

⋮ She/he/they/ze:

Talking about *pronouns* and *gendered language*

When you arrive at a workshop here at Dulwich Centre, you may be invited to indicate your pronoun(s) on your name tag. Perhaps this will be the first time you are asked to indicate the pronouns that you use. If your immediate response was 'huh?', you're not alone 😊.

This practice is new to many people, and in this handout we are going to try to explain what it's all about, why we care about this, and how you can join in this collaborative project.

Building on a long history of language action

There is a significant history of people seeking to influence language as a site of social change. Feminists, for instance, continue to challenge sexist language and develop non-sexist alternatives. The introduction of 'Mx' (pronounced 'mix' or 'mixter') has been a language action that provides a title for folks whose gender is non-binary. Thinking about, writing about and speaking about pronouns and gendered language is part of this tradition of taking action to create cultures that are respectful of all.

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are like shortcuts and we use them a lot when referring to other people. They are a part of many languages. Some of the most common English personal pronouns are:

- he/him/his
- she/her/hers
- they/them/theirs.

We often use these terms without thinking to stand in for a person's name.

Noticing gendered language

Some pronouns in English are gendered. For instance, he/him/his and she/her/hers.

These pronouns are connected to broader ideas about gender. 'He' and 'him' have been loaded with implications, as have 'she' and 'her' – so much so that if I tell you a story about a 'him' or a 'her' and give no other identifying information, your mind might start to make all sorts of assumptions about that person and how they look or act in the world.

Many other words in English are also gendered: man, woman, boy and girl are obvious ones, but there are others like mother, father, daughter, son, aunt, uncle, husband, wife, niece and nephew.

Many of these words have alternatives that describe the same thing without implying gender, for example person, child, parent or partner. Have you heard the word 'nibling' in place of niece or nephew? Isn't it the cutest word?

There is nothing essentially problematic about gendered language or any of these words. However, they shape how we interact with people and they shape our identities. Gendered pronouns and gendered language (in many cultures) are linked to the idea that there are two genders, male and female, and that these are distinct, discrete and opposite. This male–female gender binary has massive implications for our lives (I think that may be the understatement of the century ☺).

For some people, gendered pronouns are relatively unproblematic

Lots of people never have to question the pronouns used to describe them. 'She' or 'he' might fit so comfortably that we don't notice when someone refers to us by a gendered pronoun.

Here are some stories of pronoun ease:

- I haven't had trouble with pronouns personally. I am read as female and am gendered as such, even when I was bald and my post-mastectomy reconstruction was only half done.
- I have not, to the best of my recollection, ever been misgendered. I remember when my daughter was an infant almost 12 years ago it used to make me angry or annoyed if strangers would misgender her as a boy. 'Even though she's wearing pink!' I'd huff to myself. Now with the benefit of hindsight, those feelings were pretty ridiculous, since we didn't even know if she was a girl yet! It was we who assigned her that gender, since she wasn't able to affirm or deny it at the time.
- I'm not sure if I have a clear memory of learning about my gender. As a sensitive and non-athletic person, I never felt I related well to other boys in the schoolyard. And, indeed, that's partially why I ended up being teased and bullied throughout my grade school years. I use 'him', and I suppose I would describe myself as male, but I find I don't relate to a lot of what maleness, societally, entails.

This relative ease with pronouns is not shared by all of us.

For some people, gendered pronouns can be a matter of inclusion or exclusion, even life or death

Some people change the pronouns that they use through the course of their lives. This is in part because none of us gets to choose our first pronouns – they are allocated to us at birth. Some people are referred to as she/her in the first part of their lives, and later get referred to as he/him. Some people use he/him as kids, then later use she/her. Others use both or either depending on the circumstances, or use a non-gendered pronoun like they/their.

This pronoun journey can include many steps, as in this story:

I learnt about my gender through many, *many* years of personal contemplation. Battling against my internalised fear and transphobia made it difficult for me to admit to myself, let alone the world, that I am a trans woman. I slowly learnt to love myself, mostly through seeing other trans women being respected, and also using their trans status in an empowering manner. My pronouns went on a bit of a journey too. At first, I went with neutral pronouns (they/them) when I was still scared but taking my first steps. Then when I was ready to face myself, and the world, I switched to female pronouns (she/her).

You might not be able to guess which pronouns fit for some people who are trans or gender nonconforming. When someone is referred to by the wrong pronouns or with other inappropriately gendered terms, this is called 'misgendering'. When this is done intentionally, it is disrespectful and an act of violence (on a continuum of violence that trans and gender-nonconforming people face).

Often, misgendering happens unintentionally because people make assumptions about the gender identities of others, because the idea of gender diversity is unfamiliar and because of mistakes.

In the beginning when loved ones were misgendering me in ways that were both wilful and sincerely accidental, it was difficult. Every relationship in my life was up for review in some regard. This was long and difficult. In public, I am constantly misgendered. In the beginning, I found this difficult. Now I pick and choose when I want to say something. I pick my venues related to washroom accessibility more than anything.

Misgendering (even when not intentional) can have harmful effects. Spaces where misgendering occurs a lot might simply become inaccessible. When people in our community cannot access spaces or services (such as workplaces, schools, communities or doctors) without experiencing harm, this can have serious and material consequences for people's wellbeing.

Trying to avoid misgendering people

The reason we have made this handout is to try to prevent misgendering – and to invite you to help us!

The good news is that in some contexts there is a *super* easy two-step process to begin making trans, non-binary and gender-nonconforming people feel respected and included.

Step one:

We can be transparent about our own pronouns and ask (rather than assume) what pronouns other people use:

'Hey there, my name is Jo and I use she/her. What pronouns do you use?'

'Hi, my name is Jo and I use she/her. How should I refer to you?'

Some people use the phrase 'preferred pronouns':

'Hey there, my name is Jo and I use she/her. What are your preferred pronouns?'

But for many people, 'preferred' isn't a strong enough word.

Step two:

We can then use the pronouns the person asks us to use, and adopt other language that corresponds with their pronoun.

Some people use gender-neutral pronouns

Some folks do not find that he/him or she/her fit or make them feel like they are seen in the way they see themselves. In these situations, the most commonly used gender-neutral pronouns are they/them/theirs/ themselves. Although 'they' is often used to refer to multiple people, it can also be used to refer to a single person. Actually, the use of the singular 'they' was named the 2015 word of the year in the US (<https://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they>). You can see a terrific video called 'Singular they is here to stay' here: <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/misgendering/>

When you first meet someone who uses they/them/their pronouns, it can take a bit of practice. That's okay – practicing is good 😊. And here is a great app created to help you practice using a range of pronouns: <https://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns-app/>

There is no simple solution but our (speech) acts can make a real difference

Having just said there is an easy two-step process ☺, we're not trying to say that this process of checking in about people's pronouns is a simple solution to the vast complexities of gender, power and culture!

Some people use different pronouns on different days. Dr Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad, for example, is a bi-gendered doctor who has presented at many International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conferences. On one day of the conference, Esben Esther may identify and present as a man/masculine person. On another day, Esben Esther may identify and present as a woman/feminine person. In this situation, it wouldn't work to assume that the pronouns that Esben Esther specified on a particular day would always be the correct pronouns to use. The pronouns that people use sometimes change and we need to be aware of this.

Alternatively, some people may not feel free or may not want to speak openly about their gender identities or pronoun(s). Some people may choose not to share their pronouns because they are questioning or transitioning their pronouns, they don't use or like any pronouns, they don't feel comfortable sharing them at this particular moment or in this context, or they fear discrimination or harassment after sharing. If someone has left pronouns off their name tag or chosen not to share their pronouns, we can simply refrain from using pronouns for that person and refer to the person by their name ☺. Just as it's important that we don't make assumptions about people's gender identities and their pronouns, it's also important that we don't put people on the spot and require them to expose information about themselves that they do not wish to. For this reason, at our workshops we are using name tags with a space for people to write their pronouns rather than doing a spoken 'round' in which people may feel pressured to state their pronouns.

We're creating this handout in Australia, and in English. In other cultural and linguistic contexts there may be really different ways of speaking and writing in ways that are inclusive of gender-nonconforming, trans and non-binary people's experiences. We would love to learn more about these!

If we make a mistake

If we realise that we have just misgendered someone, the way we then respond can make a real difference.

There are some responses that can make it worse! Apologising profusely, or making a joke about how hard it is to remember pronouns, or completely freaking out don't help. If you have feelings about having accidentally misgendered someone, you need to make sure you're not putting the person you have misgendered in a position where they're expected to make you feel better or help you work through those feelings.

Here are some key ideas:

If I've misgendered someone, I've come to realise that it's best if I simply correct myself, in a matter-of-fact way, and then move on as smoothly as possible. It's important that I don't draw more attention to my mistake, or amplify it. And also that I don't let my feelings of discomfort or embarrassment become the focus.

If I misgender someone in a group setting, I don't want to then make that the person the focus of everything if I apologise publicly. So I try to use the correct pronoun for that person as soon afterwards as possible. Sometimes it's been appropriate to find that person at a later time and acknowledge my mistake, but not in a way that's about confessing or seeking forgiveness, just making it clear that I'm committing myself to getting it right in the future.

Stories of how people are trying not to misgender others

(or should that be msgender or mrgender or mxgender others – just joking 😊)

Here are some ways that people are trying to limit the chances of misgendering others:

I didn't find it easy to notice all the ways that I use gendered language! So my first step was just starting to pay attention to when I use gendered pronouns and when I use non-gendered pronouns. I realise that in some contexts I already use non-gendered pronouns. If my friend tells me 'I just met this incredible singer!', I'm likely to reply, 'Oh cool, what kind of music do they play?' This was helpful to me. I'm trying to expand the ways I already use non-gendered pronouns, not starting from scratch.

A friend and I decided we would start practising by timing ourselves and speaking for two minutes about someone important to us without using any gendered language (including pronouns and all those other words that might suggest a person's gender). It was not easy, but it was great practice!

Last week, I spent a day trying to only use they/them pronouns. My workmates looked at me a bit strangely at one stage, and I had to explain what I was doing. They were actually quite interested 😊.

I am trying not to use a gendered pronoun in relation to someone (whether they are present or not) unless I have heard from them what pronouns they use. This means I use people's names and the word 'they' a lot more than I used to!

I have a deal with my friends that if they hear me make a gendered assumption or if they hear me accidentally misgendering someone that they will correct me, not in a superior or critical way, but in a friendship way – knowing that they would like me to do the same with them. This collaboration helps!

Having reminders on name tags (that leave space for people to write their pronoun if they choose to) or in email signatures, or posters that highlight gender diversity and moving beyond the gender binary are all helpful to me. If I see these visual reminders regularly it seems to help me to take care in my use of language.

It's not only the spoken word that makes a difference; I'm trying in my email correspondence to not make gendered assumptions.

I have one friend who asks people to use the pronoun 'they' in relation to them. This is so that people get into the habit so that this person's non-binary friends and loved ones are less likely to be misgendered. This friend of mine identifies as a woman but it's an act of friendship and solidarity to invite people to use 'they'. This caretaking around speech is not just personal, it's also about trying to change the gendered culture of conversational spaces. And the good thing is that we can all be involved in this in some way.

Spending time with people who are part of the LGBT community has given me the space to practice my pronoun use, see it in action and to learn how to move forward through the shame of misgendering someone. I correct pronoun use casually throughout my everyday life, and have noticed my fellow cis friends and family have started self-correcting. As an ally, I try to be the place our friends practice and witness pronoun use, where missteps don't cause immediate harm to me and I can gently correct or, if the situation warrants, forcefully correct them.

I worked really hard to rework my schema of my wife so that referring to her with the pronouns and other words that she uses is automatic to me. I apologise if I screw up pronouns. I have gently corrected other people when they assume I am married to a man and she isn't present to speak for herself: 'Brett is a woman.' 'Brett is my wife.' When people misgender Brett when she's there, I let her deal with it as she chooses. I've told her that if she needs my assistance in dealing with pronoun trouble that I will follow her lead.

My oldest son came out as trans about 3 years ago. I struggled with switching his pronouns, big time. It took about a year of work to not mess it up when speaking to or about him. I sat down with my son and told him I was having a hard time with switching the words, that it was not an intentional misgendering, rather just Mum having a hard time. He was understanding, and it still took time. I would end up just stopping what I was doing or saying, backtrack and fix my mistake. I would apologise and we'd move on. We've also had issues with a family member purposely misgendering my son online to save face with their friends. We no longer have contact with that family member.

And as an organisation, Dulwich Centre is inviting all workshop participants to consider their pronouns, to write these on their name tags, to read this handout and to discuss these realms. This is already causing positive ripples, as Tileah Drahm-Butler describes:

In our recent Aboriginal narrative practice workshop, which was only for First Nations participants, one bit of feedback that we were really happy with was the difference it made to introduce ourselves with our preferred pronoun. There were three queer-identifying people in the group and they said that this was a moment that made them feel very welcome. We were pretty proud of that, as this is a continual learning for me and for others ... there were a couple of older people who 'passed' when asked to identify their preferred pronoun, and a few faces that said 'this is so weird', but it made a real difference that we at least did this! One woman, who had travelled all the way from the USA to be there, said that she hadn't been in a photo throughout her adult life and she felt compelled to be in this group photo! She also talked about the difference it made to talk about privilege and gender diversity from the outset.

And sometimes, taking care with pronouns makes things possible that would otherwise be harder to achieve:

When people use the right pronouns, it becomes possible that I will share my time and resources with that person, that we will engage in a reciprocal and generative relationship.

It can also lead to some fun.

My partner: [X] and [X]'s brother were at the gathering on Saturday and I think they had a great time.

Me: That's fantastic. By the way, is [X] using they/them now?

Partner: No. I was talking about both her and her brother. They can still be used as a plural pronoun too.

Me: I forget that sometimes!

What has this got to do with narrative practice?

Narrative practice (narrative therapy and community work) is vitally interested in people being able to name their experiences in their own words. Being able to determine one's own pronoun and gender(s) is a pretty crucial realm of self-definition!

Narrative practice is also centrally concerned with the role of audiences and witnesses to people's preferred identities.

These are additional reasons why we've created this handout and are inviting you to join us in this collaborative project.

We would be really interested in your thoughts and ideas, and also your feedback about this handout.

We would also love it if you would contribute your own tips and stories about how you are trying to avoid misgendering others. Visit our website: <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/misgendering/>

Thank you!

To learn more

This site is a terrific resource: <https://pronounsday.org/resources/>

Acknowledgments

This resource was created by Rosie Maeder, with contributions from Tiffany Sostar and David Denborough.

A handout from GLSEN, a United States-based education organisation working to create safe and inclusive schools, was also helpful.

Rosie is currently in the process of establishing a new queer youth, family and friends counselling service – a collaboration between Uniting Communities and Dulwich Centre Foundation. To learn more, feel free to contact Rosie c/o Dulwich Centre: dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au