

Isn't it time to stop using the term "minority" to describe all individuals, racial and ethnic groups who are not White?

By Barry Cross, Jr.,

2009



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Publisher's Perspective: Isn't it time to stop using the term "minority" to describe all individuals, racial and ethnic groups who are not White?

By Barry Cross, Jr., President and Chief Executive Officer, Elsie Y. Cross Associates

The nomination of Sonia Sotomayor for the Supreme Court has elicited cries of "racism" from some conservatives due to the nominee's earlier comments about the unique insights she could bring to this position as a Latina. In this article, Barry Cross looks at the bigger issue behind this debate and expresses his opinion on why the word "minority" is a disparaging term that should be eliminated from the conversation about diversity in this country.

Following Sonia Sotomayor's nomination to the Supreme Court, I have gotten more concerned and frustrated with how the media and conservative pundits are using the term "minority." The word has become code for everyone who is not a White male.

The use of the term prevents us from noticing diversity's differences and having an open and honest discussion about the benefits of diversity. We should be talking about why it is valid, useful and important to have different points of view based on social identity in the Supreme Court and in society in general.

It is my strong belief that the courts should reflect the demographics of our nation's population and not just the experience of one group. It is not that I think any one group is better or more qualified than another. I value representative—that is, inclusive—government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

An example of one of those frustrating and confusing comments on this topic came from Huma Khan and Jake Tapper of ABC News, who were quoted as saying: "Conservative pundit Ann Coulter said on Good Morning America, 'Saying that someone who would decide a case differently...because she's a Latina, not a white male,' that statement by definition is racist. It does a disservice to minorities—to women and minorities."

First, the most remarkable aspect of that statement is Ann Coulter's denial that her own experience as a White woman plays any part in her thinking and judgment. Secondly, her use of the word "minorities" is condescending. I prefer to use the term "People of Color" over the term "minorities" when I describe racial and ethnic groups who are not White. The term "People of Color" is neutral and

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does not have the negative implications as the term "minorities," which seems to imply something "less than" being White.

Using the term "minority," and even Hispanic, paints a picture with too broad a brush. This terminology does not distinguish the textures of culture, ethnicity and race, nor does it notice or attempt to understand different experiences, realities and perspectives by social group identity. For example, if we use the term "minority" to describe everyone who is not White, we miss the differences between Arabs, Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

These are very different groups with different values, customs and cultures. Similarly, simply using the term "Hispanic" to describe Sonia Sotomayor is misleading because it doesn't identify her as a Puerto Rican.

By saying that Sotomayor is Puerto Rican, we would know that she is a Latina born as a U.S. citizen whose official language is Spanish. We might also surmise that due to her Puerto Rican heritage, her views on immigration and other issues could be very different from the views of other Hispanics such as Cubans, Mexicans or Venezuelans.

My view of the term "minorities" is reflected in the definition of minorities found on Wikipedia: "A 'minority' is a sociological group that does not constitute a politically dominant voting majority of the total population of a given society. A sociological 'minority' is not necessarily a numerical 'minority.' It may include any group that is subnormal with respect to a dominant group in terms of social status, education, employment, wealth, and political power. In socioeconomics, the term 'minority' typically refers to a socially subordinate ethnic group (understood in terms of color, language, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and/or culture). Other groups called 'minorities' include people with disabilities, 'economic minorities' (working poor or unemployed), 'age minorities' (who are younger or older than a typical working age) and people with different sexual orientations." —Wikipedia, June 5, 2009

So, no wonder I am offended when I am called a "minority," and it surprises me that others are unaware. Personally, I consider myself Black or sometimes I may identify myself as an African American. But I do not see myself as a "minority"—someone who is "less than" someone who is in the "majority." It is even more surprising and disappointing to me when I see the liberal or progressive media outlets and even President Obama use the term "minority" to describe individuals or groups of people. I am even more puzzled when I see diversity publications

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using the term "minority" instead of "People of Color" or the actual racial or ethnic group to which they are referring.

This is not about being politically correct. This is about respecting people for who they are and making an effort to acknowledge their heritage, ethnicity, culture, race, and/or experience. Calling everyone who is non-White a "minority" is disrespectful and lazy. Think about it, we don't call White people the "majority." Most White people don't consider themselves a group, however, they experience others as "minority" groups.

The more appropriate way to describe someone or a group when you don't know their ethnicity, nationality, or race would be as a Person of Color for individuals or People of Color at the group level or for mixed groups. However, if you do know their heritage, it is always best to use that. I would say the same is true for the terms Hispanic and Asian. Both terms cover a wide range of cultures and nationalities. So again, if you do not know that person's ethnicity then it would be more appropriate to be curious and ask what race or ethnicity best represents the person who you are describing. Accept how they self-identify.

While the term "minority" is commonly used by the media, human rights groups and in various government documents and policies, it subordinates groups, places a negative label on people and racializes the term. Let's move away from creating an "us and them" two-group mentality and get to know who we really are by our social group identity and see, acknowledge, and accept our differences and similarities. Reducing everyone who is not White to a "minority" continues to make individuals and groups invisible.

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Reprinted from The Diversity Factor, Spring 2009 Vol. 17. No. 2. Copyright 2009 EYCA.