



GRAMMAR REDUX Shasha Porter & Holly Lundquist

GENDER: The time has come to let go of outmoded assumptions

My new clients stepped off the elevator on 5th floor where I was waiting to greet them.

Though I had the names of my clients, I could not tell at first glance which client had which name.

I also didn't know the gender of my clients, by first glance. The stereotypical cues were mixed.

I was reminded of one of my favorite quotes of Sherlock Holmes, when speaking to Watson:

"You see, Watson, but you do not observe".

When seeing with our eyes does not provide us with the information we need, we must proceed with genuine curiosity. We need to ask questions. And listen. Or listen, and then ask questions.

Have you ever heard your name mispronounced by a new acquaintance or customer service representative? Has your gender been misidentified due to your voice, clothing, or hairstyle? It can be a jarring experience. The way people refer to us is deeply personal, and we can feel less human when someone gets it wrong.

Those of us born in generations previous to Generation X, the Millennials, or Generation Z were raised with binary male/female pronoun choices that have become outdated and inaccurate. We may not be familiar with terms like "cisgender," "non binary" (also known as "NB" or "enby"), "genderqueer," or "gender-neutral." The time has come for us to let go of outmoded assumptions in our interactions with others, and to approach new relationships with fresh eyes.

In our work with families, we strive to create comfortable, respectful, engaged relationships. For people who are transgender, non-binary, or gender nonconforming, coming into their authentic gender can be an important and affirming step in life.

Misgendering, including misuse of personal pronouns, can have negative consequences for their self-confidence and overall mental health. How can we avoid making this mistake?

We can help clients and their children feel seen by, first, giving them the option of articulating how they are addressed; and second, following through in using each person's chosen name and desired pronouns.

Here is some important information in becoming more aware and conversant in this area:

- While the terms “gender” and “sex” are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous.
- Sex is a biological categorization. We assign a newborn's sex as either male or female based on physiology and chromosomes.
- Gender identity is a more complex social construct consisting of one's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither. The familiar binary male/female pronoun choices exclude people whose gender identity does not match their biological sex assignment.
- An individual whose sex and gender identity match is said to be “cisgender.” Someone whose gender identity is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth is known as “transgender.”
- Being cisgender or transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation, as either can identify as straight, gay, bisexual, etc.
- Some people identify as both masculine and feminine, or neither. A genderqueer or non-binary-identified person may prefer gender-neutral pronouns such as the “they/them” or “ze/zim/zis.”

To summarize, we have learned to ask for someone's preferences instead of making assumptions. Because gender identity is internal -- an internal sense of one's own gender -- we don't necessarily know a person's correct gender pronoun by looking at them. While the majority of people align across their birth-assigned sex, gender identity, gender expression, and how everyone else interprets their gender -- some people do not. A person may identify as genderfluid or genderqueer and may not identify along the binary of either male or female (e.g. “him” or “her”).

Given the importance of pronouns in effective communication, we need to raise our awareness to become comfortable with non-binary pronouns. This is a topic worthy of further exploration and discussion within CLI since a pronoun-sensitive culture helps reduce the risk of disrespect or embarrassment for everyone.

In the meantime, here are a few things we can do:

- Approach gender with curiosity and openness rather than traditional assumptions.
- Create a place to declare preferred name and pronouns in the interviewing and introduction processes. (“I'm Holly and my pronouns are she/her. Nice to meet you. How may I address you?”)

- Consider adding your pronouns to your email signature. (Shasha Porter (she/her)).
- Practice using new vocabulary until it feels natural.
- If you don't know someone's pronouns, use *they/them/theirs*, or their name, until you do.
- Use clients' preferred names and pronouns in communications with them *and* about them.
- Keep in mind that our goal is creating comfortable, respectful, engaged relationships with others whose experience may be very different from our own.

Pronoun usage is an important part of respecting a person's identity. Asking about and using a person's preferred pronouns conveys a sensitivity to the diversity of gender identities and promotes awareness of gender nonconforming communities.

We can continue to educate ourselves about gender fluidity and self-identification. Additional resources include:

- **The Trevor Project:**
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/trvr_support_center/trans-gender-identity/
- **HRC:**
<https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>
- **Videos:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i83VQIaDlQw>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjzpRvXNh7Q&feature=share>
- **Celebrating My (Gay) Divorce:**
[www.theatlantic.com > gay-marriage-gay-divorce](http://www.theatlantic.com/gay-marriage-gay-divorce)
- **Ally's Guide:**
<https://files.constantcontact.com/2f929f3f101/401ef82f-a14b-48bd-a5ff-f739ddf9ef21.pdf>

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