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BROWN SCHOOL

Use of Singular *They* in Academic Writing and Communications: Background and Recommendations for the Brown School

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Nature of the Problem

As gender and transgender issues have gained increasing attention in recent years, questions about how academic writing and communications reflect a range of gender identities and are inclusive of transgender people are also being raised. Most notably, the use of male and female pronouns (*he/him/his*, *she/her/hers*) is being challenged, and many activists argue for the acceptance and use of *they* as an epicene—a gender-neutral singular pronoun (Clemens, 2016; Hollandback, 2016). Binary gendered pronouns (*he/she*) impose a binary view of gender that does not accord with the concept of the gender spectrum (Kilman, 2013), can cause psychological harm (Hidalgo, 2013), exceptionalizes trans identities, and reinscribes difference (Wooley, 2015, p. 376, 381). The gender spectrum has been accepted in neurology (Kranz, 2014), biology (Ainsworth, 2015), social work (Austin, 2016), psychology (American Psychological Association, 2015), psychiatry (Lim, 2015, p. 399), and women’s and gender studies. Accepting the use of singular *they* in academic and professional writing is the responsible choice for social work and public health programs because it recognizes the gender spectrum and aligns with the National Association of Social Workers’ (2008) core value of the “dignity and worth of the person” and the principle of treating “each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.”

Opposition to the use of singular *they* has been based on the notion that it is grammatically incorrect. However, from Middle English to Modern English, it was “the universal English pronoun for singular and plural, masculine and feminine” (Peck, 2010, p. 11) in common use by authors such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, the writers of the King James Bible, Jane Austen, Walt Whitman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and George Orwell. The generic *he* was imposed on the English language by Anne Fisher, a feminist grammarian and schoolteacher, in *A New Grammar* (1745), who created a gender problem in trying to solve a number problem (O’Connor & Kellerman, 2009), and it spread because of the androcentrism of prescriptive grammarians (Bodine, 1975).

Institutional Responses

Many governmental, academic, and journalistic organizations have responded to this issue by adopting the use of singular *they*: the Government of Ottawa and the Canadian Department of Justice (2015), a leading Australian legal style guide (Federation Press, 2014), *The Washington Post* (Mullen, 2015), the American Dialect Society (2015), Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* (O’Connor & Kellerman, 2009), *The Baltimore Sun* (McIntyre, 2015), *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (2016), the *Oxford English Dictionary* [c. 2016], Grammarly (2016), Harvard University as an option for students’ preferred pronouns, the American Psychological Association in the context of gender diversity (Lee, 2016), and many other leading authorities on contemporary English usage. Such usage authorities argue that singular *they* is grammatical, of long standing use, common, used by leading authors, becoming accepted, and likely the best solution for the problem of English’s lack of a formal epicene.

Recommendations for the Brown School

We recommend that Brown School accept and adopt, when possible, the use of singular *they* by students in course papers and other documents and in official communications. There is no comparable substitute. Pronouns such as *e*, *hu*, *per*, *thon*, *yo*, and *ze* have been proposed since at least 1850, but all have failed to find popular purchase, though the need for an epicene was declared to be “desperate, urgent, [and] imperative” in *The Atlantic* back in 1878 (Baron, 2010). Creating, choosing, or imposing an epicene has not worked yet, despite many efforts. But singular *they* has been in common use since the 14th century, and as linguist Geoffrey Numberg (2016) put it, “Everyone Uses Singular ‘They,’ Whether They Realize It Or Not.” Using *he* or *she* reinforces androcentrism and is not a viable substitute for an epicene (Gastil, 1990). Singular *they* is not cognitively problematic for nonreferential antecedents (e.g. *everyone*, *someone*) and is processed more quickly for indefinite antecedents than *he* or *she* (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997).

Further, we recommend the adoption and acceptance of *themself* as the singular reflexive pronoun instead of the plural *themselves* to accompany singular *they*. *Themself* is a word and was the standard non-gendered singular reflexive pronoun until around 1540 (Soanes, 2013), and it never entirely disappeared. Although *themself* is not as widely accepted as singular *they*, it is moving into creative and journalistic writing (Cary, 2014), particularly when referring to someone whose preferred pronoun is *they* (“Themself,” 2016). It is logical to maintain number consistency in pronouns, so *themself* as singular makes more sense than *themselves*, which is plural, as the reflexive pronoun for singular *they* as it increases the clarity of the number.

Because many readers will question the use of singular *they* in all its forms, we recommend that writers add a footnote upon first use in a document along these lines:

In this paper I use singular *they*, *their*, and *themselves* to recognize the concept of the gender spectrum in accordance with the American Psychological Association's (2015) "Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People."

And add an appropriate reference:

American Psychological Association. (2015). Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people. *American Psychologist*, 70, 832–864. doi:10.1037/a0039906

Note: Wikipedia also offers a useful introduction to the topic.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they

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