

The emergence of “BIPOC”: What it means and how it is used

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Language, through its usage and power, has shaped many narratives and discussions throughout history. In terms of a U.S. context, the term “BIPOC” has emerged in recent years by social activists working to promote the visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement. Through a complex history of language labeling, the term BIPOC stands for “Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.”

BIPOC stems from an effort to reclaim labels that have been previously used to oppress persons from racially minoritized groups. In its origins, “colored people” represented a label that was used by white populations in power to discriminate and alienate those who were not white (Malesky, 2014) This term was problematic because it labeled persons as objects based on the color of their skin.

As an effort to reclaim identities that was driven by the narratives of community members during the Civil Rights Movement, the use of “colored people” as a label was disrupted and an alternative emerged. The term that emerged was one that many are familiar with today, “people of color”. The use of “people of color” was aimed at “humanizing” communities of color and allowed for them to take back and remake the term into something that they had chosen themselves.

Stemming from the [BIPOC project](#), the usage of this term allows for members of these communities to reclaim their identities and distance themselves from language that oppresses Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. BIPOC pushes terms of identification even further. Efforts to promote the use of BIPOC aim to problematize the current use of “people of color.” Arguments draw attention to the way People of Color, as a term, erases the experiences of Black and Indigenous communities, painting all communities of color experiences’ as one. The BIPOC project acknowledges that communities of color experience a lot of the same discriminatory practices for not being white. BIPOC centers ‘Black’ and ‘Indigenous’ to give their names visibility. According to the Sunrise Movement, “By specifically naming Black and Indigenous people we are recognizing that Black and Indigenous people face the worst consequences of systemic white supremacy, classism and settler colonialism”. This highlights the unique experiences that Black and Indigenous communities have to whiteness and how other communities of color can perpetuate this relationship. Specifically, groups like the BIPOC Project aim to build authentic and lasting solidarity among Black, Indigenous and People of Color in order to undo Native invisibility, anti-Blackness, draw attention to iterations of white hegemony, and advance racial justice.

Questions in its usage:

“When should I use “BIPOC” instead of “POC?”

If you’re specifically speaking about Black and Indigenous people or communities, using “BIPOC” is appropriate. If you’re speaking broadly about all people of color, then “people of color” or “POC” can be used. [The BIPOC Project](#) specifies, “We use the term BIPOC to highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context.”

But, is it bad to just use POC?

No, but keep in mind that some stories, issues or representations exclude Black and Indigenous people. Sometimes the word POC can be perceived that all people of color (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Desi, Asian, etc.) have the same exact experiences with injustice.

How do community members use this term?

Terms of self-identification are always question of personal choice and should be respected.

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