What's in a Personal Pronoun? A Tutorial[1]

Introduction

People often make automatic assumptions about the sex and gender identity of another person based on appearance or name. These assumptions are not always correct, and **the act of making and acting on an assumption (even if correct) sends a potentially harmful message** -- *that people have to look a certain way to demonstrate the gender that they are or are not.* Using a person's name is a way to show respect; using someone's correct personal pronouns also conveys respect and helps create an inclusive environment. By *personal pronouns*, we refer to the words we use for people in place of a name or when speaking of them in third person, e.g., she, her, hers; he, him, his; they, them, their.

In recent years, increasing recognition of a broader range of gender identities has resulted in more deliberate use of a vocabulary of pronouns, accompanied by sets of behaviors and expectations that are relatively new to many of us, especially those of us who are older adults. You may, however, have already begun to notice and wonder about the signature line on emails or letters containing the personal pronouns of the writer. The ever-increasing fluidity of gender presentation together with the inclusiveness movement to acknowledge and respect the various groups included in *LBGTQIA+* calls us to action. The mission of the Penn's Village Committee on Inclusiveness and Diversity includes the imperative to explore and provide information to assist members, volunteers, board, and staff to be aware of and incorporate this significant trend in our daily lives. We believe that the Penn's Village community would benefit from programs that aid in our understanding of, and respectful participation in, this phenomenon.

To this end, we have prepared this tutorial that provides a fuller description of this 'new' use of pronouns. It includes a brief description of why pronouns matter, how to learn what pronouns to use, how to manage 'mistakes,' and the 'best practices' for use of personal pronouns. We conclude with a brief definition of terms and suggested links to websites offering helpful descriptions of this trend for your reference. Be sure also to take a look at the recorded October 18, 2021, Penn's Village zoom program, *"Puzzled about Pronouns?"* by Erin Cross, Director of the Penn LGBT Center. The recording can be accessed by clicking the *Events* tab on the Home Page, then clicking *Past Events.* Finally, we urge our members, volunteers, board and staff to give us feedback after reading this tutorial and/or watching Erin's program presentation using the tool here.

Key elements of Using Personal Pronouns

What ARE Personal Pronouns & Why Do They Matter?

Pronouns are the words we use to refer to ourselves or other people when we are not using given names. The third person pronouns '*she*' and '*he*' are viewed as 'gendered,' that is, they normally refer to women/girls or men/boys respectfully. The third person pronoun '*they*' (like '*Ze*' or "*Xe*') is seen as 'gender neutral'; a person going by '*they*' may be a man, a woman, both, neither, or something else entirely. Thus, one cannot make inferences solely on hearing a person's pronouns.

Sharing one's personal pronouns with others disrupts the pattern learned over a lifetime of making assumptions about gender based on names, appearance, interests or occupations. (This current change in practice could be compared with the movement in the 1960s and 1970s to use the title *Ms*. rather than *Mrs*. as many women came to believe that marital status was irrelevant to their names.) Anybody can choose to go by the sets of pronouns with which they are most comfortable, and using these pronouns is an important way to show respect for the person's gender identity, i.e., the emotional and psychological sense of their own gender. Today, there are also non-binary, gender-neutral titles (e.g., *Mx*. Instead of *Mr*. or *Ms*.) and nonbinary, gender neutral language that can be used for everyone, e.g., *friends and guests* instead of *ladies and gentlemen*… and each of these approaches is viewed as more inclusive and respectful than inadvertently using a wrong pronoun.

Once a pronoun preference for a given person is known, it is incumbent to continue to use the pronoun consistently. Sometimes we may use the wrong pronoun without realizing it, or without meaning any harm. This may especially be the case with those of us in older generations, because we are not yet as accustomed to thinking or talking in this way. When the choice is incorrect, this can be hurtful because it implies that a person must look and dress and behave in a certain way to demonstrate their gender identity. Failing to use the preferred pronouns after the person has made them known, however, ---i.e., *deliberate misgendering*--engenders feelings of disrespect which, if continued over time, is harmful to the person's mental health.

While it may seem 'incorrect' or awkward to speak of a single person with the (formerly plural) pronoun 'they,' Webster's Dictionary now includes an additional definition for it. "They' can refer to an individual whose gender identify is non-binary. This definition is congruent with many people, especially among the younger generations, who prefer to use this gender neutral pronoun for themselves while they are still working on gender identity or if they just do not wish to disclose. Even though the majority of people may use 'she/her' or 'he/him,' it is important that we never assume someone's pronouns; again, we cannot always know just by looking at the person. Finally, even though we tend to think of pronouns as 'gendered,' it really is ok for anyone of any gender to use

any of the pronouns that seem to fit them, including using both 'she/her' and also 'they/them.'

Guidelines for learning and using personal pronouns.

(1) ***How to learn what pronouns to use?*** If the pronoun is unknown, use 'They/Them' or the person's given name until you can ask; when possible, ask the person directly. When inquiring, it often works best to first share your own pronouns. For example, on initially meeting someone (individually or in a group) or when you know them but have never before had 'the pronoun conversation' with them, you can just say your name and indicate your own pronouns, e.g., "Hi, I'm Mary and my pronouns are she/her. What pronouns do you use?" (Or, "How would you like me to refer to you? "). This approach models that both the question and the sharing are ok and provides the language the speaker expects when being referred to. Other ways to share pronouns include adding them to your name tag at meetings or events and/or including your pronouns in your email signature line (for example: My Pronouns: they/them) and even adding a link to a resource for more information about this practice (see *Summary* below). Likewise, in a group meeting, you could open the session by sharing your own pronouns and then continuing with round robin self-introductions that include sharing the pronouns each person goes by. You might consider explaining the practice, e.g., as a way to avoid assumptions, particularly about gender. This could feel awkward at first, but becomes normalized over time. (Just ask your grandchildren!) It may also generate questions from others like 'What's this all about?' thus, providing an opportunity to share why you are leading with your pronouns.

(2) ***What to do when you make a mistake?*** This may happen because of forgetfulness or ignorance, so be prepared. If you 'catch' the error, correct it right away --'Oh, I'm sorry, I meant 'they'--and continue without making a major point about it. If you didn't recall until after the event, consider going to the person, acknowledge that you recognize what you did, apologize and promise to try and get it right the next time. If you realize that the pronouns you have been using for/with a person may have changed, approach them privately within the context of your own 'learning about personal pronouns and that making assumptions can be problematic.' Acknowledge what pronouns you have been using for them, but that you want to know whether this is ok or should you be using a different set of pronouns to refer to them. Long apologies or continuing to go back to the mistake, especially when around others, may be embarrassing or hurtful to the person. A genuine apology and a pledge to try and do better and Doing Better Deliberately is the best way to go.

(3) ***How to respond when others make a mistake?*** When someone is misgendered, regardless of whether or not it was deliberate, it is hurtful because it communicates that the person's gender and experiences are not valued or respected. Be gentle and use this as an educational opportunity: (a) If the person being referred to erroneously is

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NOT present, it is important to consider that they may not yet have shared their pronouns in all areas of their life. If not sure, ask them first before using correction strategies; (b) Just respond to the person who misspoke, using the correct pronouns, e.g., 'You're right, 'they' are really knowledgeable about this area.' Often if the speaker is aware of pronouns, they will make the correction themselves as well. (b) If the person speaking is not aware, and the one being misgendered has shared their pronouns in all areas of their life, the best practice is to gently correct the person…e.g., "Yes, 'they' are very knowledgeable. And just so you know, Jerry uses 'they/them/their' pronouns."

A Summary of Best Practices for Pronouns

- Share your own pronouns as part of your introductions.

- Make it a practice to share pronouns at the beginning of every meeting or class; pronouns can and do change for people, especially for those who are gender fluid. The practice also introduces others new to the environment to the practice, and provides space to share and become aware of how to address others.

- Announce pronouns with 'My pronouns are…' or Their pronouns are…' Avoid using the word 'preferred' as this may be perceived as 'optional.'

- Add your pronouns to your business cards, email signature, website bio and meeting name tags.

- Include with your own pronouns a link to the following webpage as a way for interested others to access more information, e.g*., Want to learn more about pronouns? Go to* https://www.diversitycentermeo.org/about-us/pronouns/

Selected Terms Defined

SEX

Sex: A medically constructed categorization, usually 'male' or 'female,' .based on the physical traits one is born with or develops that we commonly think of as 'sex characteristics.' Determination of sex is most often based solely on the appearance of the genitalia, either in ultrasound or at birth.

Intersex: Intersex people are born with a variety of differences in their sex traits and reproductive anatomy. There is a wide range of such differences including in genitalia, chromosomes, gonads, internal sex organs, hormone production, hormone response, and/or secondary sex traits. According to experts, nearly 2% of the general population is born with intersex traits.

GENDER

Gender: A social construct used to classify a person as male, female, or some other identity. While most cultures continue to espouse binary genders, i.e., boys/men and girls/women, gender is actually fundamentally different from the sex assigned at birth. It is not binary, 'either/or'; often it is 'both/and.' It is more about how a person feels they best align with the socio-behavioral norms or rules for each gender type.

Gender - binary: The practice of classification of gender into two distinct, opposite forms --masculine and feminine-- whether by social system or cultural belief.

Gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither. It can also refer to how individuals perceive themselves, what they call themselves and how they align (or don't align) themselves. This is an individual's personal sense of having a particular gender. One's gender identity can be the same as or different from their sex assigned at birth.

Gender expression: External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.

Cisgender: A gender identity (or performance in a gender role) that a society deems matches the person's assigned sex at birth. The prefix 'cis' means 'on this side of' or 'not across.' (This term is used to highlight the societal privilege of people who are not transgender.)

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. For example, 'trans' people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, genderqueer, and so on and not all cross-dressers are trans.

Non-binary: A gender identity embraced by some people who do not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between or as falling completely outside of these categories. While many non-binary people also identify as transgender, not all do. 'Non-binary' can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, gender queer or gender fluid.

Gender non-conforming: An umbrella term referring to people who do not identify in a way that conforms to the traditional societal expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category or conform to gender roles. Some gender non-conforming people identify as non-binary, gender queer, trans-masculine, trans-feminine, agender, bigender or other identities that reflect their personal experience. Some, but not all, gender non-conforming people identify as transgender. This term can be used to describe people as well as behavior, appearance, dress, preferences, ideas and roles.

Gender transition: The process by which some people strive to more closely align their internal knowledge of gender with its outward appearance. Some people transition socially, whereby they might begin dressing, using names and pronouns and/or be socially recognized as another gender. Others undergo physical transitions in which they modify their bodies through medical/surgical interventions.

Gender dysphoria: Clinically significant distress caused when a person's assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the term – which replaces Gender Identity Disorder – "is intended to better characterize the experiences of affected children, adolescents and adults."

Gender Fluid: A person whose gender identification and presentation shifts, whether within or outside of societal, gender-based expectations, i.e., being fluid in motion between two or more genders.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual Orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, sexual attraction to other people.

Heterosexual: A person whose physical/sexual, romantic and/or emotional attractions are to people not of their own gender.

Gay: A person whose enduring physical/sexual, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex (term used especially for a man; sometimes **Lesbian** is the preferred term for women).

Bisexual: One who is not exclusively sexually attracted to people of one particular gender, i.e., to both men and women.

Queer: An adjective used by some people whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual. Typically, for those who identify as queer, the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual are perceived to be too limiting and/or fraught with cultural connotations they feel don't apply to them. Some people may use queer, or 'genderqueer,' to describe their gender identity and/or gender expression. Once considered a pejorative term, queer has been reclaimed by some LGBTQ people to describe themselves; however,it is not a universally accepted term, even within the LGBTQ community.

Asexual: Refers to the lack of sexual attraction to others, or a low interest in sexual activity. Some people consider **asexuality** to be their sexual orientation, and others describe it as an absence of sexual orientation. It is common for **asexual** people to have romantic (but not sexual) attractions to others. Persons who are asexual are not to be confused with people who deliberately choose to be celibate.

Pansexual: Persons who can feel a sexual, romantic and emotional attraction toward another regardless of (and without preference for) their gender identity or orientation.

LGBTQIA+: Stands for **L**esbian, **G**ay, **B**isexual, **T**ransexual, **Q**ueer (or **Q**uestioning), **I**ntersex, **A**sexual (or **A**lly), and **+** (a plethora of other orientations and identities). See above for definitions of terms.

Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns: Linguistic tools used to refer to someone in the third person. In English and some other languages, pronouns have historically been tied to gender and are a common site of misgendering (attributing to someone a gender that is incorrect). A 'person's pronouns' are the third-person singular pronouns that they would like others to use for them. These may or may not align with the sex a person was assigned at birth.

He/Him: Refers to a man or boy previously mentioned or easily identified.

She/Her: Refers to a woman or girl previouslymentioned or easily identified.

They, them: Commonly used to refer to two or more people previously mentioned or easily identified or to a person of unspecified gender. Increasingly, 'they/them' are used to refer to a single person whose gender or sexual identity may not correspond to the traditional binary opposition of male and female, including those who are 'questioning,' transgender, non-binary or intersex (see above).

Additional Resources

We encourage readers to explore more information on the importance and use of personal pronouns. We adapted materials from several sources for this tutorial. The most useful websites we found are listed here. If you find others, please share them with us at info@pennsvillage.org.

https://www.mypronouns.org/
Authored by Shige Sakurai (*they/them*). 'Additional Resources' section has links to several helpful videos, resources on personal pronouns, International Pronouns Day, and international organizations supporting transgender, gender non-conforming and intersex communities and rights.

https://www.diversitycenterneo.org/about-us/pronouns/
Prepared by the Diversity Center of NE Ohio, a resource of the National Federation for Just Communities.

https://pronounsday.org/
October 20, 2022, is International Pronouns Day. This site shares ideas on how to help celebrate.

https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/16/us/preferred-gender-pronouns-explainer-trnd/index.html
Easy to understand article By Harmeet Kaur, CNN, Updated 3:21 PM EDT, Wed October 16, 2019

https://news.ucdenver.edu/what-is-the-i-in-lgbtqia/
Brief article citing Lauren A. Beck's (PhD) work on intersex

https://bestlifeonline.com/what-lgbtqia-means/
Explanatory article by Ashley Moor, April 18, 2019

https://apple.news/A_pDdlf4hQsWLqBpiTvhU2Q
Brief article re: business response, Wall Street Journal, Te-Ping Chen

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[1] Prepared by a Task Force* of the Penn's Village Inclusiveness and Diversity Committee and approved by the Committee in September, 2021. (*Task Force Members: Lois Evans, Mark Raymond, & Peter Schoenbach)