Introducing Gender Pronouns in Group Spaces

This guide is intended to strengthen group practices around pronouns while also using a [racial equity filter](#). It is not recommended to include pronouns in introductions if your staff/volunteers/members don't feel comfortable explaining why. This resource attempts to provide a starting place for groups.

Why we ask people to share their pronouns

Our values drive our work. We know that white supremacy is deeply connected to transphobia and homophobia. We know that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous trans people experience epidemic levels of fatal violence in the U.S. and in many parts of the world affected by U.S. imperialism. Creating space to respect gender pronouns is one of the most basic ways that we can recognize and include trans community members. And people of all genders benefit when we do this.

[Speech bubbles of various colors with pronouns in different languages] Illustration by Alexis Scranton for Ohiofusion.com

Opening up this conversation widens the possibilities for discussing similar false assumptions about race, ethnicity, disability, and many other areas. Inviting people to share their pronouns creates space to check some of the most fundamental biases and stereotypes in our society - the false idea that we can know someone's gender based on how they look.

Using someone's pronouns correctly is an important part of living out our values of inclusion and noticing our assumptions. Pronouns are a big part of many languages, and a common way that many of us refer to one another in conversation: "She went to the store to get her lunch by herself." (she/her/herself). This is similar to using someone's correct name, for example, it would be disrespectful to call your friend Peg by "Margaret" when you know she goes by Peg or Peggy. Similarly, your grandmother may want to be addressed as "Mrs. Hernandez" and not by her first name.

A general best practice is to include name and gender pronouns in introductions at group meetings, whether with staff, clients, or in community. This could also be part of intake paperwork. If you're working with a community where the language spoken does not typically include gender pronouns, talk with co-workers and community members about best practices.

Categories like race, sex, and gender have been constructed over time, and change depending on what is politically beneficial to those in power. There are many historical parallels in how the bodies of people of color and the bodies of trans* people are regulated in the U.S. For example, early colonizers targeted Two Spirit indigenous people because of their nonbinary gender expression, "Indian schools" enforced rigid gender binaries (such as haircutting), and state and local governments forced sterilization of Native women, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Anchoring in a racial equity framework creates space to discuss these commonalities and differences, such as the generational impacts of racism in contrast to those of homophobia and transphobia.

__Note:__ The term "trans" can include transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, stud, AG, trans femme, third gender, Two-spirit, agender, and many other identities held by individuals and communities.

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How we ask people to share their pronouns

On the most basic level, introducing people to pronouns is as simple as describing what pronouns are and why you're inviting them to share. Be aware that people who are new to this practice may make jokes or comments if they are uncomfortable, so always start by explaining upfront why pronouns are part of observing overall organizational values and/or group agreements.

Here are sample talking points that you can use or modify:

- **"At [organization/group], we center relationships and challenge implicit bias.** One way bias comes up is that many of us are taught to make assumptions and call people by gender pronouns like 'she' or 'he' based on the way they look. Rather than assuming, we offer space for people to share their pronouns.

- **Though trans people are most negatively impacted when we leave out gender pronouns, acknowledging gender pronouns is important for all of us.** Gender bias hasn't always been a part of human history; many communities of color celebrated a multitude of genders before European colonization. And some languages don't historically include gendered pronouns, such as Chinese, Tagalog, Creole, and Native languages such as Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe).

- **We believe it's part of inclusion to call people by the name and pronoun they use**, so we'll invite everyone to share their name and the gender pronoun you use. This might be 'she,' 'he,' 'ella,' 'they,' or another gender pronoun. Please pay attention to what people ask to be called, and if it's new for you, listen to understand.

- **"If this is something you don't often have to think about**, **we especially invite you to participate."** And if you'd rather not share your pronouns, feel free not to.

- **After explaining, the facilitator should provide an example** such as: "My name is _____, I go by (she/ella/he/they/el/ze, etc.) for pronouns." In addition to pronouns, you may include space in introductions for people to share other important identities in their life.

Tips for success as a facilitator or group leader

- **If introducing pronouns is new for you, a great way to get comfortable is to practice.** You can ask a friend or colleague to listen to your introduction and give you feedback.

- **Say "gender pronoun" or "personal pronoun" rather than "preferred pronoun."** Pronouns are often not simply a preference (such as "I prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla, but I'll take whatever") but a key part of respecting one another.

- **Talk about specific pronouns such as "she, he, they, etc." rather than saying "female pronouns" or "male pronouns."** Though gendered pronouns are sometimes culturally associated with gender identities (such as: men use "he" and women use "she,") this doesn't apply to everyone. For example, some people who use "he" do not identify as men but may use "he/him" pronouns for safety reasons or depending on their relationship to the people present in a given situation.

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- **Sometimes people don't understand what you mean by a gender pronoun.** If this is the case, you can clarify by saying "what do you like to be called - he, she, they, etc.?" or "if someone were telling a story about you, what words would you want them to use - she, ella, they, he, etc.?"

- **People rarely get defensive or frustrated if you explain up front what a pronoun is and why you're asking**. If someone does get upset, you can say "we try not to make assumptions about which pronouns people use based on how they are perceived", or "this is something we do at [group/organization] to live out our values of inclusion."

- **If someone makes a joke or pushes back about why this is important, here are a few possibilities for responding:**

  - If they are confused or don't understand, engage in conversation. Ask them if they've heard about your group or organization's work to be trans-affirming; if they haven't heard about it, offer to tell them a bit and listen to what they have to say.
  - If they are using sarcasm or seem disinvested, respond to their comment by saying something that affirms organizational values, such as: "we do this in all meetings because some of our clients/members/staff are trans, and sharing pronouns is a basic part of inclusion."
  - If they are making jokes, you can clarify or reframe. Or find [more examples of responding](#).
  - If they are in a place of high discomfort or defensiveness, you can return to the organization's learning agreements by highlighting: "this is something we ask folks to do in the spirit of doing things differently and being willing to experience discomfort."
  - During pushback, a cisgender (or non-transgender) facilitator may also effectively share their journey story of understanding pronouns: "When I first heard of pronouns I felt _____, then _____ happened and I realized why pronouns are important."

- **It's normal for people to feel challenged by learning pronouns that are new to them or using pronouns that are different from the way they perceive someone. At the same time, using respectful pronouns is a critical part of honoring a person's humanity.** If you notice someone getting another person's pronoun wrong, make sure you refer to that person with the right pronoun as an example "yes, she did make a great point" or simply say "oh, I think that person goes by (she/they/el/etc.)" and move on. If someone is repeatedly using someone else's pronouns incorrectly, check in with the person being mis-pronouned, and ask them how they'd like you to handle it (correct it in the larger group, talk with the individual who is mis-pronouning, etc.)

- **It's okay for people not to share their pronouns and/or to not want their pronouns corrected when someone messes up.** There are many reasons why a person may feel hesitant - they may be questioning their own pronoun, they may not feel safe to share, or they may be tired of being the only one to have a pronoun that's different than what's assumed. For trans people, it can be exhausting to constantly correct others who get their pronouns wrong.

- **Whatever the reason may be, don't worry about forcing anyone to share.** Do be aware that it's important for cisgender people (people who identify with the gender they are expected to) to take the practice of using pronouns seriously.

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How to continue these practices

- **In group meetings, practice using the full introduction so you can get comfortable with it** - this may feel unnecessary if you all know each other already, but it will go a long way in building your comfort with how to introduce pronouns in other groups.

- **Once a group you're working with regularly uses pronouns in introductions, make sure you do a brief explanation and reminder each time someone new joins the group or meeting.** Get creative! Your group can use name tags, name tents, fun introductions (name, pronoun, and unexpected talent), and other ways to make the practice fit into what you're already doing.

- **Remember that every one of your follow-ups, meetings, groups, and other shared space is a chance to make your organization and your community more inclusive places for trans people.** When mistakes happen or people have questions, these are opportunities to convey the importance of trans-affirming space as one part of equity and inclusion.

What do I do if I accidentally use the wrong pronouns for someone? How should I react?

- **Acknowledge your mistake** and change to the correct pronoun mid-sentence.

- **Apologize but don't over-apologize.** Get back to whatever you were talking about as soon as you've changed to the right pronoun.

- **Center the needs of the person who was mis-pronouned, not your own** (ex: "I've been trying! I've been getting better!"). Do not look to be taken care of by the mis-pronouned person (ex: "Cut me some slack" or otherwise putting them in the position to say, "it's ok"); take care of them in that moment by correcting yourself and moving on. If you need to process what happened, do it later, on your own time, with someone other than that person.

- **If someone corrects you, remember that feedback is a gift** - if they don't believe in your capacity to grow, they likely won't waste their time telling you how you can do better.

LANGUAGE MATTERS. SHOW RESPECT FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE BY USING PROPER PRONOUNS--THEIR PRONOUNS.

[A woman is pushing away hurtful speech bubbles like "him, sir, it." Text on the bottom reads: "Language matters. Show respect for transgender people by using proper pronouns - their pronouns."] Source SJWiki, illustration author unknown

Are there times when we shouldn't use pronouns in introductions?

- Yes! Similar to a land acknowledgement with no other follow up on Native communities' history and current presence, gender pronouns should not be included just to "check a box."

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- Occasionally, a trans participant may ask in advance to not include pronoun introductions because it singles them out. In that case, respect their wishes and work to find a solution, or identify whether there is a role for the facilitator to play.
    - When bigotry or anti-trans views are active in a space, gender pronouns can become a "lightning rod" and create an environment for trans people to be further targeted.

Resources for further learning:

Pronouns and Language
Mypronouns.org explanatory resources on personal pronouns
Trans Microaggressions photo project and glossary of LGBTQ+ terms from GLAAD
Infographics on wide variety of trans and queer topics from Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER)
Pronoun Round Etiquette: How to Create Spaces That are More Inclusive from The Body is Not an Apology

Educational Videos
Brief videos about a variety of topics from trans voices via Buzzfeed
BESE Explains: Two Spirit, video (3 mins)
What It's Like to be Intersex video from Buzzfeed (3.5 mins)
S.T.A.R. Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera history video from We've Been Around (5 mins)
A short history of trans people's long fight for equality video from TED (6.5 mins)
MUXES documentary centered in perspectives of third-gender people in Oaxaca (9.5 mins)
A Cultural Understanding of Māhū from Aloha Authentic (22.5 mins)

Intersections of Race, Gender, Sexuality, Disability and more
Learning from the 60s by Audre Lorde (1982)
Two Spirits, One Heart, Five Genders from Indian Country Today
Black Trans Women Seek More Space in the Movement They Helped Start from New York Times
Unlearning Racism and Anti-Blackness Within the QTPOC Community from allgo (Texas)
What is Trans-Centered Reproductive Justice? from Positive Women's Network
Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability by Mia Mingus
My San Diego Queer Black History Month Keynote Speech by Monica Roberts, TransGriot

Podcasts
TransLash media; The Laverne Cox Show podcast; Finding Our Way podcast and learning sessions

Additional Resources
10 Principles for Disability Justice from Sins Invalid
Standing Together toolkit for predominately white LGBTQ organizations to become anti-racist
"Our Families" video series created by LGBTQ+ people of color in Oregon: Black /African American Stories,
Two Spirit/Native American Stories, Latinx Stories, Asian and Pacific Islander Stories