

Trans/Nonbinary Equity and Inclusion in Philosophy¹

We begin with an overview of some basic terminology. The next section offers suggestions to create a more inclusive learning environment for trans/nonbinary students. The last section characterizes stereotype threat, attributional ambiguity, and implicit bias and explains some of the ways that these can lead to obstacles faced by trans/nonbinary people in particular. We hope that this guide proves useful to instructors aiming to create more inclusive learning environments for their students.

1. Basic Terminology

Below are some definitions of basic terms relating to gender. Most of the definitions are taken from [this CSUN handout](#) with recommendations for making one's classroom trans-inclusive.

Transgender: an umbrella term that describes many gender identities for people who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth.

Non-binary: An umbrella term that describes gender identities that do not fit within the binary of *man* and *woman*.

Cisgender: Describes people who identify their gender identity with their sex assigned at birth.

Gender non-conforming. A person who doesn't conform to society's expectations of gender expression based on the gender binary, expectations of masculinity and femininity, or how they should identify their gender.

Agender: A person who is internally ungendered or does not have a felt sense of gender identity.

Genderfluid: A person whose gender identification and presentation shifts, whether within or outside of societal, gender-based expectations.

Genderqueer: A person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders.

Two spirit: American Indian/First Nations/Native American persons who have attributes of both men and women, have distinct gender and social roles in their tribes, and are often involved with mystical rituals (shamans)

Trans*: An older umbrella term, now used to include transgender, non-binary, and many of the other non-cis categories listed above.

Misgender: Incorrectly referring to a person's gender through language and behavior that assume someone's gender identity.

Dead name: the birth name of a trans/nonbinary person who has changed their name. Dead names should be assumed private and inappropriate to use.

¹ Prepared by Alex Singh, Milan Mossé, and Geoffrey Lee for the Equity Task Force.

2. In the Classroom

Introductions and Roll Call

- Introduce yourself with pronouns (if you are comfortable doing so). An instructor can establish that they're cognizant of pronouns by introducing themselves first as the instructor followed by their preferred pronouns. Instructors can also include them in their syllabus and email signature (e.g. Alexander Singh, he/him/his).
- Before transitioning to student introductions/roll call, instructors can set the tone by reminding the students that they're open to calling them by their *preferred name*.
- Dead Names : It's important to be aware that a student's dead name could be in the university system; again, this is private information and inappropriate to use. Inviting students to introduce themselves with their preferred names and pronouns (e.g. when they speak in class) is a better way to find out how they would like to be addressed.
- Instructors should be cognizant of the fact that some students may feel uncomfortable disclosing their pronouns or gender identity to the class during introductions. Prefacing an introduction activity with this will encourage students to consult the instructor privately about their name/pronoun preferences. With permission from the student, instructors can share this information with the GSI(s) for larger classes that have discussion sections.
- Use of they/them pronouns: If you're not sure of someone's pronouns and aren't able to politely ask them, it's best to default to using they/them. But it also commonly occurs that a trans person requests binary pronouns, and then people insist on using they/them pronouns for them anyway. So : if you know someone prefers binary pronouns, use them. Conversely, if a person requests they/them pronouns you should (of course) use them too.
- Example of an introduction activity:
 - Instructors can have students fold an index card which displays the students preferred name and pronoun. The instructor may also choose to create a *name tent* for themselves. With this method, students can conveniently share their preferred names and pronouns with the instructor and their classmates (Helder et al, 2021).

Addressing Mistakes

- Instructors may notice instances where one student misgenders another student. Handling the situation *politely* by providing a correction can avoid making both students feel uncomfortable. Instructors can correct the student by emphasizing the preferred pronoun. For example, emphasizing '*they*' if a student is referred to as she/he when they have already disclosed their preferred pronouns to the instructor (NYU, [Trans Inclusive Practices in the Classroom](#)).
- Instructors may find themselves in a position where they've misgendered a student; focusing on the situation by profusely apologizing may make the student even more uncomfortable (especially if it is in front of the entire class). The best thing to do is *first* apologize and then proceed with the discussion (NYU, [Trans Inclusive Practices in the Classroom](#)).

- Addressing anti-pronoun behavior:
 - Microaggressions are subtle acts of exclusion which are comments, gestures, or insults grounded in racism/sexism/homophobia/etc (Knight, 2020).
 - **When a student calls attention to an instructor’s microaggression.** If an instructor has been called out by a student, then the instructor should first understand that the student is displaying an indication of trust and respect for the instructor. Instructors should also understand the student’s frustration because microaggressions are grounded in ‘centuries worth of discrimination, cruelty, and oppression’ (Knight, 2020). Lastly, instructors should understand that the student is taking a huge risk by offering the instructor criticism. The best thing for the instructor to do is to listen to the concerns of the student and aim to be proactive in ensuring that similar instances do not occur (Knight, 2020).
 - **When a student does an act which is a microaggression in the presence of an instructor.** [How to respond to microaggressions](#); ACTION framework (Souza, 2018).
 - Ask clarifying questions to help you understand intentions.
 - *Can you help me understand what you meant by that?*
 - Come from curiosity and empathy (not judgment).
 - *I’m sure you didn’t mean to say something hurtful but...*
 - Tell what you observed as problematic, in a factual manner.
 - *I noticed that...*
 - Impact exploration: ask for or state the potential impact of such a statement or action
 - *Many people might take that comment to mean...*
 - Own your own thoughts and feelings.
 - *When I heard your comment I thought/felt...*
 - Next steps: Request appropriate action.
 - *I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class...*

Syllabus Blurb on Pronouns. As your instructor, it is my job to ensure that students are respected in the classroom. I therefore ask—and the university’s Code of Conduct requires—that we all refer to each other in respectful terms, by using people’s preferred names and pronouns. It is imperative that we all make a conscious effort to do this, and deliberately or repeatedly misnaming or misgendering another is unacceptable. I am responsible for ensuring that we refer to each other respectfully in the classroom, and in particular for ensuring that I refer to you using the name and pronoun you provide when introducing yourself. If you notice that I am falling short of this responsibility, or you are otherwise concerned about the atmosphere in the classroom, I welcome any feedback and strongly encourage you to reach out to me over email or in person after class.

3. Stereotype Threat, Attributional Ambiguity, and Implicit Bias

Stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is defined by Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) as follows: “When a negative stereotype about a group that one is part of becomes personally

relevant, usually as an interpretation of one's behavior or an experience one is having, stereotype threat is the resulting sense that one can then be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype, or that one might do something that would inadvertently confirm it." Ivy (2014) distinguishes two effects of stereotype threat, each potentially caused by the threat of discrimination and devaluation based on a stereotype:

- the *under-performance effect*, e.g. women performed as well as men on a math test when told that the test tends not to show a difference in ability according to gender and performed worse than men when told nothing or that the test tends to show such a difference. (Spencer, Steel, & Quinn 2002)
- the *situational avoidance effect*, e.g. faced with the stereotype that they're less capable at math than men, women may avoid STEM disciplines because they are concerned that mathematical abilities will be constantly considered inferior. (Davies, Spencer, Quinn & Gerhardstein 2002)

Ivy (2014) observes that trans women face further effects of stereotype threat, in addition to those faced by women generally, for example when:

- Reading a book such as Caitlin Moran's *How To Be a Woman*.
- Being assertive or firm in argumentation.
- Wearing a dress or having a feminine gender presentation.
- "[M]any trans women avoid participating in competitive sports for fear of excess scrutiny of their gender, especially with stories such as the high-profile mistreatment of Caster Semenya, and the subsequent IOC/IAAF gender policies that allow for "whisper trigger" investigations based on anonymous complaints."
- Trans/nonbinary persons are regularly harassed and the subjects of violence merely for wanting to use the bathroom. Ivy writes:
 - "There's a pernicious stereotype that trans women transition *in order to gain access* to women-only spaces such as bathrooms and changing rooms. Implicitly, or explicitly, the stereotype is that trans women do so in order to violate cis women or even children: trans women are perverts, molesters, and rapists. This is the stereotype even though there hasn't been a single documented case of such an event, and even though no trans/nonbinary person has ever transitioned for such a ludicrous reason. The stereotype remains, even though there's nothing to stop a man from entering a women's space to molest a child or rape a woman (or child). Moreover, it's a regular social occurrence that more than one woman will go into the bathroom together. The social convention is that the other woman, or women, wait for the other(s) until everyone is done, exiting together. However, the stereotype of trans women is that they hang around women's bathrooms in order to ogle or even molest/rape women. So a trans woman, knowing about this stereotype, may be nervous waiting in a women's bathroom for her friends, even though she's not there embodying the stereotype. The stereotype threat is that she's afraid that *others* will view her as embodying the stereotype, whether she actually embodies it or not. This leads to anxiety and stress, and so many trans women (I can speak from personal experience here) won't conform to the social convention, and so exit the bathroom alone in order to wait for their friends."

Attributional ambiguity. Attributional ambiguity occurs when it is unclear why someone behaves a certain way towards one, e.g. a young, attractive undergraduate student in a biology lab may be unsure whether she received an A+ on her skills evaluation from the male teaching assistant because she deserved it or because he's attracted to her. Attributional ambiguity can produce increased anxiety and a sense of distrust about motives and can lead one to discount praise, e.g. the student in the preceding example may discount her A+. Ivy (2014) discusses some examples of attributional ambiguity she has encountered as a trans woman:

- Walking through airport security, a trans woman is told that she's been selected for a random search. She receives a pat-down and is taken to a private room where she is asked if her gender is female. She is unsure whether the employee did that because they suspect that she is a trans woman, or if the question is standard procedure.
- A trans woman applies for a passport and part of the process requires that she provide references. In the past, it was rare that references were contacted, but this time, all of the woman's references were contacted—was the reference check because she was trans, or was it standard procedure?
- A cis woman compliments a trans woman's appearance. A trans woman may wonder whether the compliment was genuine or given out of pity.

“Attributional ambiguity goes hand-in-hand with stereotype threat because the situations where attributional ambiguity arises are typically those where stereotype threat also functions. Was that nasty look from a woman in the bathroom because she's jealous of what a (trans) woman looks like, or is it because she's 'clocked' the (trans) woman *as* a trans woman? It's ambiguous. And once this has happened, the stereotype threat of being a trans woman in the bathroom is heightened, and the anxiety and behavioral responses are similarly amplified. It's not uncommon for a trans woman to develop a sudden, intense desire to remove herself from a situation as a response to such situations (again, speaking from experience).”

Implicit bias.

- A belief or act displays implicit bias when it is unintentionally discriminatory, often stemming from tacit or unconsciously held discriminatory attitudes. These attitudes can be held by those who have the best of intentions, and can conflict with the explicitly endorsed, non-discriminatory attitudes of the agent. (Rutgers)
- What are some examples of implicit bias? (Rutgers)
 - An instructor repeatedly fails to notice contributions to a conversation by women or members of historically underrepresented groups (e.g. LGBTQ+/POC).
 - A male instructor frequently allows male classmates to talk without raising their hands but not women or members of historically underrepresented groups.
 - An instructor assumes that a student with physical disabilities also has mental disabilities and thus treats them unequally.
 - An instructor may stereotype a student with substandard writing abilities as lacking intellectual ability.
- What can be done to address it? (Yale)
 - It may be difficult to self-assess one's own implicit bias; instructors can review more examples on what implicit bias looks like in the classroom and reflect on their own modes of instruction.

- Instructors can have colleagues observe their instructor-student interactions during class and solicit constructive feedback regarding their modes of instruction.
- Instructors can offer midterm and final course evaluations and include questions about inclusivity and if the student felt adequately included in the conversations held in class.
- Further reading
 - [Creating Inclusive College Classrooms](#)- UMichigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

References

- Davies, P.G., S.J. Spencer, D.M. Quinn, and R. Gerhardstein. 2002. [“Consuming images: How television commercials that elicit stereotype threat can restrain women academically and professionally.”](#) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 28 (12): 1615-28.
- Helder, R., R. Dotan, and S. Rigney. 2021. [“Best Practices Guide for Respectful Classroom Participation.”](#) Equity Task Force.
- Knight, R. 2020. [“You've Been Called out for a Microaggression. What Do You Do?”](#) Harvard Business Review.
- Ivy, V. 2014. [“Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women.”](#) *Hypatia*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 857-872.
- New York University: Trans Inclusive Practices in the Classroom (web resource).
<https://www.nyu.edu/life/global-inclusion-and-diversity/learning-and-development/toolkits/trans-inclusive-classrooms.html>
- Rutgers Department of Philosophy. [Climate issues in academic philosophy.](#)
- Souza, T. 2018. ["Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION."](#) Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching Strategies From Magna Publications.
- Spencer, S.J., C.M. Steele, and D.M. Quinn. 1999. [“Stereotype threat and women’s math performance.”](#) *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology* 35: 4-28.
- Steele, C.M., S.J. Spencer, and J. Aronson. 2002. [“Contending with group image: The psychology of stereotype and social identity threat.”](#) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 34: 379-440.
- Yale University, Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. (2021). [Awareness of implicit biases: Poorvu Center for teaching and learning.](#) Awareness of Implicit Biases . Retrieved February 18, 2022.

Further Resources

[The Trans Philosophy Project](#)

[UC Berkeley: Transgender Resources](#)

Bettcher, T.M. 2017. [“Trans Feminism: Recent Philosophical Developments”](#)

Ivy, V. 2012. [“Coming Out in Class.”](#) *The Chronicle*.

Ivy, V. 2012. [“On the Job Market as a Transgender Candidate.”](#) *The Chronicle*.

Zurn, P. 2016. [“Trans Experience in Philosophy.”](#) *APA Blog*.