

River's Guide to Gender and Pronouns

Sex, Gender, Expression

Sex:

Biological sex is situated on a spectrum that includes male, female and intersex traits. It is usually assigned at birth based on a person's genitals, but also includes multiple biological factors such as chromosomes, gonads, and sex hormones (which aren't immediately apparent even to health professionals). Although humans are generally dimorphic (meaning that for most people, female or male is an accurate descriptor of their sex), we're learning more and more that biological sex is less of a static trait and more of an ongoing process - a physiological dance within our cells. It's something our whole bodies are "doing" in each moment of our lives. For example, every person has both "male" and "female" sex hormones, and the amounts of each vary widely between individuals and throughout one's lifetime.

Gender:

Gender identity is the internal and psychological sense of oneself as a woman, a man, both, in between, or neither. For most people, their gender matches their assigned sex at birth. These people are referred to as "cisgender." For some people, their gender identity does not match up with their assigned sex at birth. We use the umbrella term "transgender" to refer to them. Transgender is meant to be an inclusive term and encompasses a diversity of people. It doesn't necessarily mean that someone has to medically transition, use different pronouns, change their name, or express their gender in a particular way. But some transgender people may do some or all of these.

Only you can determine your gender identity. Many labels can be used to describe one's gender - but a person's experience of their gender identity is unique and personal. Labels can be a liberating way to express oneself and find others who relate to one's experiences. It's okay if someone doesn't understand all the words being used, but we should avoid invalidating others for using labels that are unfamiliar to us. Gender is complicated, and there shouldn't be a limit to the number of words someone might use to describe their experience of gender. It's okay to explore these words and labels at any age.

Gender Expression:

Gender expression is how one outwardly shows gender, including through name and pronoun choice, style of dress, voice or hairstyle. Gender expression may be referred to as masculine, feminine or androgynous. People can simultaneously express masculinity and femininity - one doesn't diminish the other.

Gender expression is also couched in sociocultural factors and expectations that are not always up to us. Gender expression can also shift and change (over a lifetime or in different social situations). Different cultures may have different concepts and frameworks for gender, so it's important to be sensitive to this as well.

Gender expression is something both transgender and cisgender people experience and communicate in relation to others. So when we talk about being inclusive and affirming

(including respecting names and pronouns) that conversation includes and benefits cisgender folks too (especially folks who are gender non-conforming). Everyone - cisgender and transgender alike - should feel respected and affirmed however they choose to express gender.

One isn't more or less of a woman, man, or any other gender because of how their body looks, how they choose to dress, speak, or what name and pronouns they use.

Pronouns

Pronouns are words that are used in place of proper nouns. If you say "That's River, they have fabulous hair," the word "they" is the personal pronoun that is being used in place of the name "River".

A gender-neutral or gender-inclusive pronoun is a pronoun that does not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed. One common gender-inclusive pronoun is "they." Many (but not all) non-binary people like to use this pronoun for that reason.

There are many different pronouns someone might feel is right for them. You are the only person who can decide which pronoun is the right one for you.

You can ask for someone's pronouns just like you would ask their name. Some people may choose not to share their pronouns or may ask that no pronoun be used (so you would just use that person's name). Nobody should be forced or compelled to share their pronouns.

People always have the right to choose a different name or pronoun for themselves.

When in doubt, it's okay to use "they/them." Don't use gender-neutral pronouns if a transgender person has requested "he/him" or "she/her" pronouns. We should always try to use the pronouns given by that person, just as we would use their proper name. This is a wonderful way to honour people and show them care and respect.

If you accidentally use the wrong pronouns for someone, just apologize and correct yourself. Even though everyone misses things sometimes, it can still be hurtful even when the mistake is innocent. The good news is we always have plenty of fresh opportunities to get it right!

It's important, however, not to intentionally misgender someone. That can make a person feel unwelcome, invisible, disrespected and/or unsafe. So let's try our best!

Lastly, even if you're cisgender and use "he/him" or "she/her" pronouns, sharing your pronouns can create a safe space for other people to share their own. It communicates that you are aware of and respect gender identity and expression. In this way, it is a beautiful offering to others.

Resources

Sex and Gender

["Sex isn't binary, and we should stop acting like it is" by Lisa Brusman](#)

[Sex biology redefined: Article suggests that genes don't indicate binary sexes](#)

["The Spectrum of Sex" by Hida Viloria and Maria Nieto \(physical text from UBC Press\)](#)

Trans Inclusivity

["Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth" by the Trevor Project](#)

I like this guide. It's aimed at supporting young people (for educators and parents etc.) but it really covers everything quite beautifully and has sweet illustrations as well. In particular, I find the way it describes sex/gender to be accurate but accessible. It also includes great statistics to help frame the importance of this work (ex. Usage of chosen name resulted in a 29% decrease in suicidal ideation and a 56% decrease in suicidal behaviour). This just reinforces my opinion that we should just write everything with young people in mind.

Some nuggets:

"Be careful not to tell others how you think they should or shouldn't label their gender. Gender is a personal experience. There is no right or wrong way to define your gender, and it's OK if you don't want to label yourself either."

"Names and pronouns are a common way to communicate one's gender. Honouring a person's name and pronouns shows respect and acknowledgement of their gender and identity."

["Trans Basics" by Trans Care BC](#)

The landing page includes subheadings and a handy glossary.

["Trans Basics: Gender" by Trans Care BC](#)

"Gender identity is the internal and psychological sense of oneself as a woman, a man, both, in between, or neither. Only you can determine your gender identity."

"Gender expression is how one outwardly shows gender, including through name and pronoun choice, style of dress, voice or hairstyle. Gender expression may be referred to as masculine, feminine or androgynous. A person may change how they express themselves depending on the situation they are in (at a business meeting, home alone, out with friends)."

"We use the word trans as an umbrella term, to describe a wide range of people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from their assigned sex or the societal and cultural expectations of their assigned sex. We do this to be as inclusive as possible to all people who are trans and gender diverse."

[Gender Inclusive Language" by Trans Care BC](#)

Great two-page handout on using inclusive language in speaking and writing.

[QMUNITY's Community Agreements \(PDF\)](#)

Includes such wonderful agreements as:

“Don’t Yuck My Yum”

Respect people’s choices, experiences and feelings

“Assume Best Intent”

This is a space to learn, and sometimes that means making mistakes

["Sisterhood not Cisterhood: Inclusion as a Politico-Moral Issue" by Florence Ashley](#)

[McKinnon, D.R. \(2019\). Including Trans Women Athletes in Competitive Sport: Analyzing the Science, Law, and Principles and Policies of Fairness in Competition \(PDF\)](#)

Pronouns (including they/them)

["Pronouns 101: Why They Matter and What To Do \(and Not Do\) If You Misgender Someone" by Kay Martinez](#)

"Some folks like me were assigned a sex at birth that does not reflect our gender. Being Non-Binary is not a Sex Assigned At Birth as it is a Gender Identity for someone who identifies as neither male/female nor Man/Woman exclusively."

"One way to honour and support the Transgender/ Gender Variant community is by taking the time to learn people’s pronouns, making the practice more widely known throughout your organization and working together to talk about ways to mitigate misgendering. Mitigating misgendering is a great starting place to create a safer and supportive workplace for everyone."

<https://www.mypronouns.org/>

This is a thoughtful and comprehensive site by Professor Shige Sakurai, a transgender person of colour and a social justice leader, university administrator, professor, and consultant with two decades of community and professional experiences. They are also the founder of International Pronouns Day.

"Just because a person goes by a certain set or sets of pronouns is not indicative of that person’s gender. A person could be transgender or not transgender (also called “cisgender” - the vast majority of the population is cisgender) and might share the pronouns they go by."

"Some people go by multiple sets of pronouns, and usually that means that it is okay to use any of the sets they go by."

["Pronouns 101" by Queer Events](#)

["What People Get Wrong About They/Them Pronouns" by Wren Sanders](#)

"As a nonbinary person who prefers they/them pronouns, the singular “they” is clearly near and dear to me. And though I am not possessive over my linguistic love, I am protective of it. When we assume an inextricable connection between preferring “they” pronouns and being nonbinary, we risk overlooking not only nonbinary folx who do not use “they” pronouns, but also the non-nonbinary folx who are entitled to being referred to in an affirming manner. Some nonbinary

people don't use "they" pronouns. Some people who aren't nonbinary do use "they" pronouns. Allowing for this sort of complexity, in the end, ought to be the bedrock of progressive gender politics."

["Dear \(Cis\) People Who Put Your Pronouns On Your "Hello My Name Is" Name Tags" by Sinclair Sexsmith](#)

"When we're doing the socializing part of whatever event we're at, and we are introduced, I automatically feel warmer toward you — regardless of your gender or presentation. I feel much more comfortable talking to you because you already tell me you know a little about gender. Thank you."

[Making space for them, her, him, and 'prefer not to disclose' in group settings: Why pronoun-sharing is important but must remain optional](#) by Oliver L. Haimson and Lee Airtton

"Especially when a person is questioning their own gender or is not sure how people will react to their trans or non-binary status, pronoun sharing can be contentious. In these cases, pronoun sharing is more difficult and dangerous for some people in the room than others.

These caveats do not lessen pronoun sharing's importance. Pronoun go-rounds can still happen, even in spaces like classrooms and non-trans-specific meetings. Sharing pronouns just should not be mandatory in these settings."