

# Emerging Pronoun Practices After the Procedural Turn: Disclosure, Discovery, and Repair<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** We examine emerging practices of pronoun disclosure, discovery, and repair after the procedural turn in pronoun politics, which shifted attention from the substantive question of which pronouns should be used to the procedural question of how preferred pronouns, whatever they might be, could be effectively communicated to others. Drawing on interviews with and observations of college students and recent graduates who are committed in principle to using preferred pronouns, we consider how they seek to do so in practice, focusing on practices of disclosure, discovery, and repair. We underscore the gap between the knowledge that is required in principle to use preferred pronouns consistently and the imperfect knowledge that pronoun-users have in practice, and we show how the use of preferred pronouns creates new forms of interactional accountability.

**Keywords:** gender; language; pronouns; interaction; accountability; knowledge

THIRD-person pronouns have long been a site of gender politics. Observations about the “missing” gender-neutral pronoun in English—a pronoun suited for referring to an indefinite person (“anyone” or “someone”) or to a particular person whose gender is unknown (“the person who left \_\_\_ keys at the counter”)—go back to the first half of the nineteenth century, as do proposals for new pronouns to fill this gap.<sup>1</sup> Several dozen novel gender-neutral pronoun-sets have been proposed, though none have caught on.<sup>2</sup> Prescriptive grammarians countered that new forms were not needed, because “he” could be used generically. Since the 1970s, however, generic “he”—under fire as part of a broader feminist challenge to sexist language (Martyna 1980)—has steadily lost ground, its place taken by the cumbersome “he or she,” by feminist uses of generic “she,” or, increasingly, by singular “they.”

Since the 1990s, the movement of transgender practices and discourse from the margins to the mainstream has occasioned two major shifts in pronoun politics. First, in response to the heightened cultural salience of nonbinary identities, the overall orientation of pronoun politics has shifted from a politics of *equality* or *neutrality* within a *binary* framework, aimed at challenging *sexist* language—the main focus of the second-wave feminist politics of language—to a politics of *inclusion* and *recognition* within a *pluralist* framework, aimed at challenging *cis-centric* language.

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In this context, singular “they” got a further boost: it could be used not only as a gender-neutral pronoun but also as a nonbinary pronoun, useful not only for indefinite references where gender is *not* known but also for references to particular people whose (nonbinary) gender *is* known. It could be both gender-neutral and, paradoxically, gender-affirming.

This versatility, among other considerations, has led some scholars (Saguy and Williams 2019; Boellstorff 2021) to argue for the universal use of singular “they” in place of traditional gendered pronouns. Yet although singular “they” is gender-affirming to some, it is gender-denying to others, including some binary trans people for whom binary pronouns are an important form of recognition. And although the project of degendering language through the universal use of singular “they” appeals to some feminists and trans advocates, it does not appeal to others, again including some trans and nonbinary people for whom gendered language is a key field of self-expression (Saguy and Williams 2022). Here as elsewhere, the trans space is marked by a tension between degendering and let-a-thousand-genders-bloom forms of hyper-gendering (Brubaker 2016:118).

The impossibility of finding a single pronoun that answers to everyone’s preferences and convictions has contributed, more recently, to a second major reconfiguration in pronoun politics: a shift from a focus on *pronouns themselves*—on the merits and drawbacks of established pronouns and proposed alternatives—to a focus on the *practices and procedures* for determining the pronoun to be used. Instead of promoting the use of a particular pronoun (such as singular “they” or one of the many neopronouns), the current phase of pronoun politics starts from the premise, institutionalized in a broadening range of contexts, that third-person pronouns should reflect the preferences of the persons referred to. Because this requires new procedures for expressing, communicating, and consulting those preferences—procedures such as pronoun-go-rounds, pronoun disclosure on digital platforms, and disclosing or requesting pronouns in informal interaction—one may speak of a *procedural turn* in pronoun politics.

Our article considers these emerging procedures and practices from a sociological—and more specifically, interactional—perspective. We are not concerned with the normative question of the desirability of using preferred pronouns or the relative merits of different procedures for making pronouns known; we address instead the empirical question of how people who support in principle the idea of using preferred pronouns go about doing so in practice.<sup>3</sup> This is a question that is only tangentially addressed in the literature on contemporary pronoun politics. That literature includes recent empirical work in social psychology, sociolinguistics, and sociology. Experimental studies in social psychology have analyzed perceptions of singular “they” (Bradley et al. 2019; Arnold, Mayo, and Dong 2021), students’ pronoun choices in referring to unknown referents (Sheydaei 2021), and perceived motivations for others’ sharing pronouns (Kodipady et al. 2023), while survey research has traced changing attitudes toward and use of the gender-inclusive Swedish third-person pronoun “hen” that has gained some traction in the past decade (Gustafsson Sendén, Renström, and Lindqvist 2021). Sociolinguistic research has examined changes over time in uses of singular “they” (Conrod 2019), resistance to the use of “they” as a nonbinary pronoun (Konnolly and Cowper

2020), and attitudes toward nonbinary pronouns more generally (Hekanaho 2022). Sociological research has addressed gender activists' stances toward different uses of singular "they" (Saguy and Williams 2022).

Our concerns in this article are different. We are interested in the emerging social practices and procedures through which pronoun preferences are expressed, communicated, and discovered and through which people who wish to be guided by such preferences manage the epistemic demands and the epistemic and normative uncertainties that arise in attempting to do so. Drawing on interviews with and observations of college students and recent graduates, we consider practices of disclosure, discovery, and repair. We begin by examining practices of pronoun disclosure in informal face-to-face interaction, in institutionalized settings such as pronoun-go-rounds in introductory meetings of college courses, and on digital platforms. Shifting from the perspective of the pronoun-discloser to that of the pronoun-user, we consider next the practices of discovery through which people seek to inform themselves about the preferred pronouns of others as well as practices of reference in contexts of epistemic and normative uncertainty. The final section draws on conversation-analytic perspectives to analyze the practices of repair that are prompted by the perceived use of incorrect pronouns.

We draw on three types of data. A dozen interviews about pronoun practices were conducted with undergraduates (9) and recent college graduates (3), all of them between the ages of 20 and 25, at three Southern California universities. The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling in networks likely to be sympathetic to progressive views on gender matters; all supported respecting others' preferred pronouns, though none of them used nontraditional pronouns for themselves. This deliberate skewing of our sample enabled us to focus not on *attitudes* toward pronouns but instead on the emerging interactional *practices* of those who are sympathetic to the project of respecting pronoun preferences. Interviews—lasting between 30 and 75 minutes—were conducted in person and over Zoom and were recorded and transcribed. Interview data were complemented by two sets of observational data: observations of pronoun disclosure—both prompted and unprompted—in six introductory class meetings and observations of informal social interaction among college students and recent graduates.<sup>4</sup> All names in interview and observational data have been changed. A final set of data was derived from a systematic canvassing of options for pronoun disclosure on a dozen digital platforms and an analysis of the prevalence of pronoun disclosure among PhD students with LinkedIn profiles.

Our data are limited to a specific group of progressive-leaning college-educated young people, who are of course not representative of the population at large. The scope of our argument is therefore limited. Yet readiness to use preferred pronouns is no longer a niche disposition. In 2021, half of the U.S. population reported that they would feel "very comfortable" or "somewhat comfortable" using gender-neutral pronouns if asked to do so, and a quarter of the population reported personally knowing someone who uses such pronouns (Minkin and Brown 2021). So although our analysis is exploratory and tentative, it has relevance beyond the specific group studied.

## Disclosure

The principle that people should refer to others using their preferred pronouns requires a new kind of knowledge on the part of those who seek to act in accordance with it. Until recently, third-person pronoun use, especially in the case of a definite antecedent, generally involved what cognitive psychologists have called automatic rather than controlled cognition: the cognitive processes involved were “implicit, un verbalized, rapid, and automatic” rather than “explicit, verbalized, slow, and deliberate” (D’Andrade 1995:180). This followed from the prevailing quasi-automaticity of sex/gender categorization and the taken-for-granted link between sex/gender categorization and pronoun selection.<sup>5</sup> The use of preferred pronouns, however, often requires controlled cognition, and it requires knowledge of the preferred pronouns of the persons one refers to. If one takes seriously the principle, vigorously articulated in the normative literature, that one should never *assume* what a person’s pronouns are on the basis of physical appearance, gender presentation, or even declared gender,<sup>6</sup> then the required knowledge becomes much more extensive, and the epistemic burden much more substantial. (As we shall see in the next section, however, our respondents often did make such assumptions—perhaps precisely because of the epistemic burden of not doing so.)

The use of preferred pronouns therefore generates a problem in the sociology of everyday knowledge. How is knowledge of preferred pronouns socially generated and distributed? Such knowledge must be both *disclosed* by the referent and *acquired* by the pronoun-user. We consider disclosure in this section and acquisition (or what we call discovery) in the next, treating them separately for analytical reasons. But they are of course sometimes bound together in a single communicative interaction, in which preferred pronouns are disclosed to and at the same time acquired by a specific recipient or set of recipients. Such interactional disclosures may be joined in chains of reciprocal disclosure, as in the so-called “pronoun-go-rounds” discussed below, that have become common in recent years in certain institutionalized group settings like classrooms or meetings.

The normative literature recommends that such disclosures be routinely used in informal interaction as well (Zimman 2017:95). We found, however, that disclosures—as well as requests for others to disclose their pronouns—appear to be rare in informal interaction.<sup>7</sup> As one student noted, “It was very common in community college to just share our pronouns in professional spaces. . . . It was like an expectation. But not in more casual type of settings” (Kaia). Another underscored the rarity of pronoun-accompanied self-introductions in informal spaces:

I think most of the time, every time I meet someone, they just introduced themselves with their first name. It feels very customary to do that. I don’t think I’ve met someone who’s introduced themselves as “Oh, my name is Gater, and my pronouns are she/her” or something like that.  
(Mac)

A third student agreed: “I don’t think the culture is set up to where it’s like ‘Hi, my name is Pedro. I go by he/him, what’s your name? What are your pronouns?’ Maybe not so much of that” (Pedro).

In dyadic interactions, there are no immediate interactional benefits to disclosing pronouns, because interlocutors generally do not refer to one another using third-person pronouns.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, disclosing or requesting pronouns in informal contexts may carry interactional risks:

I was in a class in my first year at UCLA. I remember I just turned around and talked to someone. I introduced myself and we talked for the rest of the class. Then class ends and we're talking outside about activities and things like that. I said, "Oh, by the way, what pronouns do you go by? I go by he/him." That person froze for like three, four seconds, and then she was like "Oh, I go by... um... she/her." So I don't really have a good relationship with asking for pronouns because of that. I try to go around about it and figure it out for myself. (Malcolm)

We did observe a couple instances of people asking about pronouns in informal interaction without causing interactional trouble of the sort encountered by Malcolm. In one instance, Goldenberg and her friend Clementine were in line to order at a coffee shop when two people, one of whom had been in the same class as Clementine, stopped to talk for a moment. A few minutes later, when Goldenberg and her friend were picking up their drinks, one of the two (Paula) again came up to Clementine and asked:

Paula: What are your pronouns, by the way?

Clementine: They.

Paula: Oh, I use they too.

The conversation continued without reference to pronouns; here—as suggested by the “by the way”—the request for pronouns served as an interactional resource: a conversation-starter.

In general, however, proffering or requesting pronouns in informal interaction—outside particular trans and queer subcultures (Nordmarken 2019; Zimman 2019)—appears to be quite rare. Yet two other modes of disclosure—in institutionalized introductions and on digital platforms—are quite common. We consider each in turn.

In recent years, pronoun disclosures have been incorporated into introductions in institutionalized settings like classrooms, club and organization meetings, and job interviews. Of course, the practice is much more likely to occur in some social milieus than in others. Our interest here is not in the prevalence of the practice but in the social-interactional dynamics through which it is carried out.

In the introductory meetings of three sociology discussion sections we observed, the TA prompted introductions by saying “Tell us your name, where you’re from, your pronouns if you want, and why you became a sociology major.” Of the 61 students present in the three sections, only 15 included their pronouns in their introductions. Local imitation appeared to govern the students’ inclination to disclose or withhold their pronouns in these introductory rounds. In the first discussion section, for example, five students shared their pronouns, and after one person omitted them, the next four omitted them as well. We observed similar

patterns of local conformity during introductions in other classes in which the instructor made no mention of pronouns: once one student included pronouns in their self-introduction, the next students did so as well. Local imitation makes the course of pronoun-go-rounds contingent; a sequence of disclosures can be started by one person, but a single nondisclosure can generate a sequence of omissions.

Most students who shared their pronouns did so without hesitancy and without calling attention to the disclosure; they vocalized the pronouns in the same way as the other information they shared. Some students however, added their pronouns as an afterthought at the end of their introductions: “Oh, I use she/they pronouns” or “Oh, he/him pronouns.” The oh-particle, as Heritage (1984) observed, is a “change-of-state token,” indicating here an abrupt remembering of the pronoun component of their self-introductions. The last-minute add-on may reflect the novelty of pronoun disclosure. After the introductions, the TA initiated a quick debriefing session on students’ disclosure or nondisclosure of pronouns. Some nondisclosers said they had simply forgotten: “I just completely forgot in the moment. I go by she/her,” said one. Others made similar observations: “I personally didn’t use mine because growing up I wasn’t raised that way, so I’m just not used to it” and “I didn’t say mine, but it wasn’t for a particular reason. It’s just not something I’m used to.” Nondisclosure, these students suggested, is not a self-conscious decision but reflects instead a lack of habituation to the practice. It is possible, of course, that some nondisclosers objected to the practice but did not wish to highlight their nonalignment and therefore appealed to lack of habituation to the practice.

Our respondents did report some instances of resistance to or at least lack of alignment with the practice of disclosure. They recalled multiple instances in which students “made a joke” of pronoun disclosure: “There would be a lot of guys that would laugh. Or be like ‘Obviously he/him’” (Kaia). Another student recalled an incident at a USC summer program:

One of the boys there, Channing, uses he/him pronouns and he’s male presenting. He said that his pronouns are she/her as a joke and started laughing. I think he was spoken to later and asked to clarify what his pronouns were and he said that it was just a joke and that obviously his pronouns are he/him. That’s what I mean when I say making a joke out of it, because saying things like “obviously” before stating your pronouns, it kind of ruins the point of it. (Mora)

The students who disclosed their pronouns in a joking manner can be understood as enacting role distance, through which the individual can communicate “disaffection from, and resistance against, the role” while still partaking in the action (Goffman 1961:108). They can thereby convey to their peers their lack of alignment with the practice—and with what the practice might imply about the self—without explicitly challenging it or refusing to participate.

Digital platforms are the other major site of pronoun disclosure. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, Slack, Zoom, Canvas, and a number of dating sites—among them Hinge, Tinder, and Bumble—all provide specific slots for pronouns and prominently display disclosed pronouns next to the user’s name on profiles or—on platforms like Zoom and Canvas—in digitally mediated meetings or class



discussions. The existence of dedicated slots prompts users who might not have thought of disclosing their pronouns to do so. And platforms that do not provide dedicated slots for pronouns nonetheless allow users to easily disclose and display them. On Twitter (X), for example, pronouns can be added to one's free-form profile, and many people add pronouns to the signature line on email platforms.

The openness and contingency of face-to-face interaction create risks and vulnerabilities that many digital natives prefer to avoid in potentially difficult or awkward situations through texting or other asynchronous, digitally mediated modes of communication.<sup>9</sup> Disclosing or requesting pronouns in face-to-face contexts is one such potentially awkward situation, given the absence of settled norms and the uncertainty about how others will respond. Digital platforms allow people to avoid these interactional risks. Perhaps in part for this reason, most of our respondents reported having disclosed their pronouns on at least one digital platform. Other indicators, too, suggest that disclosure is widespread on digital platforms (for Twitter, see Tucker and Jones 2023).

Platform disclosure not only avoids the risks of interactional awkwardness, it removes disclosure altogether from the temporal flow and contingency of interaction. Disclosed pronouns are there in the profiles for others to consult, but the disclosure itself is accomplished on one's own, through the platform interface, outside of any immediate interactional context. Disclosure is not interactionally requested or prompted (though, as noted, it may be prompted by the techno-social platform interface itself), and it is not interactionally reciprocated. It is interactionally almost entirely decontextualized.<sup>10</sup>

This interactional decontextualization gives platform-mediated pronoun disclosure a different meaning than interactionally embedded disclosure. Many of our respondents, who did not themselves identify as LGBTQ, saw their digital disclosure as a form of allyship:

I also do it because if there is someone who has different pronouns, they can feel comfortable sharing them. So it's more like normalizing it and making it a social expectation. (Kaia)

I think everyone should display their pronouns if they feel comfortable, which I do. I feel like as a cisgender person, you do kind of have a responsibility to destigmatize that sort of thing. A lot of people don't understand why they should display their pronouns, even if they're cisgender. (Mora)

Precisely because platform disclosure is interactionally decontextualized, it appears to respond to the broader social, cultural, and political contexts that invite disclosure as a form of allyship.<sup>11</sup>

## Discovery

The use of preferred pronouns, as noted, requires that knowledge of such pronouns—knowledge that is by definition initially accessible only to the person concerned—be both disclosed by the person concerned and discovered by the pronoun-user.

Having considered practices of disclosure, we turn now to practices of discovery, shifting our angle of vision from the perspective of the pronoun discloser to that of the pronoun-user.

How do pronoun-users know what pronouns to use? They may have expressly learned—though for interaction to proceed smoothly, they will also have to have remembered and have ready at hand—the preferred pronouns of some friends and acquaintances, whether directly from the person concerned, from a pronoun-go-round, or from digital traces. But how do they know what pronouns to use in other cases?

Schooled in the locally prevailing normative discourse, our respondents emphasized that one should in principle never make assumptions about others' preferred pronouns: to "assume someone's pronouns is disrespectful" (Malcolm); "I just think that people need to get out of the habit of assumption" (Mora); "I try not to make assumptions" (Kaia). Sentiments like these are promoted by infographics that circulate widely on social media.<sup>12</sup> One such infographic, for example, begins with the principle "Don't assume a person's gender" (accompanied by the upraised hand "don't walk" icon) and glosses this by saying "When you meet someone new, stop yourself from immediately classifying that person as 'male' or 'female' based on how they look, sound, or dress."<sup>13</sup> Because such digital infographics are so easily shareable, social media users do not have to actively support a cause or participate in an activist group to encounter them, especially in the progressive-leaning milieus our respondents inhabit; the infographics created by activist groups are widely shared by celebrities, social media personalities, and friends and acquaintances who sympathize with their message. In this way, people become aware of new expectations—such as the injunction not to assume a person's gender or their pronouns—in a diffuse and largely passive way.

Yet although respondents endorsed the idea that they should not make assumptions, they admitted to routinely making such assumptions in practice. Malcolm reported that "I look at them if they're dressed in a masculine or feminine way, or their body language." Another respondent registered the tension:

I know that gender expression and gender do not-, well, they can go hand in hand a lot of the time, but they don't have to, but most of the time. So if someone is presenting more masculine, then I will go by "he", and if someone is presenting more feminine, I will go by she/her. (Lena)

When gender presentation is more ambiguous, respondents take this as a sign that the person may be using "different" pronouns:

There are public figures who will be nonbinary and they will either have short hair or long hair, or they'll dress in masculine or feminine clothes, but they'll have a body type that isn't necessarily the ideal body type society puts forward. . . . So if they're not like that, or if they have wider shoulders, and they're more muscular, and they are dressing more feminine and I'm not sure, that is kind of a signal to me that they might or might not be going by different pronouns or just like LGBT. . . . I hate to say it, but there's a look and so I'll just be unsure. And I want to find



out if they're open to saying their pronouns or not. So sometimes I will be like "What are everyone's pronouns?" (Nicole)

In effect, respondents reported following the "don't assume" principle only selectively. When gender presentation is unambiguous, they are often content to take their pronoun cues from this; only when gender presentation is ambiguous do they refrain from making assumptions about pronouns.

As suggested by Nicole, an ambiguous gender presentation would sometimes prompt a direct, in-the-moment question about preferred pronouns. But other respondents reported being wary about asking, because they understood a direct request for pronouns as potentially sensitive and intrusive: "I try to use context clues to not put that pressure [of disclosing pronouns] on someone. So I just pay attention to how people talk about them" (Kaia). Here using context clues means observing what pronouns others use in referring to the person in question: "And it was just kind of one of those things where I heard someone say it and I was like oh okay, he/him" (Pedro). Goldenberg observed something similar in a conversation with an old friend:

Anne: Jack is this girl-

JG: A girl named Jack?

Anne: Yeah, well their name is Morgan but they go by Jack and I heard people say "she" so that's what I do as well.

But others' reference practices are not always consistent: "If they're around friends, like close friends, and these close friends are calling them 'she,' 'he,' 'they'... I'm hearing mixed things" (Kaia).

Respondents also reported deliberately checking social media profiles for digital pronoun disclosure. This practice has two advantages. First, because it takes place outside of (synchronous) interaction, the discovery of pronouns on digital platforms, like the disclosure of pronouns on such platforms, is unobtrusive and avoids interactional risks and potential awkwardness. And second, the knowledge gleaned comes straight from the source: from the individual in question, who is understood as the sole legitimate source of knowledge about gender identity and preferred pronouns.<sup>14</sup> Some report looking for digital pronoun disclosure before meeting someone in person: "I try to look for pronouns, like in Slack. I try to look in their bios or on their social media or LinkedIn before reaching out to someone" (Kaia). Others do so after an in-person meeting: "Something that I actually started doing is getting their Instagram and then seeing if they have pronouns in there too. And most of the time they do" (Malcolm). One respondent noted that her "Instagram stalking habits" helped her avoid using the wrong pronouns as often as others did and kept her abreast of her friends' pronoun changes: "Every time that somebody's told me that their pronouns have changed, I've already seen it on their Instagram" (Mora).

These practices of discovery have their limits; they leave a gap between the knowledge that is in principle required in order to use preferred pronouns and the knowledge that is in practice available. Pronoun-users may have come to know some pronouns directly and explicitly from the person concerned, whether through

unprompted disclosure or in response to a request, and they may have learned others' pronouns in pronoun-go-rounds; from social media profiles, Zoom sessions, or email signatures; or by asking a third party or observing how third parties refer to them. But in many cases, people will not have such explicit knowledge ready-at-hand in the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction, even if they might know where to look for it. As noted, our respondents admit to relying on tacit assumptions based on embodiment and gender presentation in place of the explicit knowledge that they acknowledge is normatively preferred.

Respondents also reported dealing with uncertainty and imperfect knowledge by using singular "they" as a "safe" choice<sup>15</sup>:

When I meet someone new, my go-to is honestly "they." Unless they tell me their pronouns. Usually if I'm meeting someone new for the first time and I don't know their name or don't remember their name, I'll go by they/them just to play it safe. And if I do know their name, I just like to say their name. I feel like they/them is really neutral, and you can use it in any setting. (Julia)

I'm not the biggest fan of asking right away [for pronouns] because I'm not sure if they're even comfortable discussing that... So in new situations, I don't always try to ask, I try to leave it open for them to bring it up. And if it's ever the case where I'm not confident or I'm not sure what they go by, I just use "them." I feel like they/them is always my safest bet. (Pedro)

Some report using "they" even when they know or think they know that the referent prefers another pronoun. We observed two instances of this. In one instance, Goldenberg's friend Joel was using "they" to refer to a famous person:

JG: Oh, do they go by they/them?

Joel: No, I think they go by she/her. I usually say they/them just in case.

Here Joel registers his uncertainty about the referent's preferred pronoun; he thinks it is she/her, but he uses they/them "just in case." In another instance, at a gathering of friends, Camilo requests the pronouns of Heidi (whom he had met before) but then asks if he can simply use "they":

Camilo (to Heidi): What are your pronouns?

Heidi: She/her.

Camilo: I honestly just call everybody "they," do you care?

Heidi: Nah.

JG [to Camilo]: So do you call everyone "they" even if you know their pronouns?

Camilo: Yeah, I use it for everyone. It just makes things easier.

Although other respondents reported using “they” as a *safe* choice, Camilo reports using “they” as an *easy* choice, a way of avoiding the cognitive burden of having to remember people’s pronouns.

Pronoun-users have limited knowledge not only of others’ preferred pronouns but also of the expectations and normative stances of their interlocutors. This epistemic and normative uncertainty makes people much more self-conscious about the pronouns they use and leads people to monitor their own linguistic behavior in new ways. Even when people do know others’ preferred pronouns, that knowledge—especially in the case of nontraditional pronouns—is likely to be explicit, discursive knowledge, not ingrained, habitual knowledge; it must be deliberately retrieved and summoned up before it can be used. As we noted earlier, the use of preferred pronouns requires a shift from automatic, un verbalized, and habitual to controlled, verbalized, and deliberative cognition.

Our respondents commented on the self-conscious monitoring of what used to be taken for granted and unnoticed. They observed this especially in connection with the use of nonbinary pronouns:

I had to be incredibly mindful of the pronouns I was using. Ever since you’re little and you’re learning grammar, you learn that they/them is a plural term. . . . So making that adjustment and switching to it referring to one person takes practice. You use “he” and “she” your entire life, and then something else gets more difficult. It took a couple of months of adjustment. And I think when you’re adjusting to something, you just have to be aware, you have to be careful. (Mora)

Another respondent described being pulled in different directions by the automaticity of visual cues and the explicit knowledge of preferred pronouns:

Mar has more feminine features and sometimes dresses more feminine. So if you don’t know that they go by they/them, you’d actually assume she/her. And so at first I’d be like “she” and then I’d be like “shit, they.” But now it’s a lot easier, it comes more unconsciously or just comes easy to refer to their pronouns as they/them. Only because I’ve been doing it for a while. And every time, I’d think about it like “Okay, we got to go by they/them or use their name.” (Julia)

Changes in pronouns similarly prompt heightened self-monitoring:

I had a family friend whose daughter we had known for a long time. And then all of a sudden, in middle school, decided that they wanted to go by he/him pronouns and started presenting themselves very differently. And that was something I would have to think about because I had known that person for so long as their past identity that it was definitely a big change. And that was a big thing where I would have to think about the pronouns I use. They started identifying like this when they were twelve and I had known them since they were three or four. So it did take me some thinking like “Oh, wait, I need to pause when I think about them.” (Kaia)

In fact, Kaia still struggled to use her friend's pronouns during the interview. She only referred to him using "they" pronouns although she was pointing out that he goes by he/him.

## Repair

The new phase of pronoun politics creates new forms of interactional accountability. The literature on "doing gender" has long highlighted the pervasive everyday accountability to the gender or sex category in which one is placed by others, in part as a result of one's own ways of doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009). The expectation to use preferred pronouns means that one is now accountable also for the gendering (and potential misgendering) of others. Accountability for *gender*, in other words, now extends to accountability for *gendering* (Saguy and Williams 2022:22).

A rich terrain for studying how accountability for gendering plays out in everyday interaction is what conversation analysis calls "repair": the methods people use for identifying and resolving "problems of speaking, hearing, and understanding" (Albert and Ruiter 2018:279; Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977:361). The correction- or repair-prompting problems that concern us here involve (with one exception) misspeaking rather than mishearing or misunderstanding. And they involve what Jefferson (1974:181) calls "interactional" errors, which occur "in the attempt to speak appropriately to some coparticipant(s) and/or within some situation," rather than "production" errors, which arise "in the attempt to produce coherent, grammatically correct speech."

The "trouble source" (Schegloff et al. 1977) that prompts repair is an utterance (whether completed, partial, or merely projected) of a possibly wrong pronoun.<sup>16</sup> The possible wrongness of the pronoun—"possible" because repair may also be initiated when the speaker (or another participant) is uncertain about the correct pronoun—is both referential and social: the pronoun may be *referentially incorrect* (not corresponding to the referent's preferred pronoun), and it may be *socially inappropriate* (not meeting the normative expectation—held by or imputed to the speaker and/or other participants—that preferred pronouns be used). The fact that every person reference using third-person pronouns becomes a potential site of assessment for referential correctness and social appropriateness helps explain both our respondents' heightened self-consciousness and the frequency of practices of repair.

Our respondents (and our own observations) suggest that self-correction is much more frequent than correction by others. Self-correction typically occurs by replacing the incorrect with the correct pronoun, whether simply by inserting the correct pronoun or by redoing part of the problematic utterance. Goldenberg observed several instances of the former. The simplest occurred during a conversation outside of a class with two classmates, one of whom said: "And Lonnie, she- they told me it was fine." In this case, the classmate interrupted his utterance immediately after the incorrect pronoun and resumed with the correct one, without any marking of the error. In the other instances, a minimal apology accompanied the self-correction. While Goldenberg was having lunch with a friend, she mentioned

a coworker who goes by they/them pronouns. At one point, Goldenberg's friend referred to them as "he" and, following a very short pause, corrected himself: "they, sorry." Goldenberg witnessed something similar in a conversation with two friends, Joan and Peggy. Joan referred to Peggy by saying "she," mistakenly because Peggy goes by they/them pronouns. After she finished her sentence, Joan stopped and quickly said: "they, sorry, sorry." The "sorry"—in particular the doubled "sorry, sorry"—marks the error as an apology-warranting offense. Goffman (1971) suggests that the individual who apologizes "splits himself into two parts," the one that admits to committing the offense and the part that "disassociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule." The apology suggests the existence of a rule to which the speaker subscribes, a rule requiring the use of preferred pronouns.

Other self-corrections repeat all or part of the trouble-causing utterance, replacing the problematic pronoun with the correct one (Schegloff et al. 1977; Kitzinger 2013). Goldenberg observed two nearly identical instances of this. At a social gathering, someone referred to an absent friend by saying "She would love to be single. They would love to be single." And in a one-on-one meeting with a professor, the latter—referring to a graduate student—said "She's researching something like that. They're researching something like that."

Some self-corrections, as Schegloff et al. (1977) suggest, are initiated, verbally or nonverbally, by others. One such instance was reported by Malcolm, whose friend's sibling had transitioned from male to female:

The other day we [he and his friend's sister] were both just sitting in class and then one of my friends was like "Did you do the history homework?" And I was like "Yeah, I did it and he [his friend's sister] did it as well." And then she [the friend's sister] just looked at me and I was like "she did the homework."

Malcolm completed the correction by partially repeating his last sentence and replacing "he" with "she." But the correction seems to have been initiated, nonverbally, by the sister.

Another instance of other-initiated repair we observed was more complex. Goldenberg and some friends were in a parking lot before going to a social event. Jeremy, who uses they/them pronouns, was sitting in the car with the doors open while the others were standing outside. Amanda and Sally were talking:

Sally: What are we waiting for?

Amanda: They're taking a shot.

S: Oh, there's more of them?

A: No, no.

S: Oh, I thought you said they were taking a shot.

A: That's their pronoun.

Here the repair did not involve correction, because no error was made; instead it addressed a problem of understanding generated by "they," which Sally, who

did not know Jeremy's pronouns, heard as plural. This was the only instance we observed in which what conversation analysis calls the "progressivity" of interaction was substantially derailed by repair occasioned by the need to assure mutual understanding.<sup>17</sup>

Self-corrections, as noted above, are often accompanied by minimal apologies. They are much more rarely accompanied by accounts. Goffman noted that accounts, along with other forms of remedial work, transform "what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable" (Goffman 1971:109). Yet respondents note that they try to move on quickly when they err:

You try not to make a big deal out of it when you make a mistake. You have to treat it as normal. You apologize and then you keep moving forward... So I just quickly correct myself and apologize. (Kaia)

I tried to fix it and move on because I didn't want to make him uncomfortable or make him feel like this is not the space for you to be comfortable with pronouns. So if I ever did refer to him as "she," I'd quickly be like "oh, I meant he." (Pedro)

Self-correction without an account helps prevent shifting the focus of the conversation to the error and to the pronouns; it facilitates the progressivity of interaction. Speakers sometimes recognize their errors but let them stand rather than correct them:

Sometimes I won't correct myself, it depends on the pace of the conversation, and what we're talking about, who we're talking with. And also I try to look at them and see their reaction if he wants me to correct myself or not, because it happens so often that it becomes exhausting to do it over and over again. (Nicole)

It is noteworthy that Nicole linked the frequency of errors ("it happens so often") to the practice of letting them stand uncorrected; this too facilitates the progressivity of interaction, whereas correcting errors all the time would be not only exhausting, as Nicole indicated, but interactionally disruptive.

The only overt account we observed was in the medium of texting. Goldenberg and a friend were texting about their mutual friend Peggy who goes by they/them pronouns:

JG: You stay close to Peggy's, right?

Jeremy: Yeah, I'm like two minutes away from hers

[4 texts omitted]

Jeremy: also theirs\* smh [shaking my head]

Jeremy: I just woke up

Jeremy's account blamed their error on their not being fully awake and, by implication, not being fully in control of their behavior. This is an instance of what Goffman (1971:111) described as an offender claiming "reduced responsibility" due to "reduced competence."



We emphasized in the previous section the gap between the knowledge that would in principle be required to use preferred pronouns and the limited knowledge people actually have. Some forms of self-correction highlight this knowledge gap. In one instance, Goldenberg and her sister were at the sister's apartment with her roommate, John, and Goldenberg's friend Peggy. John was offering Goldenberg's sister a drink and asked her which bottle she preferred:

John: Do you want this [points at his bottle] or what she brought?  
[points at Peggy's bottle] Wait, Peggy, do you go by "she" or by "they"?

Peggy: They.

John: What they brought.

Mac reported a similar story: "I was talking with some of my floor friends from my dorm and I was like 'Oh, have you guys seen Sky lately? Do you know where she is?' And then I was like 'Oh, wait, it's he/they, right?'" Although neither John nor Mac overtly attributed their possible error to a lack of knowledge of the correct pronouns, they alluded to it by asking what the correct pronouns were or, in the second case, asking for confirmation of a candidate correction, and thereby marking the candidate correction as tentative. The appeal to limited knowledge is another way of claiming reduced responsibility for the (possible) error (Scott and Lyman 1968:48).

We noted above that some instances of self-repair are initiated by others, whether verbally (by a verbal sign of misunderstanding, for example) or nonverbally (by a look, in the example given above). In these cases, the repair itself is accomplished by the initial speaker. In other cases, however, repair is not simply initiated but carried out by another speaker. Given the uneven distribution of the relevant knowledge, one might think that such other-corrections would be a common way of addressing and fixing pronoun errors. In fact, other-corrections occur less often than self-corrections. The infrequency of other-corrections is in line with a foundational conversation analysis finding concerning the "preference for self-correction" (Schegloff et al. 1977). "Preference" here refers not to the subjective feelings of participants in the interaction, but to "forms of conduct that are recurrent and institutionalized, and that systematically favor certain interactional outcomes over others" (Clayman 2002:232).

When other-corrections do occur, and when the focal person—the person incorrectly referred to—is present, one might expect the correction to be undertaken by that focal person, as the undisputed authority on the correctness of the pronoun. In fact, other-corrections are rarely done by the focal person or even in the presence of the focal person:

But ironically, nobody's ever corrected me on their pronouns. People have corrected me on other people's pronouns, typically when that person isn't around, because I think it makes the other person uncomfortable or draws a lot attention to it [when the focal person is present]. But if the person is not around, without a doubt one of my friends will notice and immediately correct me. (Mora)

When the focal person is present and chooses not to correct the error, others who know about the error may likewise pass up the opportunity to correct it. They may defer not only to the focal person's authoritative knowledge of the correct pronouns but also to that person's observed disinclination to correct the error.<sup>18</sup>

We did observe one instance of other-correction made by the focal person. Goldenberg was cooking dinner with her friends Joel and Camilo at Camilo's house. At one point Camilo referred to Joel (whom he did not know very well) using "they" pronouns:

Joel: I actually like going by "he" now.

Camilo: Oh, sorry.

Joel: No, it's ok. I change them all the time.

Camilo began his turn with an oh-particle, which, as noted before, communicates that the speaker has undergone a change of state (Heritage 1984). Because Camilo had been under the impression that Joel went by different pronouns, the oh-particle serves as a receipt for the new information and as an acceptance and acknowledgment of the repair. This marks the trouble as resolved and allows for a "mutually ratified exit" (Heritage 1984:318) from the repair. After the oh-particle, Camilo apologized for the mistake but did not account for his error. Instead, Joel produced an account on Camilo's behalf: because Joel changes his pronouns "all the time," Camilo could not have been held responsible for knowing the most recent update. Joel did extra interactional work here to protect Camilo's "face," in Goffman's (1967:5) sense of "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact."<sup>19</sup>

Our respondents reported various instances of other-correction, most of them by persons other than the focal person.

There was one instance where I said "she," and then my coworker that overheard the conversation said "Oh, I think Sol goes by they/them pronouns." And I said "Thank you for the reminder. I did know that."  
(Nicole)

Nicole's coworker's other-correction was prefaced by "I think," which, as Schegloff et al. (1977) suggest, downgrades the correction on a "confidence/uncertainty" scale. Nicole, instead of accounting for her mistake, let the coworker know that she already knew Sol's pronouns, taking responsibility for the error instead of offering an account or excuse. Another workplace instance was similar:

I have a coworker named Norma. We worked together for a while and it wasn't until like six months into us working together that I was let known that I was misgendering him. It wasn't a big deal or anything. I just had referred to him as "her" twice in front of another coworker. And they just let me know, they were like "Oh, by the way, just so you know, Norma goes by he/him." And I was like oh snap, you know? There was a little embarrassment because, you know, am I the only one that didn't know this? (Pedro)

A further instance involved a delayed correction:

I was part of a public debate team and one of the students, Leo, changed his pronouns from “she” to “he.” One of the other students had a specifically really hard time even just being compassionate about it and refused to make any effort to understand it. There was a scale where if you call Leo “she,” you weren’t trying. If you call them “they,” you were kind of trying, you were trying to figure it out. If you call them “he,” you got it down. And he would not even try for “they” or “he,” he would always go by “she.” We would witness several instances occur but we wouldn’t say anything in the moment because of the flow of the interaction. And then later, in a more casual setting, we would be like “Hey, we noticed that earlier you said ‘she.’ Leo’s preferred pronouns are they/them or he/his, please try to use those instead.” Just in a more private way so that he didn’t feel called out or ganged up against. (Nicole)

Nicole’s reference here to the “flow of the interaction” suggests that she and her peers refrained from in-the-moment correction to preserve the progressivity of interaction, and then availed themselves of a later opportunity to remind the erring student of Leo’s pronouns. Because it was done in a different setting altogether, this is not an instance of interactional repair, but it does show accountability for gendering at work. It also displays a concern to preserve the face of the erring student (“so that he didn’t feel called out or ganged up against”) and perhaps a concern to avoid putting Leo on the spot in a potentially awkward or embarrassing way as well.

A final instance, again reported by Nicole and again concerning Leo, likewise does not involve repair as such but similarly involves a mechanism of feedback and accountability, though a more circuitous one:

Sometimes I call Leo by the wrong pronouns and he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t make a big deal out of it. And then later on, it’ll come back up because he will say behind our backs “Oh, Nicole doesn’t care enough about me to actually practice.” And then these people end up being the mediators and just telling me that Leo didn’t like it when I said that. When one of them came to me and a couple of my peers they were like “it made Leo feel like he wasn’t being accepted.”

Here the focal person does say something, not by way of other-correction in the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction, but instead by way of after-the-fact complaint to third parties, who then report the complaint in the course of yet another interaction.

## Conclusion

We have examined emerging practices of pronoun disclosure, discovery, and repair after the procedural turn in pronoun politics, which shifted political attention from

the *substantive* question of *which* pronouns should be used to the *procedural* question of *how* preferred pronouns, whatever they might be, could be effectively made known to others. Drawing on interviews with and observations of students and recent graduates who are committed in principle to using preferred pronouns, we analyze how they go about trying to do so in practice. As we have emphasized throughout, doing so consistently is not easy. The epistemic burden is dauntingly high: there is an unbridgeable gap between the knowledge required in principle to use preferred pronouns and the inevitably imperfect knowledge that pronoun-users are able to muster in practice.

Bracketing normative questions such as whether a preferred pronoun regime is desirable and what procedures and practices *should be* adopted to support such a regime, we have addressed the empirical question of how the procedures and practices that *are* adopted work in practice in contexts of disclosure, discovery, and repair. We acknowledge the limitations of our data, in particular our interview data. Respondents' reports of their practices of disclosure, discovery, and repair are less reliable—and less well suited for analyzing interactional practices—than recordings of naturally occurring interactions. We supplemented our interview data with considerable observational data, but our analyses should be seen as exploratory, pending future work with recorded data. Our data are also limited, of course, to progressive-leaning college-educated young people.

We have given particular attention to two themes: limited knowledge and extended accountability. Proceeding from the observation that the use of preferred pronouns generates a problem in the sociology of everyday knowledge, we have analyzed how the knowledge of preferred pronouns gets disclosed by the individuals concerned, the sole authorized source of knowledge on the matter; how that knowledge gets discovered by pronoun-users and what shortcuts pronoun-users take in the face of the heavy epistemic burden placed on them; how a preference for avoiding interactional risks discourages disclosing and requesting pronouns in informal settings; how the inevitable limits of knowledge shape practices of reference; and how the uneven distribution of that knowledge—uneven across persons but also uneven within persons over time, because knowledge that is accessible at one moment may not be accessible at another—generates practices of repair when the wrong pronouns are used.

The use of preferred pronouns extends the reach of accountability for gender by potentially subjecting every person reference using third-person pronouns to scrutiny for the gendering—and misgendering—that is accomplished through the use of such pronouns. This extended accountability contributes to a heightened reflexivity and self-consciousness in the use of pronouns. It might be thought to contribute to a certain anxiety as well, because the new pronoun regime, given the limits of knowledge just noted, is an engine for the proliferation of errors, and errors are potentially high-stakes affairs, understood as involving not just misspeaking but misgendering, not just referential incorrectness but social inappropriateness. Yet our examination of repair revealed practices that lower the stakes and keep interaction running smoothly. These include a strong preference for self-correction over other-correction (and, in the case of other-correction, for correction by someone other than the focal person); a tendency to avoid accounts when self-correcting or

even to let errors stand rather than correct them, both of which keep interaction from getting sidetracked by focusing on the error or on the pronouns themselves; and the practice of postponing corrections for another occasion, thereby saving the face of the person who has misspoken or avoiding placing the misgendered person in a potentially uncomfortable situation. All of these practices preserve the progressivity of interaction. Given what would appear to be abundant opportunities for derailing interaction under a regime of preferred pronouns, in view of the limits of knowledge, the frequency of error, and the interactional risks of correcting others' pronouns, it is striking how smoothly interaction proceeds, thanks in no small part to the finely adjusted machinery of repair.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Baron (2020:22, 82ff).

<sup>2</sup> For an exhaustive chronological list of proposed alternatives, see Baron (2020:185ff).

<sup>3</sup> The normative idea underlying the procedural turn is that pronouns, like gender identity, should be treated as a domain of self-determination. Initially the case for respecting pronoun preferences rested on the case for respecting gender identity: because preferred pronouns were widely seen as expressing gender identity, respect for gender identity was understood to require the use of pronouns corresponding to that identity. More recently, however, as nonbinary gender identities and pronoun options have proliferated, some trans advocates have decoupled pronouns from gender identity (and from gender presentation), arguing that people are entitled to be referred to by their preferred pronouns regardless of whether those pronouns express their gender identity. In effect, they have reconceptualized pronouns "as their own distinct arena for linguistic self-determination, separate from gender identity" (Zimman 2019:161; see also Nordmarken 2019). For a critique of the preferred pronoun paradigm, see Levin (2018); for a qualified defense, see Lora (2021). For a sustained philosophical argument in favor of the universal use of a gender-neutral pronoun, see Dembroff and Wodak (2018).

As one anonymous reviewer pointed out, treating pronouns as a domain of linguistic self-determination is a genuinely novel, indeed unprecedented practice: "For basically the entire history of pronouns existing in human language, they've functioned as tools for referring to things that mostly exist outside the structure of language. Speakers learned how their languages organized pronominal reference, and then applied linguistic rules to refer to the things they experienced in the world, more or less without issue. What's happening now, in situations like the ones analyzed here, is different. And it's different from the previous move advocated by feminists in the '70s to get rid of the generic 'he,' which was essentially an argument for a more accurate match between language (pronouns) and the world (male and female people). Now individuals are overriding the linguistic rules of how pronominal reference works by choosing a pronoun for themselves, using it as an identity marker, and expecting others to use it when referring to the individual. That's what creates the interactional trouble that requires disclosure, discovery, and repair practices."

<sup>4</sup> Goldenberg kept a notebook on hand throughout the yearlong process of working on the thesis, recording her observations as soon as possible after making them.

<sup>5</sup> For a cognitive psychology perspective on the automaticity of sex/gender categorization, see Jung et al. (2019). On cognitive challenges arising from the automaticity of language use as one of several factors that make shifts to gender-inclusive language difficult, see

Waldendorf (2023). Waldendorf finds surprisingly rapid recent increases in the use of gender-inclusive language (specifically gender-neutral or gender-inclusive nouns) in German news media; her data, however, address changes in written language, where the issue of automaticity is less important.

- 6 On this principle, see Zimman (2019) and Nordmarken (2019).
- 7 On the related but distinct question of disclosure and nondisclosure of gender identity as a form of identity management, see Kade's (2021) study of trans men.
- 8 They may occasionally use one another's third-person pronouns when reporting others' speech.
- 9 See Turkle (2015:22) on the frequently heard observation that "I'd rather text than talk."
- 10 Some digital platforms, to be sure, allow users to tailor the information displayed—including pronouns—to particular occasions and audiences. Thus one can in principle have more than one email signature line and can select the signature line based on the recipient. And if one enters pronouns on Zoom, one can then choose whether to display them in all meetings, in no meetings, or on a meeting-by-meeting basis, by responding to a prompt at the beginning of each meeting.
- 11 We did a Google search for PhD students at a large West Coast public university who have LinkedIn profiles, using the search terms "[university name] PhD student LinkedIn" and then checking the results to see whether the LinkedIn profile in fact indicated that the person was a PhD student at that university. Of the first 100 PhD students with LinkedIn profiles, 36 included pronouns in the profile: 26 listed she/her and 10 he/him. Some of those disclosing these pronouns may have been trans women or trans men. Yet the striking fact that no gender-neutral or nonbinary pronouns were listed is consistent with the hypothesis that disclosure on social media is often a form of allyship.
- 12 On the role of social media infographics in social movements, see Kavian and Salehi (2022).
- 13 <https://www.qualityinteractions.com/blog/why-gender-pronouns-matter-infographic>. The infographic was published by Quality Interactions, which characterizes itself as providing "industry-leading cultural competency training."
- 14 See Zimman (2019) on notion of self-determination and "language of neoliberal selfhood."
- 15 On the use of "they" as a "default" pronoun when preferred pronouns are unknown, see Saguy and Williams (2022:21).
- 16 On repairs in cases of errors that one almost made but did not make, see Jefferson (1974).
- 17 On the tension between intersubjectivity (or mutual understanding) and progressivity, see Heritage (2007).
- 18 On interactants' different "epistemic territories" and correspondingly different "rights and responsibilities to know" particular things, see Heritage (2012:6).
- 19 One respondent reported a much more confrontational instance of other-correction in the context of a meeting between participants in high school student government and administrators. A student who used they/them pronouns repeatedly corrected an administrator for referring to them with "she." Here progressivity was substantially disrupted, and a direct confrontation between the student and the administrator eventually led to the ending of the meeting.



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