IM△GINE
CANADA

◈ HR INTERVALS

Appendix:

Language and Usage Guide

Introduction

The number of terms, words, and acronyms people have developed to talk about issues of oppression, equity, and injustice can be difficult to navigate, and it can be hard to know which ones to use or which are appropriate for your context. The language we use is an evolving practice. This isn't about getting it perfect, but being aware of what we mean when we use certain words, and updating our vocabulary as we grow our understanding. This language and usage guide aims to help understand the definitions of these terms, but also how, when and why they are used.

It can be helpful to think about three different categories for the terms in this guide:

1. Umbrella terms that are meant to reference **many experiences of oppression at the same time**, such as "people from equity-seeking groups."
2. Terms that are about **approaches to tackling,** like anti-racism or anti-oppression.
3. Terms to describe **specific experiences of oppression**, or different identities, such as racism, 2SLGBTQ+, working class people, etc. We haven't addressed these terms in this guide - for definitions of these terms, you can find a <u>Glossary of Terms, Systems, and Identities</u> on the HR Intervals website.

Your organization might want to be really specific about the kinds of oppression you are addressing, or need to talk about multiple experiences at the same time. The context of your organization also matters - if you are a grassroots, activist organization, you might choose different terms than a bigger nonprofit that is attached to a hospital or university, for example.

Umbrella Terms

These are terms that are meant to refer to a wide range of experiences of oppression or of privilege at the same time.

Discrimination and discriminatory: is the prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability. In Canada, discrimination is legally prohibited under the [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), which prohibits discrimination on grounds such as race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex (including pregnancy and childbirth), sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability, and conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered. Each province and territory also has its own human rights legislation that prohibits discrimination, often covering similar or additional grounds. The legally protected characteristics have changed and evolved over time, and are often slow to adapt to changes in how systemic oppression is understood and defined, or accepted. Discrimination has a legal meaning and definition, and is also used more colloquially to refer to unjust treatment.

Equity-denied, equity-seeking, equity-deserving: There is a lot of discussion about these terms. All three of them "are used to refer to communities and groups that experience significant collective barriers in participating in society. This could include attitudinal, historic, social and environmental barriers based on age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, Indigeneity, gender identity and gender expression, nationality, race, sexual orientation, etc." ([UBC Equity & Inclusion Office](#), 2025)." The use of terms like equity-denied, equity-seeking, and equity-deserving groups has primarily been meant to shift the focus to the structural and systemic barriers that cause inequity in the first place. Equity-seeking and equity-deserving are sometimes felt to confer more agency to affected groups; equity-denied to more squarely 'point the finger' at the issue. They are not widely used in community settings but are often seen in research, literature, and theory.

Indigenous, First Peoples, First Nations, Métis and Inuit: Indigenous and First Peoples are umbrella terms referring to First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation, the three recognized groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It refers to the original inhabitants of a territory; in the context of these guides, we mean what is now known as "Canada."

First Nations: refers to the Status, non-Status and Treaty Indians in Canada. It is used to replace "Indian," which is widely considered offensive terminology when used by non-Indigenous people. Inuit refers to all Indigenous peoples living in the arctic regions. In Canada, it refers to those living in communities across the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador). The Métis are a post-contact Indigenous community that is connected to the fur trade in the area around Red River ([Government of Canada, 2025](#)). The term metis (without an accent on the e and often a small "m") means someone who is of combined First Nation and European descent, and does not necessarily mean they are part of the Métis Nation. These individuals are not necessarily part of the Métis Nation. Whenever possible, it is important to refer to the specific First Nations, Inuit, or Métis communities you are in relation with.

Multiply marginalized refers to individuals who experience multiple forms of discrimination or disadvantage based on various aspects of their identity. The concept acknowledges that these different forms of marginalization intersect and compound, leading to unique and often more severe challenges than if an individual only experienced one form of marginalization. For example, a Black transgender woman might experience discrimination based on her race, her gender, and her sexual orientation, and these experiences are not simply additive but interact in complex ways. This is also often referred to as "intersectionality."

People of colour (POC): The term people or person of colour (and the declinations such as 'women of colour') came into use in the 1970s in North America, and was meant in part as a political refusal of terms like immigrant or visible minority, which many activists found inaccurate and harmful. They also wanted to find a term that created solidarity amongst racialized people. It is sometimes criticized for implying too much shared experience amongst people of colour. This led to the development of the phrase Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC).

Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC): The addition of "Black and Indigenous" to the term "People of Colour" was meant to continue that desire for cross racial solidarity while also acknowledging the very particular place and impacts that anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism have in North American culture. For more discussion about the limits and uses of terms like "People of Colour" and "Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour," a good resource is "What's Wrong With the Term 'Person of Color'" (Janani, Black Girl Dangerous, 2013). In the Canadian context, people often say this as "IBPOC," foregrounding the experiences of Indigenous peoples.

Privilege and people of privilege: is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. Identity categories that do not experience systemic oppression - such as men, white people, wealthy people, able-bodied people, often will experience privilege. Most people who experience privilege are often not aware of it, as it is the norm for their experience. Privilege can be a difficult concept to apply well in practice and understand in practice, as many people experience some forms of oppression and some forms of privilege.

Racism: refers to a system of prejudice and discrimination where power and privilege are primarily held by individuals identified as white, and where people who are not white are assumed to be less deserving. Racism is a system that disadvantages and marginalizes racialized people through practices, policies, and cultural norms. It includes individual acts of racism and systemic racism, and both conscious and unconsciously held beliefs.

Racialized or racialization: the term racialized is often used to describe anyone who identifies as Indigenous, Black, Arab, Asian, Latinx, mixed race, and/or a visible minority, a person of colour, non-white, etc - that is, people who are not white. The term "racialized" is often chosen because it suggests that society creates racial categories - people become racialized, rather than "having a race" (see Bernard & Daniel, 2015).

Systemically oppressed or systemically marginalized: these are terms that refer to individuals or groups who are of non-dominant identities and social experiences, whose identities have historically and currently been oppressed (interpersonally, institutionally, etc). We are talking for example about: Indigenous,

Black, and racialized persons, women and gender diverse persons, people with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQ+ people.

Language of oppression and marginalization is more often used in slightly more activist or community contexts. Some people criticize these terms for focussing too much on the experience of oppression, and not on the agency of the people being oppressed, or who is doing the oppressing. **Systemic racism, systemic ableism**, etc are specific kinds of systemic oppression.

Tokenism: the experience and effect of individuals and groups of systemically marginalized identities being symbolically utilized as a way to give the appearance of equity, diversity, or inclusion. For example, a tokenistic hire is one where a candidate who belongs to a systemically marginalized identity is brought in, and would then likely encounter inequitable and exclusionary working conditions due to the employer's superficial uptake of equitable hiring and labour practices. Using representations of systemically under-represented people on communications materials like Employee Handbooks or organisational websites where they are not actually reflective of the organization's composition is also an example of tokenism.

Underrepresented groups: refer to communities of people who have been historically and systematically excluded or marginalized, often due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, or other characteristics. This underrepresentation can manifest in various areas, such as employment, education, media, or leadership positions, leading to a lack of equitable presence and voice for these communities.

White: White is a racial category that generally refers to people from European ancestry. Who is considered white has changed throughout history based on how people are seen and understood. Being white or fitting under the umbrella of whiteness has evolved based on many factors. In North American society, being white is the position of racial power and dominance, and allows privileged access to resources and opportunity.

White-led: Organizations that are led primarily by white people (at the leadership or Board of Directors level).

Terms about Approaches

These are terms that are meant to explain different approaches to challenging inequity.

Anti-oppression: is meant to describe an active and intentional approach to identify, challenge, and dismantle oppressive systems and ideologies. The term has its roots in critical social theories and movements that emerged to challenge systemic injustices, emerging especially from the field of social work in the 1970s, and being adopted by social movements and feminist and critical race theorists through the 1980s and onwards. It is widely used in social justice activist circles.

Anti-racism: is meant to describe an active and intentional approach to identify, challenge, and dismantle all forms of systemic racism. While anti-racism is part of the umbrella of anti-oppression, it's often named explicitly. It is associated also with a strong body of scholarship and intellectual work that addresses racism, such as critical race theory, the work of Civil Rights leaders, and so on.

Anti–Racism and Anti–Oppression (ARAO): these two concepts are often used together, also to refer to an active approach to combating and eliminating racism and oppression. ARAO approaches are often focussed on changing structures, policies and practices to redistribute and share power equitably. ARAO practitioners work on the premise that systems of oppression, like racism, ableism, and sexism, are deeply entrenched in our groups and cultures, and that we must build new ways of doing things that are free from such oppression.

Decolonization: refers to the process of removing colonial power and control. In the Canadian context, this could mean things like returning land, resources, and governance to Indigenous peoples. It is also often used to refer to undoing colonial culture, colonial thinking, and colonial norms and beliefs. It is connected to the term "Indigenization."

There has been critique of the way that decolonization gets understood as a kind of, or similar to, other forms of anti-oppression work, like anti-racism, and the way that it gets used to only talk about (for example) changing curriculum or teaching methods. Activists and scholars engaged in decolonization claim that decolonization is not simply a request for Indigenous inclusion, but also a set of demands about repatriation of land and Indigenous sovereignty (see for example Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Equality: invites everyone to receive the same treatment, regardless of their gender, race, disability, etc. It is a foundational concept to many of the principles of Canadian governance; for example, the Canadian constitution guarantees "that every individual is equal before and under the law." While the idea of equal treatment is important in many contexts, it is also widely criticized because it does not take into account, for example, the history of racism, sexism, and so on that mean that people do not have equal "starting points" and may not have equal experiences of the same treatment. Equity is often a preferred concept.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI, or DEI): which has evolved into other versions such as **Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI)** or **Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA)**. Sometimes, **belonging** is also added. In this context:

- **Equity** is about creating equal conditions for people to participate fully in society. Equity acknowledges that some groups face systemic barriers, and those barriers must be addressed to have any kind of "level playing field."

- **Diversity** refers to having a measure of representation within a community, ensuring that people and groups who experience systemic oppression are "at the table."

- **Inclusion** refers to the creation of an environment where people are able to participate, contribute, and be treated with respect, particularly groups who experience systemic oppression.

- **Justice** is sometimes added to the acronym to acknowledge the structural injustices that create the conditions for inequity, homogeneity, and exclusion in the first place, and underlines the importance of systemic change.

- **Accessibility** refers to the ways our environments, activities, and ways of communicating, relating and doing are usable or in contrast, create barriers for people. This often refers to the needs of

people with disabilities.

- **Belonging:** is about responding to the human need to be known, noticed, and missed in community.

Though the ideas behind EDI and associated terms came from social movements, and particularly anti-racist ones, these terms were popularized and brought forward by the American government's initiatives regarding equal employment opportunities. They are most often used in workplaces and institutions, and are most often seen as part of workplace policies and initiatives. For these reasons, they are often associated with more institutional or work-related contexts. These terms are also becoming the centre of backlash against inclusion work more generally, especially in the United States, but also in Canada.

Employee Resource Group or Employee Affinity Group: An Employee Resource Group, or ERG, is an employee-led group whose membership is based on a shared identity and/or experience of systemic oppression. These employees also continue to face systemic barriers in the workplace. ERGs can play numerous roles, including as a way for employees to "foster community, to build professional networks, and to share experiences and offer mutual support in relation to the workplace…" (McGill University, n.d.). These groups can play an important role in your organization's equity work, but are not the same as an equity working group.

Equity Working Group or Equity Committee or EDI Committee: a group of individuals in an organization tasked with questions, issues, and/or decisions related to Equity (Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, etc.). These groups vary in form, function, and size.

Indigenization: similarly to decolonization, Indigenization is both used to mean the process of bringing something (land, governance, structures, systems) under the power and influence of the Indigenous peoples of that area, and to refer to the incorporation of Indigenous worldviews into the norms, standards, or approaches of a group - like an organization, a school, or research project, etc. A concrete example might be that your organization would incorporate Indigenous customs into grievance procedures, such as healing circles or working with an elder or knowledge keeper who may support Indigenous employees when a grievance arises.

Indigenous self-determination: Indigenous self-determination can be described as First Nations, Metis and Inuit people reclaiming an individual and collective autonomy of self: that Indigenous people will decide what is best for themselves outside of the colonial system they have been forced to operate in for centuries. This means that the 634 First Nation communities and their members, the 53 Inuit communities that exist across the far north, and those belonging to Métis organizations, will pursue and shape their own governing bodies, policies, economies, education, and control of traditional territories (Truth North Aid, 2024).

Intersectionality: is a framework for understanding how various social and political identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, combine to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. It recognizes that these different aspects of identity are not isolated but rather intersect and interact, shaping an individual's social standing and opportunities. It was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw initially, to talk about how Black women had a unique experience of workplace

discrimination as compared to White women and Black men ([Crenshaw](), 1989). The term gets used in a very wide variety of contexts, some of which are a bit distant from the original definition of the word. Some groups use it to refer to an approach that takes into consideration multiple forms of oppression. Other groups will use it as a shorthand for a critique of forms of feminism that centre the experiences of white women.

Racial equity: Creating racial equity means giving people what they need to succeed, in a way that results in similar outcomes for people of all races. This means recognizing that some people need more to succeed than others as a result of the history of racism. This is often contrasted to the idea of racial equality, which would suggest treating everyone the same (regardless of race).

Truth and Reconciliation: in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation refers to the process of bringing to light the atrocities committed as part of the colonization of Canada (truth), and establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous peoples, non–Indigenous peoples, and the Canadian government. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission writes, "In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, an acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour" ([Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](), 2015, p. 6).

The drive for "Truth and Reconciliation" is sometimes criticized for being overly focussed on the relationship between Indigenous and non–Indigenous Canadians, and not sufficiently on material changes and actions to change the reality of Indigenous peoples living in Canada, and sometimes for being adopted in superficial ways. Most importantly, however, the 94 calls to action that were included in the Truth and Reconciliation report in 2015 have largely not been implemented, or only partially implemented, leading to a lot of cynicism about the project.

References and Resources

- <u>Racialization – an overview</u> (Bernard & Daniel, 2015)
- <u>Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics</u> (Crenshaw, 1989)
- <u>First Nations, Inuit and Métis historical terminology</u> (Canadian Government, 2025)
- <u>The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms </u>(Government of Canada, 2025)
- <u>What's wrong with the term person of colour </u>(Janani, 2013)
- <u>Employee Resource Groups</u> (McGill University, 2025)
- <u>Indigenous Self Determination</u> (True North Aid, 2024)
- <u>Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future </u>(Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)
- <u>Decolonization is Not a Metaphor</u> (Tuck & Yang, 2012)
- <u>Equity and inclusion glossary of terms</u> (University of British Colombia, 2025)