deformed" are not acceptable for use by people without disabilities, though it is important to remember and respect that some people with disabilities may self-identify with these terms or others generally considered disrespectful. Some disability groups also strongly object to using euphemisms to describe disabilities (such as "physically challenged" or "differently abled"). Note: Federal regulations use the wording, "individuals with handicaps," and define this as any person who either (1) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially impairs one or more life activities, (2) has a record of such an impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment.

**Queer:** An umbrella identity term encompassing sexual identities and orientations that are not heterosexual, heteronormative or gender-binary; this may include lesbians, questioning people, gay men, bisexuals, non-labeling people, gender-queer folk amongst others.

“Queer” was used as a derogatory word in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Currently, it is being reclaimed by some people and used as a statement of empowerment. Some people identify as queer to distance themselves from the rigid categorization of “straight” and “gay”. Some lesbian, gay, questioning, non-labeling, and bisexual people, however, reject the use of this term due to its tendency to sometimes deny the differences between these groups.

**South Asian:** The South Asian community in the United States is comprised of individuals with ancestry from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The community also includes members of the South Asian diaspora – past generations of South Asians who settled in many areas around the world, including the Caribbean (Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad & Tobago), Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda), Canada, Europe, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands (Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore). The community is comprised of individuals who practice a variety of religions and speak different languages, yet share similar immigration histories and racialization. For example, South Asians practice Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. The most common languages other than English spoken by South Asians in the United States include Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu.

**Third World:** The Third World refers to the colonized or formerly colonized countries of the world, including the nations and peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean Islands, who have a shared history of economic exploitation and oppression. The term gained increasing usage after the 1955 Bandung Conference of “non-aligned” nations, which represented a third force outside of the two world superpowers. The “First World” referred to the United States, Western Europe, and its sphere of influence. The “Second World” referred to the Soviet Union and its sphere. The “Third World” represents for the most part, those nations that were, or are, controlled by the “First World”. However, many Africans and Asians are reclaiming the term “First World” in recognition of their place in world history as the oldest civilizations. Additionally, nations historically classified as “third world” are also now referred to as “developing” countries.

**Transgender:** Broadly speaking, transgender people are individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were assigned at birth. The word transgender is an umbrella term which is often used to describe a wide range of identities, behaviors and experiences, including: FTMs (female-to-male), MTFs (male-to-female), cross-dressers, drag queens, drag kings, gender queers, and people who have a gender that is outside the female/male binary. Transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation.

**White:** White can refer to people of European descent, including the English, Irish, Italian, German, Greek, Dutch and Polish. White identity has been institutionally upheld as a way to give or deny social and political power. In US history, those at some point not considered white have included: Irish, Germans, Ashkenazi Jews, Italians, Spaniards, Slavs, and Greeks. The process of officially being defined as white by law often came about in court disputes over pursuit of citizenship (but also to create and maintain laws, voting rights, property, and privileges for one group and institutionally deny those rights to everyone else). The Immigration Act of 1790 offered naturalization only to “any alien, being a free white person”. This was ultimately determined by religious practices, education, inter-marriage and a community’s role in the United States.

**Women:** A gender identity that can be connected to femaleness, femininity, and non-female gender identities/expressions. Not all females identify as women and not all women identify as female. In some contexts adult females are not seen as “girls” and should not be referred to as such.

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**Note:** Please remember that the racial and cultural categories and terms are fluid and overlapping. For example, a person from Nigeria living in the United States might refer to him/herself as African, Black, Nigerian, or a Person of Color. His/her child, if living in the U.S. for most of his/her life, might choose the term African American, as well as the other options listed above. **It is always best to learn how people refer to themselves.**

**Acknowledgements:** LDIR staff and community members have compiled and developed these definitions over the past several decades. Original sources include *The Council on Interracial Books for Children, Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks* (New York, 1979) by Patricia DeRosa and Joyce King of the Multicultural Project for Community Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Margo Okazawa-Rey at the University of Maryland.

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