THE FLUIDITY OF LANGUAGE:
DECONSTRUCTING GENDERED VOCABULARY

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a framework for understanding and resisting the ways in which our language tends to exist along a static gender binary that is not inclusive to all. Placing an emphasis on recognizing and celebrating the individuality of *all* individuals, we challenge the reader to evaluate the motives behind the language they choose.

We offer an alternative model that prioritizes creating space for others to share vocabulary that aligns with their sense of self. This model resists the idea that one's secondary sex traits (ex. hair, height, voice, etc.) are indicative of one's preferred descriptors such as pronouns, titles, honorifics, etc. Furthermore, this relational form of respect allows individuals to traverse language and interactions with an increased fluidity. We would like to enforce that this respect is intrinsic rather than attained over time.

This document examines the long-established history of, desire for, and use of gender-neutral language. Understanding that language, people, and expressions of self are ever-changing, we provide a set of guidelines for interacting with others during new introductions and in ongoing conversations that allows for healthy mistakes and fosters mutual respect.

> "RESPECT IS APPRECIATION OF THE SEPARATENESS OF THE OTHER PERSON, OF THE WAYS IN WHICH [THEY ARE] UNIQUE."
>
> -ANNIE GOTTLIEB

Respect and using respectful language play large roles in creating an inclusive environment for everyone. This information sheet, compiled from lived experiences of employees and virtual resources, provides a framework for how to establish a respectful dialogue that is attentive to the complexity of gender throughout meeting and getting to know someone.

CONTENTS

WWHY IS THIS IMPORTANT IN THE WORKPLACE?

Working in a virtual environment makes work relationships feel less personal, which can lead to employees being less comfortable taking initiative to ask about each other's affirming language. This results in an increased reliance on assumptions. Unlearning the assumption that gender expression and/or sex traits give us enough information to inform the appropriate language to use with each other creates space for more respectful and inclusive dialogues in the workplace. This cultivates more positive employee experiences.

Some other important reasons to be mindful of gendered language in the workplace are:

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

- Prioritizing respectful language creates an inclusive work environment, which aids employees in feeling safe and secure.
- Organizations that foster an inclusive environment for all employees typically retain employees more consistently.
- Experiencing repeated microaggressions can force employees to consider seeking or actively seek employment elsewhere.

EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

- When work environments are not inclusive, employees may feel pressured to hide various elements of their identity. These elements can be physical, social, and/or behavioral. Altering or hiding these aspects of self is tiring and time consuming. This is wasted energy that could be spent on work related tasks.
- Employees that do not feel safe expressing themselves wholly in the workplace may refrain from voicing ideas or taking initiative as a way of protecting themselves.
- Feeling safe and secure in one's job, while also being empowered to perform well, contributes to employees feeling engaged and enthusiastic about their work and workplace.
- When one can bring their best self to work, their work reflects their best as well.

WHY ARE WE DEGENDERING OUR LANGUAGE?

The use and desire for gender-neutral language is not new; however, increasing its relevancy in our daily lives creates a dialogue between individuals and communities that creates an inclusive place for all. Rae McDaniel from the Well + Good Journal has an excellent explanation as to why degendering our language is important:

"Instead of seeing degendering language as putting a potato sack on everything and getting rid of gender completely, it's more about 'how do we intentionally create the most inclusive environment that includes the most amount of people that we actually are trying to talk to?'... If you degender your language, the everyday person is probably not going to notice that much, but the people that it matters to will notice a lot, and it makes a huge difference in whether or not they feel safe and seen in a space."

Intentionality is a key element of McDaniel's words. Building and sustaining inclusive spaces requires awareness, action, and accountability. Understanding the limitations of gendered language, intentionally degendering our language is one way we can act on the awareness that we have and promote accountability for ourselves and others.

WHY ARE PRONOUNS, TITLES, AND NAMES IMPORTANT?

For many people, their change in vocabulary is not a preference. Let's say your friend's name is Robert but he goes by Rob. If people purposely keep calling him Robert, he will probably feel uncomfortable and not want to be around them. Using the wrong nouns, pronouns, titles, etc.

creates a very similar effect. Trying to use someone's chosen language demonstrates your respect for them while creating an inclusive environment for all.

"It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else's gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive."

- LGBTQ+ Resource Center, University of Milwaukee

WHY DO PEOPLE CHANGE THEIR NAME AND/OR PRONOUNS?

Understanding some of the reasons people change the language they use to describe and address themselves is an important step to adopting a fluid approach to language. These factors can and do occur throughout all stages of our lives. Keeping this in mind, it's beneficial to be prepared to adjust the language we use to describe and address others.

DYSPHORIA AND EUPHORIA

Gender dysphoria is a medical term that describes the feeling many have of not belonging. It is an expansive term that goes beyond the DSM-IV definition: "psychological distress that results from an *incongruence* between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity." Some ways people may experience dysphoria are:

➢ **BODY DYSPHORIA:** This one is the most well-known, and has to do with discomfort with the person's body, which can include a variety of things from height to genitals
➢ **COGNITIVE DYSPHORIA:** In which a person's mind/thoughts are against their gender identity; this is slightly less known, and can involve misgendering oneself or referencing their past self as a separate person
➢ **SOCIAL DYSPHORIA**: discomfort occurs when being perceived by others; this can be caused by being misgendered by others, being titled incorrectly, or being misnamed by someone, and is extremely common in nonbinary folk

People experience social, body, gender, and cognitive dysphoria in different ways. Some people may not experience all or any of these, either! Assuming misgendering or misnaming someone elicits certain experiences is incorrectly generalizing an individual experience. Regardless, it is important to respect one's chosen language no matter the emotions they experience with previous language.

Oppositely of gender dysphoria, gender euphoria is described by healthcare practice Plume as: "The psychological state of bliss and comfort that happens when our gender expression is *aligned* with our identity."

Andy Conner from The Guardian reflects on gender dysphoria and euphoria by saying:

> *"[Gender dysphoria] builds itself entirely around what trans people are seeking to escape, whereas the experience of trans people tends to involve at least as much of a sense of being drawn towards something. When young trans people experiment with presentation and self-conception, they're paying attention to what feels good as well as what feels bad. Along with the push of gender dysphoria, there also breathes the pull of gender euphoria: the sense of fulfilment or joy that comes from living as the gender you feel yourself to be."*

OTHER REASONS:

- It is part of the transition process. GenderSpectrum.org details this by saying:

> *"It's important to note, though, that a transition experience can be a very significant event in a person's life. A public declaration of some kind where an individual communicates to others that aspects of themselves are different than others have assumed, and that they are now living consistently with who they know themselves to be, can be an empowering and liberating experience (and moving to those who get to share that moment with them). Oftentimes during a transition experience a person will announce a change in the name and pronouns that they use and ask that others use their new name and pronouns going forward. Honoring this request is a sign of respect and a critically important way to demonstrate support."*

- Simply joy! Plenty of people are simply unhappy with their given name, regardless of what it has to do with their gender identity and find joy through changing their name or using a nickname.

- Some have traumatic experiences and harm associated with their dead name; changing their name can help create distance from such experiences

  - Rachel Kazez, therapist, and founder of All Along— a Chicago-based organization that helps patients find appropriate mental health care — says that a name change, whether legal or social or both, can be a powerful tool for survivors. "During a trauma, someone's agency is very quickly taken from them. Getting that sense of control back is really important," she says. "If there's a trauma that occurs where the perpetrator was using the person's name, they might want to go by a nickname or use a middle name instead."

  - Mary-Teresa Robinette described the fear her birthname would bring her: "Even as I left home and cut off contact from my abuser, I felt my name still connected me to her and the awful things done to me, things I would rather forget. Every time someone said my name, I would look around to check who was saying it to make sure I was safe."

To Summarize:

- Being misgendered and misnamed can cause pain, dysphoria, and even unearth past traumas.

- Oppositely, using the correct name and pronouns for someone can increase their mental health, decreases stress and depression, and help them feel accepted and safe.

- Our identity is multi-faceted and conclusions about one identity cannot be drawn from another.

"On most virtual meetings, the only available indicator of my gender is my voice. Being assigned male at birth, my voice is generally masculine which often results in me being gendered as male. I'm frequently referred to using the "Sir" honorific and "He/Him" pronouns after speaking. This language doesn't align with my nonbinary gender identity and can cause me gender dysphoria. My typical response to these interactions is to become distracted and withdrawn which makes meetings less productive. That said, slip-ups happen and a quick and simple correction to my name or 'they/them' goes a long way."

-Anonymous

IT'S OKAY TO MAKE MISTAKES!

Mistakes are going to happen when introducing new language. Take these all as opportunities to learn and grow. Consider the following messages about mistakes:

- Mistakes are learning opportunities!

- It's better to ask than to never know

- It's better to make and correct the mistake than to be ignorant or disrespectful

- Keep in mind that there is no standard 'timeline' to perfect de-gendering your language. A healthier goal is constant improvement. This has everything to do with how you work on it within yourself. Do you get defensive when corrected? Or do you accept the criticism and move on?

    - A helpful analogy for handling these types of mistakes is to imagine how you handle noticing someone has their fly unzipped - both parties tend to benefit from keeping the interaction brief and moving on!

- Intent is a very important aspect of lines of questioning/conversations. Asking good faith questions and being open to making mistakes (and learning from them) demonstrates care and positive intent. Consider your intent before asking a question or making a comment - is a fleeting curiosity driving the thought or are you genuinely wanting to better understand something/someone?

- Feeling a bit confused on how these situations could arise? This article has some good examples of different mistake scenarios: https://www.mypronouns.org/mistakes

PRONOUNS: VARIATIONS AND USES

- She/her: She went to the park with her dog. She warms herself with a fuzzy coat.

- He/him: He went to the park with his dog. He warms himself with a fuzzy coat.

- They/them: They went to the park with their dog. They warm themself with a fuzzy coat.

- This may be new information for some. The Oxford Dictionary, however, "not only accepts singular *they,* but they also use the form in their definitions. And the *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Third Edition, 2010)*,* calls singular *they* 'generally accepted' with indefinites, and 'now common but less widely accepted' with definite nouns, especially in formal contexts."

NEOPRONOUNS: WHY ARE THEY USED, HISTORY, AND EXAMPLES

Neopronouns are a type of gender-neutral pronoun that are not they/them or it/its. As explained by the Well + Good journal:

> *"A main component of what separates neopronouns from other personal pronouns is that they are very explicitly not linked to gender. "They disrupt the idea that you can make gender assumptions about a person based on their pronouns," says sex therapist Jesse Kahn, LCSW, CST, director at The Gender & Sexuality Therapy Center in New York City… Even they/them pronouns have been falsely assumed to indicate gender, giving more credence to the necessity of neopronouns and the wider understanding of what they mean."*

The Atlantic magazine sites that English speakers have proposed 200 to 250 pronouns since the 1780s. Some historical examples Professor Dennis Baron gives are:

- Thon/Thon/Thons/Thons/Thonself — 1858
- E/Em/Es/Es/Eself - 1890
- Ae/Aer/Aer/Aers/Aerself - 1920
- Ey/Em/Eir/Eirs/Eirself - 1975

Some other examples of neopronouns include:

- Fae/faer: Fae went to the park with faer dog. Fae warms faerself with a fuzzy coat.
- Xae/xaer: Xae went to the part with xaer dog. Xae warm xaerself with a fuzzy coat.
- Other neopronouns: https://neopronounfaq.tumblr.com/masterlist

Some folks use more than one set of pronouns. It is important to acknowledge all sets of pronouns and know that it is valid to use more than one set. Folks may list these in order of preference, in order of how general of usage they would like to hear, or they may simply want others to alternate between them.

Do not assume that because someone goes by a certain set of pronouns, that they also use the corresponding nouns. Clarification is key!

OTHER COMMON GENDERED LANGUAGE:

Beyond pronouns and names, there are other pockets of language that are gendered. As defined by the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, gendered means "having or making gender-based distinctions". For example, consider the number of times you see a position with -man as the suffix, honorifics such as "sir" or "ma'am", or inanimate objects labeled with binary gendered language.

- Male-inclined language
  - Male language is *everywhere*: manmade, all men are equal, chairman, etc.

- Male language is associated with strength and power, while female language is associated with weakness and insult
- Honorifics
  - Honorifics within the workplace are usually used as a sign of respect. The intent of this is usually within good faith, however, the impact of these statements cannot be ignored. There's a consistent disparity in experience with honorifics along gendered lines regardless of the intent to be respectful:
    - "Sir" generally carries a positive sense of esteem and power for many men.
      - Historical origins: knighthood and prestige
    - "Ma'am" generally carries an uncomfortable sense of docility and meekness for many women
      - Historical origins: being a married, matronly woman; the etymology of ma'am (Old French ma dame, "My Lady") implies women are possessable objects
    - These start defining people's identity from a very young age, which can cause internal conflict if children do not fit into society's boxes, which commonly include narrow understandings of gender

- Binary language:
  - Our language is often inserted into a binary.
  - Think about common job positions, titles, slang, and honorifics.
  - Someone may prefer feminine (waitress), masculine (waiter), or neutral (server) nouns

Rather than erasing words that some folks genuinely enjoy, we could encourage asking questions like "May I call you sir, ma'am, or is there another honorific you prefer?"

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS: LOOKING INWARD AT OUR MOTIVES

The motivation, or intent of questions and comments are often in good faith. However, there is a chance when requesting more information or making commentary, that the other person may feel uncomfortable. How do we work to ensure that we are not crossing boundaries? Ask yourself the following three questions:

- Why do I want to know this information?
- Would I feel comfortable if someone asked these questions of me?
- Would I ask this question of a non-transgender person in a similar situation?

NEW BEGINNINGS: WHAT IS VALIDATING OR HARMFUL TO SAY?

Below are examples of both validating commentary and harmful commentary

Helpful Commentary:

- Thank you for feeling comfortable enough to tell me.

- I'm sorry if I have ever invalidated you.

- Please correct me if I ever misaddress you.

- You are welcome to explain as much or as little as YOU are comfortable with.

- What can I do to support you?

- What name and pronouns should I use around others? (Family, coworkers, friends, etc.)

- Do you feel comfortable with me correcting others if they misaddress you?

  - Should I do it right then or should I pull them aside privately?

  - Do you want me to explain your identity if they ask? Or should I leave that to you?

Potentially Harmful Commentary:

- Can you explain what that means?

  - It is wiser to open the floor for anything else the individual may want to talk about rather than expecting an explanation. Sometimes, people are open and even enthusiastic about sharing their OWN experience/story. Asking about someone's own story is less burdensome, however keep in mind that it is to the discretion of the individual what they would like to share. If there is further information you would like to learn that the individual isn't comfortable discussing, turning to Google is advisable.

- So-and-so is also transgender/nonbinary!

  - Make sure the person you are referencing is fully out and/or okay with you outing them like this. DO NOT out other people if you do not have explicit permission.

- So, are you transgender/nonbinary?

  - Assuming that someone is changing their name and/or pronouns due to a change in their gender identity is harmful. Allow the individual agency to decide their identity markers on their own.

Harmful Commentary:

- I've been calling you X for years; I can't change now/I won't remember!

  - Can I still call you X?

- Is that your birth name? What is your birth name?

- Your appearance has really changed, is this just a phase?

- Are you going to transition your gender?

  - Don't you have to medically transition if you're genderqueer/trans?

  - Are you going to have surgery?

  - Oh cool, now I know a trans/genderqueer person!

- ○ Does that mean I can use homophobic/transphobic slurs now?

MOVING FORWARD: HOW DO I CONTINUE TO BE RESPECTFUL?

- Continue to use the correct name, pronouns, and nouns and correct others if this is preferred
- Continue to adhere to the boundaries that the person laid down when they came out (see above)
- If you forget, it's okay to ask for clarification! It is better to ask than to misaddress.
- Keep in mind that gender is fluid; people can change their presentation, expression, identity, and associated language at any time.
  - ○ As people change their language, remember to continue to ask clarifying questions.
- Don't forget the three questions!
- Leading with your own name and pronouns creates a safe space for others to introduce theirs. This helps clarify things right upfront, so no one is hurt or disrespected.
  - ○ Additionally, doing so can reduce the burden of repeatedly coming out for those whose name/pronouns are tied to a genderqueer or trans identity.
  - ○ Examples of places you can do this are in meetings, icebreakers, socials, presentations, promotion materials, etc.
- Remember that all people are greater than their identifying language, gender identity and expression. Don't focus too much on it either way.
- A simple apology is all that is necessary if you make a mistake; you do not have to explain yourself nor swell the situation.
  - ○ Keep in mind that over apologizing could turn the focus on to you (i.e.: I have been talking like this for so long, I knew you as X for years, I'm still learning, etc.)
- "I feel bad that I am making you feel bad" or "I'm sorry that you're upset" assumes someone's emotions and places accountability away from your actions. Mistakes are okay, as we discussed earlier, but it is still important to recognize both the actual cause and effect.
- One size does *not* fit all
- We are steering away from saying "their *preferred* pronouns are x, y and z" because this implies that someone's pronouns and gender are a chosen preference. These are a part of someone's identity and should be treated as such.
- Alternatively, you can simply say "their pronouns are x, y and z"

- Avoid the words "real," "regular," and "normal." These words imply that you do not see the person as their identity, but you see them as a deviated version. Likewise, avoid backhanded compliments i.e. "You're beautiful for a trans woman".

SO, WHAT CAN I DO WITHIN THE WORKPLACE TO PROMOTE THIS LANGUAGE?

The effort to ensure a workplace is inclusive cannot only happen within the bubble of an individual's personal changes. Employees must work together to assure that all members have a sense of belonging.

All employees can:

- Be open and accepting to feedback about their language

- Use and display your own pronouns in acceptable locations per your organization. Some examples of this can include:
  - Pronouns in email signatures
  - Adding pronouns to your video chat name
  - Introducing yourself to new employees with the pronouns you use

- Ask their colleagues if there is anything they can do to support them

- Normalize using pronouns inside AND outside of their own department (in meetings, on presentations, etc.)

- Write with gender-inclusive language:

  - As you review your writing, ask yourself the following questions:

    - Have you used "man" or "men" or words containing them to refer to people who may not be men?

    - Have you used "he," "him," "his," or "himself" to refer to people who may not be men?

    - If you have mentioned someone's sex or gender, was it necessary to do so?

    - Do you use any occupational (or other) stereotypes?

    - Do you provide the same kinds of information and descriptions when writing about people of different genders?

  - Perhaps the best test for gender-inclusive language is to imagine a diverse group of people reading your paper. Would each reader feel respected? Envisioning your audience is a critical skill in every writing context and revising with a focus on gendered language is a perfect opportunity to practice.

  - Looking for further information on gender-inclusive writing? Check out this article: https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/gender-inclusive-language/

- Use people's names as they're displayed on meetings, etc. unless they have directly provided an acceptable alternative.

- ○ This can be a subtle but impactful way to avoid causing folks gender dysphoria, as names are so often heavily gendered and using common shortened versions or nicknames can rub up against one's gender identity and relation to their name. Not using displayed names also puts pressure on the person to make a correction publicly, otherwise others in the conversation interpret that version as acceptable and continue to use it in their own interactions with that person.
- ▪ Not rely on LGBTQ+ team members to educate you
  - ○ Although a member of your team may be a member of the LGBTQ+ community, that does not mean that they desire to share their experiences with you. This is asking for a person to share things that may be deeply personal to them, beyond the labor that is expected within the workplace.

Some notes for managers:

- ▪ How can a manager introduce the idea of different pronouns to their team?
  - ○ Through group and individual trainings
    - ➢ This goes together with not relying on your colleagues to do all the work. Training from a manager emphasizes the importance of this language and encouraging employees to do their own work on specific topics leaves room for learning. It is also important to take note of those who hold beliefs that are not in line with inclusiveness and try to lead a better example.
- ▪ Normalize it as early as the interviewing process! (Not just pronouns but preferred name and title too)
- ▪ The benefit of managers normalizing pronouns is that the idea can spread on its own and it is effective to have leaders who advocate for their employees.

CONCLUSION

Respect is relational and does not have a static definition or itinerary. A key tenant of building respect is working to understand one another and establishing a common ground of what respectful language & vocabulary looks like for any given person. We ask that you challenge your idea of respect: rely less on general assumptions and more on individual communication. Everyone identifies with unique sets of pronouns, identity labels, honorifics, and more. Further, one's identity with each of these things may be fluid and respecting these changes leaves room for individuals to grow into themselves. Asking appropriate questions and utilizing respectful dialogue makes for a healthy environment, both inside and outside of the workplace.

APPENDIX A: A REFRESHER ON GENDER

All the following identities are distinct from one another, and they come into play for each of us: not just LGBTQIA+ folks! Also keep in mind that our identities are fluid, and our presentation of them can change over time. This means just like a hairstyle, someone's name, pronouns, and expected language may change more than once.
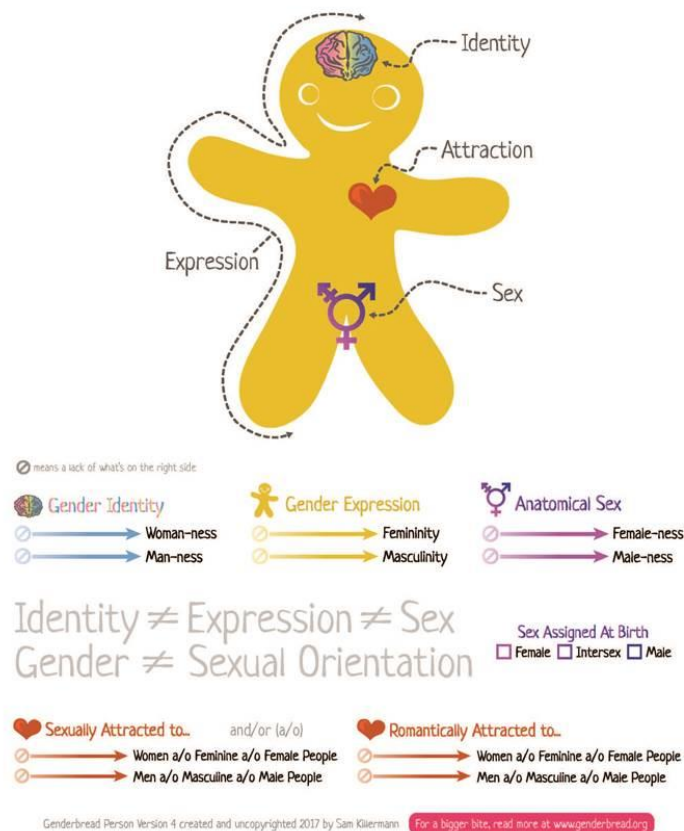
- ➤ **GENDER IDENTITY:** symbolized here by the brain, which is one's internal sense of their gender; this could be man or woman, genderqueer or nonbinary or genderfluid, or any other gender identity.
- ➤ **GENDER EXPRESSION:** symbolized here by the black outline. This is the physical manifestation of one's gender identity through clothing, hairstyle, voice, etc. It's important to know that someone's Gender Expression does not tell you their gender identity.
- ➤ **ANATOMICAL SEX:** symbolized by the gender marker, the physical characteristics someone has, such as a uterus or their hormones
- ➤ **SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH:** symbolized by the gender marker. the assignment and classification of people as male, female, intersex, or another sex based on a combination of anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes. Sex Assigned at Birth is NOT the same thing as gender identity!

➤ **SEXUAL ATTRACTION:** symbolized by the heart. This is sexual orientation or who you are attracted to sexually and/or physically. This can also include lack of sexual attraction.

➤ **ROMANTIC ATTRACTION:** symbolized by the heart. This is your romantic orientation or who you are attracted to romantically and/or emotionally. This can also include lack of romantic attraction.

SOURCES: IN ORDER OF THEIR USAGE

*Please note that much of this information came from the knowledge
and experiences of author Raymond Falkiewicz*

WHY ARE WE DEGENDERING OUR LANGUAGE?

- https://www.wellandgood.com/degendering-language/

SO WHY ARE PRONOUNS, TITLES AND NAMES IMPORTANT?

- https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/qa_faqs/why-is-it-important-to-respect-peoples-pronouns/

WHY DO PEOPLE CHANGE THEIR NAME AND/OR PRONOUNS?

- https://getplume.co/blog/what-are-gender-dysphoria-and-gender-euphoria/
- https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/26/the-joy-that-comes-from-embracing-trans-identity-shouldnt-be-so-rare
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- https://www.genderbread.org/
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PRONOUNS: VARIATIONS AND USES

- https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/
- https://www.wellandgood.com/what-are-neopronouns/
- https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/06/gender-neutral-pronouns-arent-new/619092/
- https://blogs.illinois.edu/view/25/705317

OTHER COMMON GENDERED LANGUAGE

- https://www.thefreedictionary.com/gendered
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2YNrEgKHZY