Gender Inclusive Language and Gender Pronouns 101

(From Dutin Steuck, He/Him/They/Them)

As language continuously evolves to accommodate the myriads of human identities and experiences, we all must do the work to keep our personal vocabulary intentional, researched, and up to date. Cultures change over time, and the words we use to refer and relate to one another also shift to encompass new concepts and ideas within society. It is a privilege not having to worry about how someone will gender you because of how they perceive your gender identity, but embracing and taking action to respect an individual's pronouns leads to a more inclusive and respectful environment.

What Are Pronouns?

Gender pronouns are words that people use to identify themselves outside of their names in everyday communication. They are a part of someone's gender expression and can help convey and affirm gender identity. Some people use specific pronouns, dual/multiple pronouns, or none at all.

Pronoun Examples:

He/Him/His

The pronoun sequence, he/him/his/himself, is most commonly attributed to those who identify as men. However, we cannot guess an individual's gender identity by knowing their chosen pronoun, even if society assumes those who use this sequence identify as men. Some examples of this pronoun in use are:
- He went to the store to buy milk.
- Please give the piece of cake to him.
- This piece of cake is his.

She/Her/Hers

The pronoun sequence, she/her/hers/herself, is most commonly attributed to those who identify as women. However, we cannot guess an individual's gender identity by knowing their chosen pronoun, even if society assumes those who use this sequence identify as women. Some examples of this pronoun in use are:

- She went to the store to buy milk.
- Please give the piece of cake to her.
- This piece of cake is hers.

They/Them/Theirs

The pronoun sequence, they/them/theirs/themself(themselves), is most attributed to those in a group. However, we also can use they/them/theirs/themself as a singular pronoun, meant to be more encompassing of gender. Some examples of this pronoun in its singular use are:

- They went to the store to buy milk.
- Please give the piece of cake to them.
- This piece of cake is theirs.

 Ze/Hir/Hirs

The pronoun sequence, ze(zie)/hir/hirs/hirself, is a common gender inclusive pronoun. However, we cannot guess or assume an individual's gender identity by knowing their chosen pronoun. Some examples of this pronoun in its singular use are:

- Ze went to the store to buy milk. (Ze is pronounced like the letter 'z')
- Please give the piece of cake to hir. (Hir is pronounced like 'here')
- This piece of cake is hirs.(Hirs is pronounced like 'heres')

Why Focus on Pronouns?

This gives everyone in the room the opportunity to self-identify instead of assuming someone's identity or pronouns. Including pronouns is a shift towards respecting people's identity and creating a more welcoming space for people of all genders.

How Is This More Inclusive?

Pronouns can sometimes be a signifier for someone's gender identity but not always. We do not want to assume people's gender identity based on expression (typically shown through clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms etc.) By providing an opportunity for people to share their pronouns, you're providing an opportunity for people to self-narrate their bodies and support their identities.

What If I Don't Want to Share My Pronouns?

That's ok! Providing space and opportunity for people to share their pronouns does not mean that everyone feels comfortable or needs to share their pronouns. In the case that someone has chosen not to share their pronouns, refrain from using pronouns for that person and refer to that person by name.

Dual Pronouns?

It's important to use a person's pronouns interchangeably without assigning one pronoun more importance. For example, if a person's pronouns are "she/they", be sure to switch off referring to them as "she" or "they" even if you may have more comfort and familiarity with referring to someone with "she/her" pronouns. You are also welcome to ask individuals if they have a particular preference for how their multiple pronouns are used, as preferences can vary. Ultimately, aim to not lean into your own

comfort and preference in how you refer to others, and instead be respectful and curious about how others want to be referred to.

Mistakes and Misgendering

Misgendering refers to labeling someone intentionally or unintentionally as a gender/genders other than what they identify with. Everyone makes mistakes, please take accountability for your mistake and continue using the correct pronouns.Please avoid from imposing any feelings of guilt for pronoun errors made on transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people themselves or expecting automatic forgiveness. They might have a strong reaction to the misuse of their pronouns and need space to recenter.

What About PGP?

There has been a shift away from the term "preferred gender pronoun" or "PGP" to just using "pronoun." This change was made because a person's pronouns are not just preferred; they are the pronouns that must be used. In the same sense as mentioned earlier, gender was removed because pronouns do not always reflect or indicate someone's gender.

Make Your Support Visible

Include "pronoun:" under "name:" in name tags and group introductions as an opportunity for participants to make their pronouns visible. Share this resource with others to open supportive conversations and make sure you are engaging in respecting people's identities and pronouns. Growing and learning takes time! Educate, engage, and amend!

Tips for Gender-Inclusive Language:

Practice, practice, practice! Use gender-inclusive pronouns such as "they" and "ze" while visualizing the person who uses them. This is especially useful to do right before you're about to see the person.

Use descriptive language if you do not know a person's gender, pronouns, or name. e.g. Can you give this paper to the person across the room with the white t-shirt and short brown hair?

When addressing groups of people or people whose pronouns you haven't been told, use gender-inclusive language such as, "siblings," "third graders," "students", "friends," "folks," "all," or "y'all," rather than "brothers and sisters," or "guys," "ladies," "ma'am," or "sir."