



Language and Gender Guidelines

Modul University Inclusion, Diversity and Equity Committee

December 2025

1 Introduction

The aim of this document is to provide information and guidance on inclusivity and sensitivity when referring to and discussing language and gender. Discourses which promote gender diversity and a person's right to express their gender free from attack and discrimination are now well established. It is vital that these are acknowledged and all people, regardless of their gender identity, are treated with respect.

Many structural biases still exist within societies, especially regarding gender, and these are perpetuated in part through the (mis)use of language. Language can be used consciously to discriminate against and demean people, but this discrimination also occurs unconsciously when tired old tropes are repeated unthinkingly, or unconscious bias is shown through the use and choice of words. Whether thinking or

unthinking, the use of language which attacks, derides, or denies someone's identity is extremely hurtful and can have a profound impact on that person's wellbeing.

It is especially important for a university to be aware of and to embrace the call for sensitivity when dealing with issues around gender. This is not only because Modul promotes an environment which is inclusive and free from discrimination, but because members academic institutions need to be precise and non-judgmental in their use of language.

The approach taken here is that of an emic rather than an etic perspective. That is, people should always be described and/or referred to using the language that they use themselves. It is also vital to note that this is an evolving area and not everyone may fit into the discussion below or be comfortable with the terms described here, and it is important, where appropriate, to ask people which labels, names and/or pronouns they use themselves.

2 Sex and Gender

Before any discussion of the use of gender-inclusive language can take place, it is important to recognize the difference between sex and gender, two terms which are often confused, conflated, and used without precision.

2.1 Sex

The use of the term 'sex', outside of a discussion of sexual behaviour, refers to the legal sex assigned to a person at birth based on their external genitalia. In some cases, a person's anatomy does not conform to an assumed binary of male or female, forming a third, very broad, category of intersex people. Sex is generally considered to also include other factors which are biological, such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs. It is sometimes – falsely – assumed to be static and a marker of a person's 'natural' status. However, research shows that biological markers of sex are often far more complex, mutable, and ambiguous than people might commonly suppose (for an overview, see Ainsworth, 2015), and many of the markers of biology that we might imagine determine someone's status are not evident: It is very rare, for example, that we are aware of someone's, or even our own, chromosomal, hormonal, or reproductive state. In addition, a person may change their presentation of biological sex characteristics through, for example, taking

hormones or surgery. For a discussion over the use of terminology, see Dembroff (2021).

2.2 Gender

Gender, in contrast to sex assigned at birth, comprises a set of categories that are socially and culturally created and which include someone's 'gender identity (whether they identify as female, male, both, or neither), their gender expression and gender roles (whether they [present as] feminine, masculine, both, or neither), or the privileges, assumptions, expectations, and restrictions they face due to the sex others perceive them to be' (Serano, 2016, pp. 24–25). It is not a fixed concept but is constructed and performed within cultural and social parameters (see Butler, 1990), nor is it dependent on the sex assigned at birth. Thus, any study, discussion, or investigation which is not concerned with the biological definition of sex should use gender as a term and categories of gender – not sex – to show demographic differences.

2.3 Gender and Sexual Orientation

A person's sexuality or sexual orientation is separate from their gender identity and the two should not be confused nor conflated. This means, for example, that someone who is cis, trans or non-binary may identify as straight, gay, or as having any another variant of sexual orientation, with there being no connection between their gender identity and their sexuality. So, a man, whether cis or trans, who is attracted to other men would describe themselves as gay and male, whereas a woman, whether cis or trans, who is attracted to men would describe herself as straight and female.

3 Gender and Diversity

3.1 Cis and Trans

People who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are described as 'cis' while those who do not often use the term 'trans'. Note that, like female and male, these are to be used only as adjectives and never as a compound noun, e.g.: cis/trans man or cis/trans woman. Cis and trans are often combined with gender as a compound adjective – so cisgender man/woman or transgender man/woman –

although the term transgender is now considered slightly old-fashioned by many, and some people do not like to use it. Note, many trans people who identify on a gender binary simply use the terms man and male or woman and female.

An older term, transsexual, is no longer in general use and is usually limited to describing people who have undergone, or who intend to undergo, gender affirmation surgery. Note that the term 'gender reassignment surgery' is no longer considered appropriate. Likewise, the terms 'assigned female at birth' (sometimes AFAB) or 'assigned male at birth' (AMAB) are now used instead of the misleading adjectives 'female-to-male' or 'male-to-female'.

The use of the terms such as cis or trans to describe people should be restricted to studies or discussions where it is important to consider gender variance or gender history, or if the people you are talking to or writing about always self-identify as, for example, trans.

3.2 Non-Binary and Genderqueer

People who identify outside of the gender binary of female/male often describe themselves as being either non-binary or genderqueer. These adjectives cover a very wide range of identities which do not align, or only overlap, with the male/female binary. Some of these include: being androgynous with both a masculine and feminine identity; intergender, with an identity between the categories of female and male; genderfluid, with an identity which varies; or bi- or pangender with multiple identities. Some people also have a gender identity which is specific to their culture and does not conform to a female/male binary. Note that non-binary or genderqueer people may also identify as trans.

3.3 Masculine and Feminine

Masculine and feminine describe gendered ways of presenting and behaving which are socially and culturally associated with the state of being either a man or woman. They are often seen as oppositional but the specifics of how people present and behave under these designations can vary culturally and historically. While there is pressure for certain groups to conform to these ways of presenting and behaving, they exist outside of gender identity. Trans people who are either masculine or feminine may describe themselves as transmasculine or transfeminine.

4 Names and Pronouns

4.1 Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that denotes person, gender, number, and case, for example, I, you, he, she, it, we, and they. As pronouns denote gender in English, they are an important marker of identity in language use. It is important to use the pronouns that the person being addressed or referred uses themselves. The use of pronouns may cover a wider range of identities than the he/him and she/her gender binary. A person who identifies as male may use he/him pronouns, while a person who identifies as female may use she/her pronouns, however, both may also use they/them pronouns.

Non-binary and genderqueer people may use a variety of pronouns. The most common usage is 'they/them' (along with the title Mx), but some people use neopronouns. There are many of these in use, with numerous variants, but some include:

Subject	Object	Possessive	Possessive	Reflexive
he/she/they	him/her/them	his/her/their	his/hers/ theirs	himself/ herself/ themselves, themselves
e(y)	em	eir	eirs	eirself/emself
per	per	per	pers	perself
ve	ver	vis	vis	verself
xe	xem	xyr	xyrs	xemself
ze	hir	hir	hirs	hirself

4.2 Singular ‘They’

The use of ‘they’ as a singular pronoun in English dates back at least 600 years. In contemporary English it is the preferred way to refer to a generic single person. This avoids the sexist use of ‘he’ as a generic reference and the more inelegant and gender-binary forms such as ‘he and she’ or ‘he/she’. ‘They’ is, therefore, inclusive and can also be used when you do not know the pronouns someone uses and have not had the opportunity to ask them. The singular ‘they’ should be used in all university settings and documentation when referring to a generic individual.

4.3 Current and Retrospective Misgendering and Deadnaming

Two of the most damaging and hurtful linguistic actions against trans people are misgendering and deadnaming. Both cause considerable psychological hurt and harm, have a very damaging effect on a trans person’s wellbeing and serve to reinforce discriminatory behaviours within society.

Misgendering occurs when someone uses, consciously, maliciously, or unconsciously, the wrong pronoun when referring to or addressing another person, for example, using ‘she’ when the person referred to uses ‘he/him’ or ‘they/them’ pronouns. It is incumbent upon the person addressing or referring to another person to be aware of the pronouns that that person uses. If you do not know which pronouns a person uses, then ask. If that is not immediately possible then use the singular ‘they/them’ (see above).

N.B. A person’s use of pronouns should not only be adopted for the present, but should also be used retrospectively when referring to a person’s past, even if in the past that person was known by other pronouns, i.e. current always takes precedent over past usage. For example, if in the past someone was referred to using ‘he/him’ pronouns but now uses ‘they/them’, ‘they/them’ should be used when talking about the person in the past tense, as in ‘they [not ‘he’] used to go to that school’.

Deadnaming is a similar practice, but it is the use, whether consciously, maliciously, or unconsciously, of a person’s past given name. The same rules apply as for pronouns. You should always use the name that the person uses who is being addressed or referred to. And, as for pronouns, this name should also be used retrospectively when referring to the person’s past, even if in the past they were

known by a different name. For example, if a person uses the name Stephanie but had a different given name in the past, the past name should never be used in connection with that person, and they should always be referred to as Stephanie whether talking about their present or their past.

5 References

Ainsworth, C. (2015). Sex redefined: The idea of two sexes is simplistic. Biologists now think there is a wider spectrum than that. *Nature*, 518, 288–291.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/518288a>

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* [2nd ed.]. Routledge.

Dembroff, R. (2021). Escaping the natural attitude about gender. *Philosophical Studies*, 178, 983–1003. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-020-01468-1>

Serano, J. (2016). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* [2nd ed.]. Seal Press.