



Glossary of Common Terms – Ethnicity, Ancestry, and Membership in a Racialized Group

Ethnicity and race are two distinct constructs. **Race** is a system of classification based on antiquated and discredited theories of biology, and is no longer considered to be based on science or biology, but on societal distinctions (Gould 1994).

Research since the 1900s has demonstrated that populations could not be classified as biologically distinct races (Lewontin 1972) and recent population genetic studies have determined that there is more internal biological variation within populations than between “racial” groups (Van Arsdale 2019). Race is, in most instances an inappropriate demographic category for research.

However, race continues to be used in popular discourse, which can contribute to social, economic, and political discrimination. It is also used for administrative purposes (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). Use of the term race and related practices contribute to discrimination and racialization.

Ethnicity. Ethnic origin, as stated in the Statistics Canada reference guide “refers to a person’s “roots” and should not be confused with citizenship, nationality, language or place of birth....”

Ethnicity is a form of relatedness based on a person’s self-identified social or cultural affiliations, connecting them to contemporaries as well as ancestors. Individuals may have multiple ethnic affiliations. These various ethnic identities may be contextually relevant in different social and research settings (Barth 1969). This requires researchers to frame their questions to elicit the information on ethnicity that would actually be relevant to their research.

Genealogical Ancestry: Genealogical ancestry establishes claims to affiliations and ancestors and their social groups through family histories and pedigrees. Genealogical ancestry may reflect cultural and behavioural characteristics, as well as some genetic and epigenetic characteristics (Benn Torres 2020; Van Arsdale 2019; National Academies of Sciences 2023).

Genetic Ancestry: Genetic ancestry is a relatively new means of characterizing individuals’ biology, based on DNA testing using SNPs (single nucleotide polymorphisms), panels of selected genes, and whole genome sequencing. In clinical settings genetic testing may identify individuals who are related in order to investigate inherited conditions, or to determine susceptibility to diseases, prognosis of disease, and response to drug and other therapies. Genetic ancestry through pedigrees¹ and DNA testing provides a more useful means of capturing the biological relatedness among individuals than the vague notion of race. Genetic Ancestry cannot be used to establish ethnic affiliation, which is a social attribute (Benn Torres 2020; Van Arsdale 2019; National Academies of Sciences 2023).

Indigeneity: Indigenous is a global term that refers to the Original Peoples of a country. In Canada, Indigenous typically refers to people of First Nation, Inuit, and/or Métis descent “regardless of where they reside and whether their names appear on an official register.” Indigenous groups have distinct histories, cultures, languages (TCPS2, Chapter 9), and distinct traditional knowledge, perspectives, and worldviews.

Racialization: Racialization is, “the systematic accentuation of certain physical attributes to

¹ “A pedigree, as related to genetics, is a **chart that diagrams the inheritance of a trait or health condition through generations of a family**. The pedigree particularly shows the relationships among family members and, when the information is available, indicates which individuals have a trait(s) of interest.” (<https://www.genome.gov/genetics-glossary/Pedigree>)

allocate persons to races that are projected as real and thereby become the basis for analyzing all social relations" (Webster 1992: 3).

Although census and related categories of race and ethnicity are used extensively in different areas of research, the actual intended use of these categories by public bodies is to gather information to inform social policy (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Racialized group: A social construct describing groups that have racial meanings associated with them that affect their economic, political and social life. This term is sometimes preferred over "race" because it acknowledges the process of racialization.

Sources

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