

"Scientists and scientific journals have the opportunity to facilitate best practices and ultimately impact racial and ethnic disparities. The written interpretations of science by a few shape the future creation of history and science for many."

Dr. Khadijah Breathett, University of Arizona
Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes

April 26, 2023

Best Practices for Inclusive Language in Life Science Research and Communications

Joyce Clark Hicks, BA, and Leila Emery, MA

The power of **knowledge.**
The value of **understanding.**

Introductions and Experience



Joyce Hicks (she/her)

Senior Medical Editor
RTI Health Solutions

- Inaugural and former vice chair of the RTI-HS Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Council
- Co-leads inclusive language and diversity initiatives for RTI-HS
- Edits surveys, study protocols, and reports on observational studies and patient health preferences
- Former staff health writer for *The News and Observer* and freelance writer for various national publications
- Former content editor for GSK



Leila Emery (she/her)

Senior Medical Editor
RTI Health Solutions

- Vice chair of the RTI-HS Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Council
- Co-leads inclusive language and diversity initiatives for RTI-HS
- Edits epidemiology study protocols, reports, SAPs, etc.
- Former clinical medicine document review specialist at PPD and scholarly manuscript editor at Research Square
- Former professor of English composition



What Is Inclusive Language?

“Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, gives respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equitable opportunities.”

— *Linguistic Society of America*

- Inclusive language avoids using expressions or words that may
 - Exclude groups of people who have been historically discriminated against
 - Invalidate or demean
 - Carry hierarchical valuation or portray some groups as inferior

Why Is Inclusive Language Important?

- Honors variability in **self-identification**
- Strengthens data
- Encourages greater participation from underserved groups
- Helps reduce stigma

Diversity and Inclusion in Action



DIVERSITY + INCLUSION
ADVISORY COUNCIL

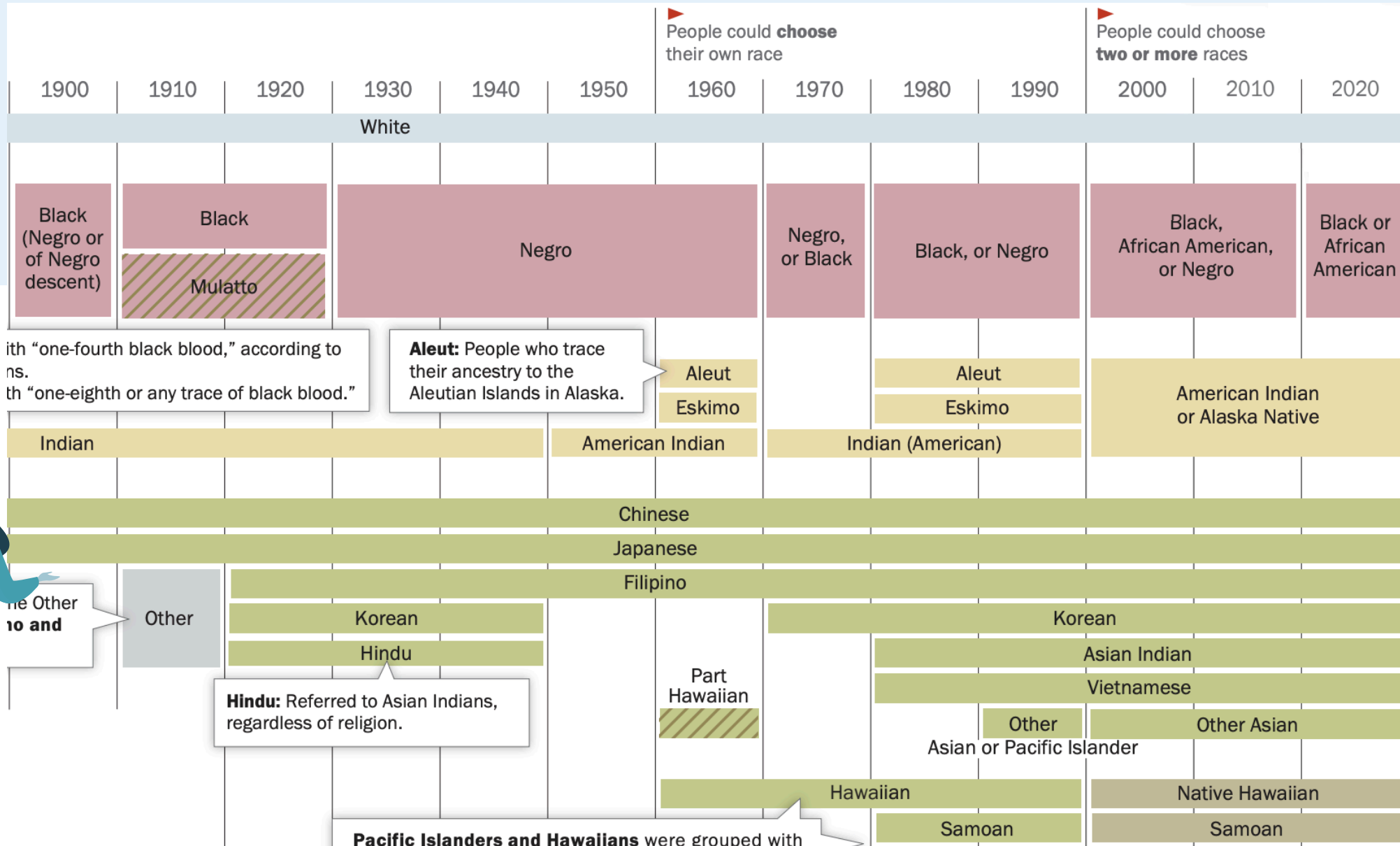


RTI-HS applies our **expertise** to help our clients address gaps in **equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging**

- Using Inclusive Language best practices, RTI-HS helps life science organizations and researchers address inequities & bias in their work
 - Identify the needs of marginalized communities
 - More intentionally reach medically underserved patient populations
 - Help patients feel more included, validated, and seen
 - Achieve better health outcomes



Racial and Ethnic Designations in the US Census: Historical Context



CLASSIFICATION BY RACE



with "one-fourth black blood," according to laws. The "one-eighth or any trace of black blood."

Aleut: People who trace their ancestry to the Aleutian Islands in Alaska.

Hindu: Referred to Asian Indians, regardless of religion.

Pacific Islanders and Hawaiians were grouped with

Race

- Historically, race has been regarded as a means of differentiating between people by phenotypic characteristics (e.g., skin color).
- *“Race is a social construct—a human-invented classification system. It was invented as a way to define physical differences between people, but race has more often been used as a tool for oppression and violence.”*

— Center for Health Progress



Ethnicity

- A multifaceted component of one’s identity that can encompass nationality, tribal affiliation, religion, language, and traditions of a particular group.
- Often the basis for systemic discrimination.



Unconscious Bias

- Social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form in an unconscious manner.



Othering

- To view, treat, depict, and/or refer to a person or group of people as intrinsically different from or inferior to oneself using an “us vs. them” mentality.



Examples of Preferred Terminology: Race

Avoid	Preferred
At-risk patients, at-risk youth, at-risk communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients at risk of developing diabetes • Communities of color at risk of acquiring COVID-19 • Black patients at risk of developing sickle cell anemia
Minorities, minority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practice is to name the specific group(s) being referenced (if <i>relevant</i> and if <i>known</i>) <p>For example: “African American people with these underlying conditions are at even greater risk of COVID-19 hospitalization” or “Black people with these underlying conditions are at even greater risk of COVID-19 hospitalization”</p>
Minority communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities of color • Historically underserved communities • Historically marginalized groups
Non-White, non-Whites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If <i>relevant</i> and if <i>known</i>, best practice is to name the specific group(s) being referred to • If the identity of the person or group is <i>not</i> known: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communities of color, historically marginalized groups, historically underserved populations or communities, medically underserved communities (e.g., when referring to health disparities among groups)

Gender

- Sociocultural norms and expectations about behaviors and characteristics regarding what is considered “masculine” or “feminine”



Gender Identity

- One’s innermost concept of self as **female**, **male**, neither female nor male (e.g., **nonbinary**), a **blend** of genders, or **no gender**
- How individuals **perceive** and **refer** to themselves



Sex Assigned at Birth

- The assignment (female, male, or intersex) that a doctor or midwife uses to describe a child at birth based on external anatomy



Sexual Orientation

- One’s romantic, emotional, and/or physical attraction
- How one self-identifies based on these characteristics



Examples of Preferred Terminology: Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation

Avoid	Preferred
Gender (when “sex assigned at birth” is intended)	Sex assigned at birth
Gender (used on its own)	Gender identity
Sex (used on its own)	Gender identity
Homosexual/homosexuals	If the sexual orientation(s) of the individual or group being referred to is known and is directly relevant, best practice is to specify that identity. If not known but directly relevant, it’s acceptable to use: members of the LGBTQ+ community, people who identify as LGBTQ+, person/patient who identifies as LGBTQ+
Sexual preference/lifestyle	Sexual orientation <i>Note that a person’s sexual orientation should not be referred to as a “preference” or a “lifestyle,” as these descriptors erroneously suggest that sexual orientation is a choice rather than an identity.</i>
Transgendered	Transgender (used as an adjective, e.g., “a transgender patient”)
Transgenders	Transgender people; people who are transgender

Common Inclusive Language Pitfalls

Instead of using generalized or “catch-all” terms

- Specify the group(s) being referenced

“**Minorities** with these underlying conditions are at even greater risk of COVID-19 hospitalization.”



“**African American people**¹ with these underlying conditions are at even greater risk of COVID-19 hospitalization.”

“We are conducting a survey to assess health disparities **among minority patients with cardiovascular disease**.”



“We are conducting a survey to assess health disparities **among patients with cardiovascular disease who self-identify as African American or Black, Hispanic, Latine, or Latinx**.”¹

“However, certain barriers to internet adoption by **minorities** have not changed significantly since 2000.”



“However, certain barriers to internet adoption by **people of color** have not changed significantly since 2000.”

¹ These are examples where the specific groups being referenced are known.

Stigmatizing Language

“Approximately half the study sample will comprise **individuals from underrepresented communities.**”

“**These at-risk segments of the population** may require hospitalization when infected with COVID-19.”



“Approximately half the study sample will comprise individuals from **historically marginalized communities.**”



“**Groups that have been medically underserved** may require hospitalization when infected with COVID-19.”

Unconscious Bias

The survey was written only in English, **and there was not a Spanish-language version for the Hispanic population in the US.** Therefore, the Hispanic respondents may not be represented because not all Hispanic respondents would be able to read and understand English, and the results might only be representative of English-speaking US patients.



The survey was written only in English, and **there was not a Spanish-language version.** Therefore, US respondents who are most comfortable communicating in Spanish may not be represented, and the results might only be representative of US patients who are most comfortable communicating in English.

Biased language "distracts many readers and makes the work less credible to them."

— *Chicago Manual of Style*



Medical Survey Questions & Response Options

Limiting, Inaccurate, and “Othering” Language

1. What race(s) or ethnicity(ies) do you consider yourself to be? *(Select all that apply)*

- African American or Black
- Alaska Native, American Indian, or Native American
- Asian or Asian American
- Hispanic, Latina/o, Latine, or Latinx
- Middle Eastern and/or North African
- Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander
- White
- A race or ethnicity not listed



Inclusive Language at RTI Health Solutions

Why Is RTI-HS Best Positioned to Assist Life Science Researchers With Inclusive Language?



Regularly solicit Inclusive Language feedback from colleagues & key stakeholders



View or review our clients' projects with an eye toward expanding equity & inclusivity



Routinely consult recently published primary source material to look for trends



Provide RTI-HS's EDIB statement in our proposals



Draw upon the diversity and lived experience of RTI-HS staff

How Can RTI-HS Help Your Organization Incorporate Inclusive Language Best Practices?



Making it easier for patients, respondents, and other individuals to self-identify

- Where possible, allow them to self-identify as more than 1 race or ethnicity
- Allow them to select from gender identity options beyond the female/male binary



Regularly updating and consulting RTI-HS' in-house Inclusive Language glossary and style guide, which offer alternatives to catch-all terms such as “minorities” and “non-White”



Flagging potentially stigmatizing language, e.g., “mixed race”, “at-risk patients”

- Preferred: “biracial,” “multiracial,” “patients who are at risk for diabetes”



Omitting “othering” language by expanding race, ethnicity, and gender identity response options in patient surveys

- RTI-HS has replaced “Other” with “A race or ethnicity not listed” and “A gender identity not listed”



Possible Concerns Your Organization May Have



You may worry that you or your research team might unintentionally offend or communicate the wrong thing

- Through its expertise, Health Solutions is well equipped to handle any Inclusive Language concerns



Encountering resistance to change



Lack of awareness

Remember: We're all co-learning!





“How can we describe results that vary by race and ethnicity?”

- What is the best practice for addressing outdated and non-inclusive terms in comparative or secondary research
- What’s wrong with “Other”?



Recent Inclusive Language Trends



The *AMA* has started to focus on best practices for Inclusive Language and has added an extensive Inclusive Language section to their most recent manual of style



The AP, APA, CDC, FDA, and many universities, businesses, and industries have developed—or are developing—Inclusive Language guidance



Some medical journals now require greater detail on race and ethnicity classification as well as data collection/description of methods



Journals and researchers are taking a more critical look at how race and systemic racism affect healthcare access, health outcomes, etc.



Thank You
Questions?



Contact Us



Joyce Hicks (she/her)
*Senior Medical Editor
RTI Health Solutions*



Leila Emery (she/her)
*Senior Medical Editor
RTI Health Solutions*

inclusive_language@rti.org

www.rtihs.org

