

# KEY TERMS USED IN THE D&I CONVERSATION

*AND WHAT THEY MEAN*

A resource from the  
Pittsburgh Legal Diversity & Inclusion Coalition  
to help define terms commonly used in the  
diversity and inclusion (D&I) conversation



PITTSBURGH  
LEGAL DIVERSITY & INCLUSION  
COALITION

**African American** | An ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa, including the descendants of enslaved Black people who are from the United States. The term “African American” connotes both a history in the African continent and in the American continent. See definitions of **Black**, **BIPOC**, **Person of Color**, and **Enslaved vs. Slave**.

**NOTE:** Both “African American” and “Black” are acceptable terms, although individuals may prefer one or the other. We should be attuned to the way individuals refer to themselves and reflect that preference in our description of them and in our interactions with them. Terms that are no longer acceptable are: “Negro,” “colored” and, of course, the “n-word.”

**Ally; allyship** | Any person that actively promotes and aspires to advance a culture of inclusion through intentional, positive, and conscious efforts that benefit people as a whole. Everyone can be an ally because privilege is intersectional. See definitions of **Intersectionality**, **Performative Ally**, and **Privilege**.

**NOTE:**

- You cannot declare yourself to be an ally. You are an ally if you act as an ally, standing behind or beside another who needs your support. It is the act of using your voice and actions to identify and address oppression, biases, and barriers that people from other cultural communities experience.

- Allies make a concerted effort to understand others’ struggles. An individual from a marginalized group cannot cast away the weight of their identity (or identities). They carry it every single day. An ally lends their privilege to an individual who is marginalized.

**American Indian** | American Indian, Native American, and Indigenous American all refer to the people who originally inhabited the United States and their descendants. This is a large and diverse group of people and, whenever possible, tribal names should be used instead of the generic terms American Indian, Native American, and Indigenous American.

**NOTE:** As we all know, many Pennsylvania place names are American Indian names (Ohio, Youghiogeny, and Aliquippa). [More on Western Pennsylvania’s American Indian heritage.](#)

**Anti-racism** | The policy or practice of opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance. The term was coined by Ibram X. Kendi in his book “How to Be an Antiracist.” According to Kendi:

*“To be antiracist is to think nothing is behaviorally wrong or right -- inferior or superior -- with any of the racial groups. Whenever the antiracist sees individuals behaving positively or negatively, the antiracist sees exactly that: individuals behaving positively or negatively, not representatives of whole races. To be antiracist is to deracialize behavior, to remove the tattooed stereotype from every racialized body. Behavior is something humans do, not races do.”*

Kendi adds that it is not enough to be “not a racist.” “The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist,’” he writes. “It is ‘antiracist.’” See definition of **Racism**, **Racist**.

**Asexual** | An adjective describing a person who does not experience sexual attraction.

**Asian** | A person from Asia. Because Asia is the largest continent on earth, there are many distinguishing terms used by Asians, most importantly those stemming from their countries of origin, as well as South Asian (people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Maldives); Southeast Asian (people from Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, the Phillipines, Malaysia, Myanmar [or Burma], Brunei, Singapore, and Timor-Leste); and East Asian (people from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan).

**NOTE:** *The term “West Asia” is not widely used. Countries in West Asia are more commonly referred to as the countries of the Middle East. They are: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Gaza Strip, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, West Bank, and Yemen.*

**Asian American** | An ethnic group of Americans whose total or partial ancestry is from one or more Asian countries. Since Asia is the world’s largest continent, many Asian Americans prefer to identify by a more specific reference to a particular country (e.g., Vietnamese-American), or a particular region of Asia (e.g., South Asian-American).

**Black** | A phenotype that describes various groups of people from all over the world, including those who are not American or who do not typically identify immediately with solely African American ancestry. See definitions of **African American**, **BIPOC**, **Person of Color**, and **Enslaved vs. Slaves**.

**NOTE:** *Major news outlets have begun to capitalize the word “Black” when describing people and cultures of African origin; some news organizations have also decided to capitalize “White”; some have not. The New York Times explains that the capital “B” signifies a group of people who have a shared history and culture and brings the treatment of the word “Black” into line with the treatment of the words “African American,” “Latino,” “Asian,” and “Native American.” The Times does not capitalize the word “brown” as it describes a broad range of peoples and cultures; and has chosen not to capitalize “white” because they believe it does not signify a shared culture or history in the way that the word “Black” does. The Washington Post does capitalize “White.”*

**BIPOC** | **Black, Indigenous, People of Color.** See definitions of **Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color.**

**NOTE:** *BIPOC is a person-oriented term enabling us to move away from describing someone as a “minority” or “marginalized,” which to some people are terms which themselves are marginalizing, although they are accurate terms and still in common use. But unlike the term “person of color,” BIPOC recognizes that people of color face varying types of discrimination and calls attention to the fact that racism deeply affects Black and Indigenous people in ways not experienced by other people of color. It thus reinforces the idea that not all people of color have the same experience.*

**Bisexual** | A person who has the capacity to form enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional relationships either with people of the same gender or with people of a different gender. See definition of **Pansexual**.

**Bullying, Workplace** | Harmful, targeted behavior that happens at work. It might be spiteful, offensive, mocking, or intimidating. It forms a pattern, and tends to be directed at one person or a few people.

**Bystander Effect** | The inhibiting influence of the presence of others on a person's willingness to help someone in need. Research has shown that, even in an emergency, a bystander is less likely to extend help when they are in the real or imagined presence of others than when they are alone.

**Cisgender** | A person who feels they are "on the same side of" the sex they were assigned at birth identifies as cisgender. See definition of **Transgender**.

**NOTE:** *Cis (and trans) are both Latin prefixes. Cis, in Latin, means "on this side of." See definitions of Transgender, Non-binary, and Genderqueer.*

**Covering** | Someone who is covering some aspect of themselves is consciously changing the impression they are making in order to hide an outsider identity. Covering is consciously calling attention to something that is perceived to be not as acceptable or valued as an alternative trait. [Diversity does not mean having to choose between identity and inclusion.](#)

**Culture** | Although there is not one widely agreed upon definition, most definitions characterize culture as something that is widely shared by members of a social group and shared by virtue of belonging to that group. The American Sociology Association defines culture as "*the languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful.*"

**Cultural Competency** | The ability to understand and interact effectively with people from other cultures, together with a willingness to learn about the cultural practices and worldview of others; a positive attitude toward cultural differences; and a readiness to accept and respect those differences.

**Disability, Person with** | The movement in this area is towards terms which center the personhood of the individual you are referring to and which acknowledge the different abilities they might have, rather than their disability. Examples are: "person with a disability" or "people with disabilities"; similarly, "a person with paraplegia," rather than "a paraplegic." Describing a person as "confined to a wheelchair" emphasizes the person's limitations (they are "confined") as opposed to saying "a person who uses a wheelchair." [Terms to avoid and to use.](#)

## Diversity > Equity > Inclusion

**Diversity** | The presence of differences in a particular setting. For example, a zoo contains a diversity of animal species. The word "diversity," used in the context of a diversity and inclusion program or initiative, most frequently refers to a diversity of identities along the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. The presence or absence of diversity, therefore, is a factual matter most frequently measured numerically.

**Equity** | A concept acknowledging that not everyone begins at the same starting place and that various societal systems are not equitable and that those inequities are reflected in workplaces. Equity refers to fair access, opportunity, and advancement by working to understand and address inequities. See definition of **Equality**.

**Inclusion** | The extent to which each person in an organization feels welcomed, respected, supported, and valued as a team member. Inclusion is about people with different identities feeling and/or being part of the team. *Diversity is being asked to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.*® -Vernā Myers. [Diversity Doesn't Stick Without Inclusion.](#)



**Enslaved Person vs. Slave** | To describe someone as a slave suggests an identity that is inherent in that person – that person is a slave. To describe someone as an enslaved person acknowledges that person as a human being; a person to whom something has happened – that is, that person has been captured, denied their freedom, and forced to become a slave; that is, that person has been enslaved. [Why we should use the term “enslaved people” instead of “slaves.”](#)

**Equality** | Equality rests on the notion of “the same”; that is, when everyone gets the same resources, we tend to think of that as equality. For example, if every child is given an apple, every child is treated equally; there is equality in the distribution of the apples. On the other hand, if every school is given 150 laptops without taking into account that most children in some wealthy school districts already have laptops and most children in some poor districts do not, then everyone has been treated equally but not equitably. Equality is not the same as equity and the terms should not be used interchangeably. See definitions of **Diversity > Equity > Inclusion**.

**Equity** | See definitions of **Diversity>Equity>Inclusion**

**Ethnicity** | A person’s ethnicity is typically associated with cultural identity and expression. See definitions of **Race** and **National Origin**.

**First Nations** | The original inhabitants of Canada and their descendants.

**Gay** | This adjective (e.g., gay man, gay people) describes people whose enduring physical, romantic, or emotional attraction are to people of the same gender. Some gay women may prefer to be referred to as lesbians (noun) or as lesbian women. Avoid using the outdated term “homosexual” as that is considered derogatory. See definitions of **Lesbian** and **Homosexual**.

**Gender** | A person’s gender is made up of two components: their gender identity – that is, the gender they feel themselves to be; and their gender expression – how they present themselves to the world.

**Genderqueer** | Some people consider the term Genderqueer to be synonymous with non-binary. Others see it more as a term like queer. As queer signifies all sexual identities other than heterosexual, Genderqueer is similarly an umbrella term signifying all genders other than cisgender. And for the same reason that queer is considered offensive to some people, Genderqueer is a term that some prefer to avoid. See definitions of **Non-binary** and **Queer**.

**Hispanic** | People who speak Spanish or who are descended from Spanish-speaking populations.

**Homosexual** | Because of the clinical history of the word “homosexual,” it is considered to be a derogatory and outdated term with connotations of mental illness. Avoid using the term except in direct quotes, even to avoid repeated use of the term “gay.” See definitions of **Lesbian** and **Gay**.

**NOTE:** *The World Health Organization removed “homosexuality” from its international Statistical Classification of Diseases in 1990, which is why the day is now International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. The New York Times, Associated Press, and Washington Post all restrict the use of the term “homosexual.”*

**Inclusion** | See definitions of **Diversity>Equity>Inclusion**.

**Indigenous** | A term used to describe anyone who is an original inhabitant of a land or a descendent of an original inhabitant. See definitions of **BIPOC**, **American Indian**, and **First Nations**.

**Indigenous American** | See definition of **American Indian**.

**Individual Racism** | Includes overt or covert actions by a person toward a person or group that intentionally expresses prejudice, hate, or bias based on race.

**Institutional Racism** | The policies and practices within and across institutions that, intentionally or not, produce outcomes that chronically favor, or put a racial group at a disadvantage, such as in many employment sectors in which day-to-day operations, as well as hiring and firing practices can significantly disadvantage people of color.

**Intersectionality** | Coined in 1989 by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term is used to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap.

**NOTE:** *According to Crenshaw: “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.”*

**Intersex** | An umbrella term that describes people born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy or chromosome patterns that cannot be classified as typically male or female. While some people can have an intersex condition and also identify as transgender, the two terms are not synonymous and should not be conflated. Do not use the outdated term, hermaphrodite.

**Latino/a** | An individual who is from Latin America or who is descended from an individual from Latin America. As Spanish is a gendered language, Latino refers to a man and Latinos to a group of men or a mixed group of individuals and Latina refers to a woman and Latinas to a group of women. See definition of **LatinX**.

**LatinX** | A non-gendered way of identifying a person who is descended from people from Latin America. It is also an important term for referring to such an individual who does not identify as either male or female, but rather identifies as gender nonconforming, non-binary, Genderqueer or gender fluid, etc. See definition of **Latino/a**.

**NOTE:** *LatinX is not universally accepted among people of Latino or Hispanic backgrounds. According to Pew, 61% of people of Latin American heritage prefer the term “Hispanic,” and 29 percent prefer “Latino.” Women and younger people in the Latino community are more likely to choose to self-identify as “LatinX” than others. As always, be attentive to the way individuals refer to themselves and when in doubt, ask – and apologize if you make a mistake.*

**Lesbian** | A woman whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay (an adjective) or as gay women. The term “lesbian” may be used as both a noun and an adjective. Do not refer to lesbians or gay men as homosexuals, as that is considered a derogatory term. See definitions of **Gay** and **Homosexual**.

**LGBTQIA+** | The plus sign when used in this context refers to a person within the LGBTQIA community who does not self-identify with any of the identities within the acronym. See definitions of **Lesbian**, **Gay**, **Bisexual**, **Transgender**, **Queer**, **Intersex**, and **Asexual**.

**Marginalized populations** | Groups and communities that experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political, and economic) because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

**Microaggressions** | The everyday slights, indignities, put-downs, and insults that members of marginalized groups experience in their day-to-day interactions with individuals who are often unaware that they have engaged in an offensive or demeaning way. Another way to describe microaggression is “death by a thousand cuts.” [Microaggressions are like mosquito bites.](#)

**National Origin** | Determined by where a person was born.

**Native American** | See definition of **American Indian**.

**Non-binary** | Term used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman or they may define it in a wholly different way. The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual and should only be used if someone self-identifies as non-binary and/or Genderqueer. Some people consider the term non-binary to be synonymous with Genderqueer. See definition of **Genderqueer**.

**Oppression** | According to Wikipedia, oppression is the “*malicious or unjust treatment or exercise of power, often under the guise of governmental authority or cultural opprobrium. Oppression may be overt or covert, depending on how it is practiced.*”

**Pansexual** | Someone who is attracted – either emotionally, physically, or both – to all genders, including cisgender, transgender, and gender nonconforming individuals. Note that the P in the acronym LGBTQIAP stands for pansexual. For some, this term means the same thing as bisexual but for others, it is more all encompassing. [Read a discussion of this controversy.](#) See definition of **Bisexual**.

**Performative Allyship** | Words and actions that signal a person is a good, well-intentioned person – for example, by attending diversity training, making a financial donation, and showing up for MLK breakfasts. But in other moments, when action or witness is called for, the performative ally does not step forward; in contrast to an actual ally who advocates for change to the benefit of a marginalized group, who interrupts bias, and who acts to make our world less racist. [How to spot performative allyship and, more importantly, what to do instead.](#)

**Person of Color** | Any person who is non-white or not primarily of European/Caucasian descent. See definition of **BIPOC**.

**Power** | As used in the D&I context, power is the social capital gained by virtue of belonging to a group with supremacy. See definitions of **Supremacy** and **White Supremacy**.

**Privilege** | Privilege does **NOT** mean, in this context, that you are rich, everything has been handed to you, that you have an easy life, or that you’ve never had to struggle or work hard. It means that because of who you are, there are some things that you never have to think about. That not-needing-to-worry-about-something is a kind of privilege. Merriam-Webster defines privilege as *a right or immunity granted as a particular benefit, advantage, or favor*. Privilege within the D&I context is the way that some people may experience things more positively than others based on characteristics that they did not earn, but merely inherited. [See James Corden learn about privilege.](#) See definition of **White Privilege**.

**Queer** | The National Association for LGBTQ journalists says that “queer,” although originally a pejorative term for gay, is now being reclaimed by some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as a self-affirming umbrella term. Queer is still offensive as an epithet to many, however, and particularly for older people who have sharp memories of it being used against them. Caution is warranted before any person not a member of the LGBTQ community uses the term. It is never appropriate to describe someone as a “queer person.” Instead, people in some contexts may refer to a person as “a queer” or to “queer culture” or the “queer community.”

**Race** | Race is typically associated with biology, physiology, and physical characteristics such as hair texture, skin color, and other physical and visible traits. Race is a social construct and not a biological fact. The American Society of Human Genetics, the largest professional organization of scientists in the field, explained in an essay: *“The science of genetics demonstrates that humans cannot be divided into biologically distinct subcategories.”* [ASHG Denounces Attempts to Link Genetics and Racial Supremacy](#). See definitions of **Ethnicity** and **National Origin**.

**Racism, Racist** | These terms have undergone changes in definition in recent times, as well as challenges to their historical definitions. They are, therefore, slippery in meaning and their various definitions can be used both to accuse and defend the words and acts of others. At one time, racism was thought to be an act that was intentionally harmful to another person because of that person’s race. It was the conscious belief that one race is superior to another and a racist was a person who held that conscious belief. Racist acts reflected that belief. But now we speak of racism in relationship to systems and structures – whether in health care or education, policing or the law – which have systematically disadvantaged people of a particular race and may have been founded on racist beliefs but have become uncoupled from those beliefs while continuing to perpetuate discriminatory outcomes.

At the same time, Ibram X. Kendi and others have argued that anyone who is not anti-racist is racist, recasting the definition of racist as someone who stands by without speaking and acting to oppose racism as opposed to someone, as described above, who intentionally acts in a racist manner. See definitions of **Anti-racist**, **Structural Racism**, and **Systemic Racism**.

**NOTE:** [See the 2020 change to Merriam-Webster’s definition of racism](#) to include: *“the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another”*; *“a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race,”*; and *“a political or social system founded on racism and designed to execute its principles.”*

**Sexuality** | Our sexuality is determined by whom we are romantically and sexually attracted to on a consistent basis.

**Structural Racism** | A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice; instead, it is a feature of the social, economic, and political systems in which we all exist. See definition of **Racism, Racist**.

**Supremacy** | As used in the D&I context and most typically used in the term, “white supremacy,” supremacy is the ideology or feeling, or even unconscious feeling, that one group of people are inherently better than another group and that that explains their relatively advantaged position in society. See definitions of **Power** and **White Supremacy**.

**Systemic Racism** | “Systemic racism” and “structural racism” are generally considered synonymous. If there is a difference between the terms, it is said to exist in the fact that a structural racism analysis pays more attention to the historical, cultural, and social psychological aspects of our racialized society. See definition of **Structural Racism**.

**They/them** | The singular “they,” which we have actually been using for years, was Merriam-Webster’s 2019 word of the year and has been added into the journalists’ various stylebooks. The Chicago Manual of Style says it best: “If an individual prefers to be referred to as ‘they,’ then ‘they’ is the preferred term.” So how do you know what a person’s preferred pronouns are? If in doubt and asking does not seem appropriate in the context you find yourself in, use they. If it is important in the situation to know what pronouns a person uses, ask. You might want to say: “I use the pronouns “.....”. What pronouns do you use?” Again, if you make a mistake, apologize.



**Trans** | Shorthand for transgender or transsexual and sometimes inclusive of a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella. Because its meaning is not precise or widely understood, it should be used with care when using it with an audience that may not understand what it means. See definitions of **Transgender** and **Transsexual**.

**Transgender** | An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using other terms, including transsexual and trans. Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by doctors to bring their bodies into alignment with their gender identity; some undergo surgery. However, not all transgender people take these steps and a transgender identity is not dependent upon physical appearance or medical procedures. See definitions of **Trans** and **Transsexual**.

**NOTE:** *Trans (and cis) are both Latin prefixes. Trans, in Latin, means “on the other side of.” A person who feels they are “on the other side of” the gender they were assigned at birth is a transgender person. See definition of **Cisgender**.*

**Transsexual** | An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. Still preferred by some people who have permanently changed (or seek to change) their bodies through medical interventions. Unlike transgender, this is not an umbrella term and many transgender people prefer that term and do not identify as transsexual. Avoid mistakes by asking which term is preferred. See definitions of **Trans** and **Transgender**.

**Unconscious Bias** | Sometimes also referred to as implicit or unintentional bias. Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that we all form outside our conscious awareness. These biases about various social and identity groups and the individuals who belong to them stem from our natural tendency to organize the world by way of categorization and are fueled by the stimuli we are exposed to on a constant basis. Unconscious bias is far more prevalent than conscious, intentional prejudice and is often incompatible with one’s stated and conscious values. Unconscious racial bias and discrimination is well-documented, but biases, conscious or unconscious, are not limited to race and ethnicity, but extend to age, gender/gender identity, physical abilities, religion, sexual orientation, weight, and many other characteristics. To better understand your unconscious biases, [take the Harvard Implicit Association Test](#).

**Unearned Privilege** | See definition of **Privilege**.

**White Privilege** | White privilege refers to whites’ historical and contemporary advantages in access to quality education, decent jobs and liveable wages, homeownership, retirement benefits, wealth, and so on. See definition of **Privilege**.

**NOTE:** *Peggy Macintosh wrote in “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”: “As a white person I had been taught about racism that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage... White privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in every day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious.”*

**White Supremacy** | Merriam-Webster offers two definitions of white supremacy: 1, *the belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races*; and 2, *the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races*. See definitions of **Power** and **Supremacy**.

**Conversations about race are necessary if our workplaces are going to be truly inclusive but are often avoided because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing. [See the six “greatest hits” of things not to say in such conversations and some suggestions for how to keep your conversations on track.](#)**

**What If I Say the Wrong Thing; 25 Habits for Culturally Effective People by Vernā Myers. [Buy the book or e-book from the ABA.](#)**