

Why inviting pronouns is inclusive and trans-affirming, and how to do it in a Self-led way

I have decided to write down some of my thoughts about how we invite (or don't invite) participants to give their pronouns on IFS trainings and in other IFS spaces. The reason I'm putting it writing is because some of my parts can easily get activated about this topic, and I can often get caught in a polarization of some outspoken activist parts trying to advocate for my community versus compliant parts who try to avoid conflict by backing down even if I'm not happy with the responses I'm getting.

By writing it down, the hope is that I can unblend from this polarization and put my views on this emotive topic across in a way that is Self-led, and therefore hopefully easy for others to take in from a place of open receptivity rather than defensiveness. I may also choose to share this as a blog post or article somewhere once it's written, as my sense is that many cis people who identify as allies, still don't fully understand why pronouns are such a hot topic for trans and nonbinary folk.

My suggestion/request for IFS UK

I believe that we can make IFS trainings a more inclusive and safer space for trans and non-binary people by normalising the invitation for pronouns in introductions and on name badges/Zoom screen-names.

Trainers and other staff-members can model this by giving their pronouns in intros and including them on their badges/Zoom names if they feel comfortable doing this.

I do however want to stress that I'm asking you to *invite* pronouns, not demand them. It definitely needs to be something that is optional. Cece Sykes' 9th C of Self is choice, and choice here is important for everyone.

I believe this can be done in a self-led and relaxed way if we have done our work with our own parts first. For example...

At the signing in table:

"Welcome to the training, please write your name on one of these badges and you can also add your pronouns if you like."

For introductions in an in-person training:

"When you introduce yourself, please tell us: your name, your pronouns if you wish, where you're from and anything about you that it feels important to share"

On day one of an online training:

“If you like, you can add your pronouns to your screen name.”

I would like this to be adopted as policy on every training

But why do pronouns even matter?

For many trans people (especially early in transition) and for *all* nonbinary people it is usually necessary to give our pronouns in order to be gendered correctly.

We live in a world where people make assumptions about gender based on our bodies, our voices, and our presentation. We are all socialised to categorize people in a very binary way. Unless you are someone who has spent a lot of time within the queer and trans community, you are unlikely to use gender neutral pronouns as a default. Thus anyone who is nonbinary, genderqueer, or agender and who uses they/them or other gender neutral pronouns will always get misgendered by anyone they come into contact with.

If you're cisgender (i.e. you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth), you're probably not aware of how often people refer to you using your pronouns, or refer to you using gendered language in your presence. And if you're trans, having someone refer to you using the wrong pronoun, or using gendered language that doesn't apply to you, it feels uncomfortable at best and devastating at worst.

Speaking from personal experience, when I first came out as trans it was approximately two years before I reliably got read as male. During that time, if I didn't tell people my pronouns I would either get misgendered automatically, or would see the other person frantically scrutinising me trying to figure out which gender box to put me in. Neither of these alternatives helped me to feel safe or comfortable around other people. For this reason some of my protective parts tried to keep me from interacting with others as much as possible.

On my IFS level 1 training I was expecting pronoun invitations to be the norm because I'd seen this happen on an US-based IFS foundation training that I did online. When there was no pronoun invitation and no modelling of pronouns from the trainer or the staff team, I was really disappointed. This made me feel much less welcome and safe than I otherwise could have done, such that I didn't talk about my gender history at all for the first few days of the training. When I don't feel able to talk about my gender history, I can't connect with people - because being trans is a central part of my identity and my life story.

This is where my trans advocacy journey began. Some wonderful PAs on that training helped me to unblend from an angry 4 year old activist part who was protecting a vulnerable exile of the same age who felt invisible and erased by being pushed into a gendered role at pre-school. They passed my feedback onto the lead trainer, who addressed this. For the rest of the training

pronouns were invited, and most of the people in my cohort chose to add their pronouns to their badges. My 4 year old parts were thrilled by this show of solidarity and support.

But why bother to invite pronouns for everyone?

Please take a moment to consider this:

Not having to give your pronouns in order to be gendered correctly is a privilege.

Trans and nonbinary people are often the only person in the room who needs to give their pronouns in order to be gendered correctly. This can feel incredibly othering and isolating.

Making the invitation for pronouns to the group as a whole helps to normalise the need for clarity around pronouns. When we invite people to share their pronouns, it indicates an intention not to assume what people's pronouns are unless we check, or are told explicitly. Inviting pronouns creates an inclusive culture that feels safer for trans and nonbinary folk. This sense of safety makes it easier for trans folk to connect and learn in these spaces, because some of their parts are able to relax more than they otherwise might.

But what if people get upset about it?

Not everyone wants to give their pronouns and that's okay.

And unfortunately some people may get upset about it, because it's still not part of our culture and cis people sometimes don't understand why pronouns are being invited. This is understandable, because why would you get it if being misgendered isn't something that ever happens to you? But in my experience a lot of parts can get activated in cis people around inviting pronouns to be shared.

It's also important to note that some trans and NB folk may also not wish to give their pronouns for a variety of reasons depending on the situation, where they are in transition, and whether giving pronouns would potentially out them as transgender in a situation where they might prefer not to disclose this.

But, and this feels like the crux of the issue for my system:

If we don't invite pronouns in order to avoid conflict with cisgender people, we are prioritising the comfort of cis people over trans people.

Is it right to prioritise the privileged majority's feelings over the safety and comfort of a marginalised group? It doesn't feel okay to me, and it also feels like a parts-led decision rather than a self-led one.

Holding choice as central means we need to honour the autonomy of everyone. We all have a choice about whether we share our pronouns or not, and creating safety includes making space for parts who respond negatively to the invitation. But if we don't make the invitation, then we are making the space less safe for those without the privilege.

If you are an IFS trainer or staff team member and have protective parts who make you reluctant to invite pronouns because of the potential reactions from cis people, then perhaps this is a trailhead for you to explore.

Likewise, if you're a cis person who considers themselves to be a trans ally and you feel a strong negative reaction to being invited (not told) to give your pronouns, then again, perhaps there is some work for you to do in your own system.

A Self-led solution

We invite people to give their pronouns.

We make it very clear that it's optional.

We model it if we feel comfortable to do so.

We respond in a Self-led way to anyone who has a parts-led reaction to being invited to give their pronouns.

For example: *"We do this because it helps to make the space more inclusive and safe for trans and nonbinary people."*

We will never be able to please everyone (some of my parts hate the truth of this) and creating a new culture around pronouns might be uncomfortable in the short term. But in the long run it will help to make the IFS community a more inclusive space - and surely that has to be a good thing?

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