

January 24, 2024

Dear Marisa R. Hughes or current taxonomist at the American Psychological Association (APA),

We, the undersigned librarians and general users of APA PsycINFO, ask that APA consider revising the current headings in the *Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms* under the Racial and Ethnic Groups category, with special attention to the use of "Blacks" as a racial group (American Psychological Association, 2023c). We believe that proposed changes would be consistent with the subject heading changes of other subject taxonomies (e.g., MEDLINE) as well as congruent with APA's own recommendations (e.g., *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association: The Official Guide To APA Style*, 7th ed.). This letter provides background information on previous changes to similar subject headings, as well as references APA's own published guidance.

In APA's *Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms*, the subject heading for "Blacks" was created in 1982, and the historical note lists that "[i]n 1982, this term replaced the discontinued term NEGROES" (American Psychological Association, 2023c). The broader category for this heading is Racial and Ethnic Groups. We are now asking APA to change the subject heading for "Blacks" to "Black People." We feel strongly that the change from "Blacks" to "Black People" should be made swiftly. Further, APA should do an analysis (involving users) regarding other subject headings under the Racial and Ethnic Groups broader subject heading. The designation of racial and ethnic groups is inconsistent in *The Thesaurus*. It has a range of specificity and broader racial categories. Some have ties to geography, while others do not.

As for why we are calling for a change from "Blacks" to "Black People" in *The Thesaurus*, we will refer to explanations from other subject heading changemakers. The first example is a change recently implemented at MEDLINE. The push to change the medical subject heading (MeSH) of "Blacks" to "Black People" was led by Kelleen Maluski and other PubMed/MEDLINE users who drafted an open letter to the National Library of Medicine of the U.S. National Institute of Health (Roth, 2022). In this letter, they noted offensive and outdated MeSH terms, in particular, "Blacks." The letter noted that "'Black' as a term used to denote racial identity is a proper adjective; not a noun." The letter also addresses that selecting terminology of racial groups is nuanced, that "there is no one global term for individuals of the African Diaspora," and that "[i]ndividuals may identify as Black, African American, or by their country of origin." As a result of the letter writing campaign, NLMed changed the MeSH to Black People in 2022.

There is further precedent in changing subject headings from Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) which previously used the subject heading "Negroes," changed to "Blacks" for persons outside the U.S. and "Afro-Americans" for U.S. residents in 1976 (Cataloging Service, 1975). In 2000, "Afro-Americans" was revised to "African Americans" (Cataloging Service Bulletin, 2001). While the LCSH "African Americans" is still in use for people of Black African descent in the U.S., "Blacks" was revised to "Black people" in 2021 (Library of Congress, 2021).

While the previous section focused on precedence in other classification systems, we now focus on APA's own guidance. We believe that APA making these proposed modifications would be a further commitment to the APA resolutions on racism, such as *APA Resolution Harnessing Psychology to Combat Racism: Adopting a Uniform Definition and Understanding* (American Psychological

Association, 2021). Another sign of APA's willingness to confront racism was in the publishing of "Upending Racism in Psychological Science: Strategies to Change How Science Is Conducted, Reported, Reviewed, and Disseminated" in *American Psychologist* in 2021. This article recommends appropriate labeling that humanizes the individual and recognizes group heterogeneity (Buchanan et al, 2021).

In addition to the aforementioned APA resolutions and article, there is further alignment with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association: The Official Guide To APA Style (7th)*, *APA's Inclusive Language Guide*, and the new *Journal Article Reporting Standards for Race, Ethnicity, and Culture (JARS-REC)*.

In *The Manual* section "Be Sensitive to Labels" and the corresponding subsection of "Acknowledge People's Humanity," *The Manual* states, "Choose labels with sensitivity, ensuring that the individuality and humanity of people are respected. Avoid using adjectives as nouns to label people (e.g., "the gays," "the poor")... Instead, use adjectival forms (e.g., gay men, older adults) or nouns with descriptive phrases" (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 133).

In APA's *Inclusive Language Guide*, there is no instance of "Blacks." Instead, the guide includes a section on "African American/Black" where it is explained that "African American" and "Black" are not always interchangeable (American Psychological Association, 2023a). "Black" is described as a racial group or category, and throughout the guide, Black is used to describe people, communities, and specific groups like students and women (i.e., Black students, Black women).

The *JARS-REC* documentation states that authors are supposed to use those standards for all research studies published by APA (American Psychological Association, 2023b). The standards include general guidance followed by expectations for what should be reported in the Title and Title Page, Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, and References. The general guidance on terminology instructs authors to consult *The Manual* for "detailed guidelines for bias-free language, including information on race and ethnicity" and the *Inclusive Language Guide* (American Psychological Association, 2023b). Additional general guidance includes, "Racial and ethnic groups and categories are not universal. Terms are used differently around the world. Authors should use racial and ethnic labels and categories that are congruent with the local usage practices and that resonate with sample participants" (American Psychological Association, 2023b, p. 1). In the subsection on Participant Characteristics in the Method section, authors are further instructed to consider that "group descriptions change over time, and preferences likely vary across subsegments of the population" (American Psychological Association, 2023b, p. 3). There is no reference to the word "Blacks" in *JARS-REC*, and alternatively "Black" is used (e.g., Black feminist thought). Relatedly, "Whites" is not referenced, and instead "White" is used in instances such as "White Americans" and "White Participants."

We would like to again acknowledge the work of other librarians and subject heading users who have paved the way in advocating for the removal of offensive and outdated subject headings. Specifically, thank you to letter writers Kelleen Maluski, Misquith, Chelsea, Christian Minter, Jamia Williams, Aidy Weeks, Stephanie Roth, Ursula Ellis, Katie Lobner, and Violet Fox who were successful in advocating for change in MeSH.

Thank you for considering,
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Marianne Elmquist, Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Andrea Ford, Communication Sciences and Disorders, University of Cincinnati

Amy Kunkel, Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota

Theresa Heitz, Student Experience, Learning, and Accessibility, University of Minnesota

Alayo Tripp, Linguistics, University of Florida

Kristi Liu, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota

Sammie Morris, Libraries, Purdue University

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Megan Goeke, Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota

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Lizbeth H Finestack, Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences, University of Minnesota

Andrew Zieffler, Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota

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Lingyan Yu, Psychology, University of Minnesota

Hannah Heitz, Counseling and Psychological Services, Stanford University

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Chantel Browne, Educational Psychology

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Cathy Coats, University Libraries, University of Minnesota

Emma Shanahan, College of Education, University of Texas at Austin

Jodi Whitted, School of Social Work, University of Cincinnati

Rachel Borchardt, Library, American University

Sarah Visintini, Berkman Library, University of Ottawa