



LGBTQ+

Dismantling Oppression, One Pronoun at a Time

Onika T. Eversole, AA, BSW, TCM

JULY 2025

Objectives

- Identify the importance of pronouns
- Identify the various pronouns utilized
- Understanding the barriers that LGBTQ+ members face
- Reflect upon our individual biases and prejudices

This presentation serves a crucial purpose: to provide psychoeducation to the local community, aiming to enhance cultural humility and awareness. The presentation's structure is straightforward; the goal is not to overwhelm readers with statistics and complex language, but to deliver clear and concise educational material.

Introduction

Using correct pronouns is a simple yet powerful way for professionals in social work—and any field—to show respect, build trust, and affirm a person's identity. It creates a more inclusive and safer environment, especially for LGBTQ+ individuals who may have experienced discrimination or erasure. As social workers, honoring someone's pronouns reflects our commitment to dignity, empathy, and ethical practice.

Common Pronouns & Simple Descriptions

Pronoun	Subject Example	Used By	Description
He/Him	<i>He is kind.</i>	Cis men, trans men	Masculine pronouns
She/Her	<i>She is strong.</i>	Cis women, trans women	Feminine pronouns
They/Them	<i>They are here.</i>	Nonbinary people, genderqueer, some cis people	Gender-neutral, singular or plural
Ze/Zir (<i>zee/zeer</i>)	<i>Ze is happy. I saw zir.</i>	Some nonbinary or gender nonconforming people	Gender-neutral alternative to he/she
Xe/Xem (<i>zee/zem</i>)	<i>Xe is ready. I called xem.</i>	Some nonbinary or genderfluid people	Another gender-neutral option
No Pronouns / Name Only	<i>Alex is here. I saw Alex.</i>	People who don't use pronouns	Refers to themselves by name only

The Purpose of Pronouns

A sense of identity is a critical component of our human experiences; it's a biological drive to understand who we are as individuals, our purpose and goals in life, and to survive. The use of pronouns in the LGBTQ+ community is a method of honoring one's identity with a label that matches, in a society where the community remains oppressed and shackled by white supremacist ideology.

As social work professionals, we must honor a client's right to identify themselves in whatever manner best aligns with their desires, goals, and perception of their identity. Suppose you find that honoring an individual's pronouns and identity poses a conflict with your personal beliefs, values, or culture. In that case, it's time for professional consultation or reflection, along with a willingness to understand the experiences of others.



The Frustration of Pronouns

Yes! Pronouns can be a frustrating and intimidating topic for many professionals. However, defaulting to “they, them” is not an acceptable bypass to educating ourselves on the differences and applications of pronouns used in society today. Here’s a list of the most common frustrations I’ve experienced that others struggle with:

1. There are too many pronouns.
2. Pronouns are too complicated.
3. Pronouns cause tension in the environment (work, school, home, etc.).



The Benefits of Pronouns

Affirmation & Validation! As we previously discussed, pronouns are the core of our identities as LGBTQ+ folks. These are not just “words” or “labels”- they represent a sense of liberation and identity for many folks.

1. Improved client relationships
2. Fosters a safe and welcoming environment for clients
3. Affirms the identity of the individual
4. Demonstrates cultural humility
5. Reduces harm caused to clients





OPPRESSION

"The social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, a group, or an institution [which] occurs at all levels and is reinforced by social norms, institutional biases, interpersonal relationships, and personal beliefs" is how the University of Michigan School of Social Work defines oppression (Brock, 2024).

What does **OPPRESSION** have to do with pronouns?

Oppression is about systems and behaviors that harm people based on their identity, including gender identity. When someone's pronouns are ignored, questioned, or deliberately misused, it reflects and reinforces gender-based oppression, particularly against transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people. Denying someone's pronouns is not a neutral act — it can: Invalidate their identity, Contribute to feelings of exclusion or invisibility, and reflect deeper societal patterns of transphobia or cisnormativity (the assumption that everyone is or should be cisgender).

For many LGBTQ+ individuals, especially trans and nonbinary people, misgendering isn't just a mistake — it's often a reminder of how systems, workplaces, schools, or communities have denied their right to exist authentically. Using the correct pronouns is one way to push back against that oppression. It affirms people's identities, promotes equity, and helps dismantle everyday practices that exclude or marginalize LGBTQ+ people.



How can social workers and other professionals do better?

- **Practice asking and sharing pronouns**
(Role play with friends, family, colleagues)
- **Avoid making assumptions**
(If you're unsure, ASK!)
- **Apologize and correct yourself if you make a mistake**
(Don't act as if nothing's happened – address it)
- **Stay informed and educate yourself**
(Consume educational content related to LGBTQ+)
- **Advocate for inclusive practices**
- **Use inclusive language**
- **Listen and center LGBTQ+ voices**



RESOURCES

Crisis & Mental Health Support

The Trevor Project

Crisis support for LGBTQ+ youth (24/7)

Call: 1-866-488-7386 | Text: "START" to 678678

www.thetrevorproject.org

Trans Lifeline

Peer support hotline run by and for trans people

Call: 1-877-565-8860

www.translifeline.org

LGBT National Help Center

Confidential peer support & chat lines for all ages

www.glbthotline.org

Housing & Safety

True Colors United

Resources for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness

www.truecolorsunited.org

GLBT Near Me

Find local LGBTQ+ centers, shelters, and services

www.glbtnearme.org

Community & Identity Support

PFLAG

Support for LGBTQ+ people, families, and allies

www.pflag.org

Q Chat Space

Live-chat groups for LGBTQ+ teens, run by trained facilitators

www.qchatspace.org

It Gets Better Project

Uplifting stories and support for LGBTQ+ youth

www.itgetsbetter.org

Conclusion

Practicing cultural humility and respecting individual identities is not optional—it's essential to ethical and practical social work. By honoring each person's lived experience, including their gender identity and pronouns, social workers and other professionals create safer, more inclusive environments. This approach strengthens trust, promotes equity, and challenges systems of oppression. In a diverse world, respecting identity is a core part of valuing humanity.





References

Brock, J. (2024, September 26). Oppression definition. School of Social Work.

<https://socialwork.uw.edu/admissions/oppression-definition/>