



THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

By Amanda Parker, PhD Equity in Justice Director

You may have noticed that many of your co-workers and friends are adding pronouns to their signature line or introducing themselves with their names followed by which pronouns they use. It can be confusing when new practices to honor and acknowledge groups that have been underrepresented and excluded emerge but learning to do so despite discomfort is an important step to building an accountable and inclusive legal community. This article will explain what personal pronouns are and how to use them if you choose to.

Personal pronouns are the pronouns we use to refer to ourselves and other people. For example, I am a woman who uses she, her, and hers. Nonbinary, gender non-conforming, and some transgendered people use they, them, and theirs to refer to themselves. According to data from 2021, 1.2 million people identify as nonbinary, and it is important to include them in discussions of bias, harassment, discrimination, and fair treatment in courts and other legal settings¹.

SOME DEFINITIONS

One place to start is understanding some of the common terms and definitions that are used to describe gender. These definitions are directly from the Human Rights Campaign <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

- 】 **Sexual orientation:** An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual's sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.
- 】 **Cisgender:** A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- 】 **Gender expression:** External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.
- 】 **Gender-fluid:** A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender or has a fluid or unfixed gender identity.
- 】 **Gender identity:** One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.
- 】 **Gender non-conforming:** A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category. While many also identify as transgender, not all gender non-conforming people do.
- 】 **Non-binary:** An adjective describing a person who does 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 these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do. Non-binary can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, genderqueer or gender-fluid.
- 】 **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. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

But “they” is plural not singular, so I am confused.

Yes, this newer usage of “they” can be confusing but using “they” in reference to an individual has long been part of common usage. For example:

Someone left their pencil on the desk.

I don't know who is hosting this dinner party or what they are serving.

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My friend was sick, so I went to their house.

It can take some getting used to, so practice referring to people who use they, them out loud.

Can I assume someone's pronouns by looking at them?

No, you cannot, which is why the practice of asking for someone's pronouns and posting your own matters. You can introduce yourself verbally by saying, "My name is Amanda, and I use she, her pronouns." This invites others to share their pronouns. You can also post them on your signature line and/or in your zoom ID.

Cisgendered people share their pronouns in order to normalize pronoun usage. If we don't, many times only people who are non-binary share them. One way you can open a meeting is by saying, "Please let us know your pronouns so that everyone feels welcome in this space." In some spaces I have been in, the facilitator or person running the meeting has required everyone to post their pronouns in a zoom or to introduce themselves with them. People should be invited but not required to give pronouns because you could be outing someone who is nonbinary or creating tension for some people who are still figuring out their pronouns.

"Hello, I use she/her pronouns, please feel free to share yours with me?"

What is "misgendering"?

This is not just an issue of interpersonal communication. There are legal consequences for not respecting the civil rights of trans and nonbinary people. According to LGBTQ Bar Chair, Gina Dennis, "Misgendering, which is the intentional use of the wrong pronouns to harm an LGBTQ+ person, results in deep legal consequences such as discrimination lawsuits as well as violations of Judicial Code in New Mexico."

What if I mess up? What if I use the wrong pronouns?

If you misgender someone you can use the correct pronoun going forward or **quickly** correct yourself. For example, "She, I mean they. I apologize." And then move on.

Don't belabor or make it about yourself, like this: "I am so, so sorry I misgendered you. I don't understand all this, and "they" is so hard to get used to. I am really trying to get this right, so I am so sorry. I just wasn't raised with all of this, and people are always coming up with new things."

If the mistake is in writing, just correct the document and continue to use the appropriate pronouns.

"They" is singular, but uses plural subject/verb agreement:

Correct: They are coming to court on Monday.

Incorrect: They is coming to court on Monday.

Reach out if you have questions

I hope that you found this information helpful and remember that you don't have to be perfect to engage in equity work. There are many educators and trainers, me included, who can handle questions in a way that recognizes that we are all still learning.

Below are some additional resources that you can reach out to for more information.

Resources

Glossary of Terms - Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

The New Mexico LGBTQ Bar: NMLGBTQBARASSN@gmail.com

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

Nonbinary Resources | PFLAG: <https://pflag.org/NonbinaryResources>

Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico: 505-200-9086 • <https://tgrcnm.org>

LGBTQ Resource Center UNM: <http://lgbtqrc.unm.edu>

New Mexico State University LGBT+ Resource Center: <https://studentlife.nmsu.edu/lgbt/index.html>

Endnote

¹ <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/lgbtq-nonbinary-press-release/>