

9 April 2019

An open letter to the Max Planck Society

-Advance Copy-

The PhDnet Equal Opportunity Working Group is currently soliciting individual endorsements for this letter. It was provided to a group of central MPS administrators in mid-April, prior to a series of meetings in Munich about LGBTQ+ inclusion. After central administrators had an opportunity to read and endorse it, the letter and endorsement solicitation is now being broadly distributed to the MPS.

If you would like to add your name, email nonbinary@mpi-muelheim.mpg.de with your name/title, personal pronoun, position, and institute. You may also endorse anonymously or with any subset of this information.

Dear Max Planck Society,

We, the undersigned members of the Max Planck Society (MPS), are writing to politely but firmly request that the MPS recognize the existence, validity and right to an inclusive work environment of nonbinary people—those who do not self-identify as men or women. In this letter, we will offer a brief explanation of gender identity, demonstrate that inclusion of nonbinary identity is already well-underway within academia, and suggest the first steps to be taken by the MPS in achieving nonbinary inclusion.

Nonbinary Identity and Language

A nonbinary person can be defined quite simply: someone who is neither a man nor a woman. But to flesh out this definition, we must first establish concepts of gender and reproductive traits and the language of personal identity. (We write specifically about the English language; we do not take any position on the correspondence of these concepts to, for example, “Geschlecht.”)

Gender is a socio-psychological construction which may include traits of personality, psychology, and physical presentation such as clothing, as well as modes of interaction with society. A person’s gender is *how they feel and think about themselves*, and is completely *self-defined*. Reproductive traits are physical features of a body related to sexual reproduction, sometimes denoted collectively as a ‘biological sex.’ The words ‘man’ and ‘woman’, ‘he’ and ‘she,’ refer to gender, not reproductive traits. A person of any gender may have any combination of reproductive traits. For example, a transgender man is simply a man who was not assigned a male biological sex at birth. His self-identification as a man is precisely

what defines him as such and this identity does not require any external validation. The statement, “he identifies as a man,” is unnecessarily complicated (and to some, connotes an invalidating skepticism); one should simply write, “he is a man.”

A nonbinary person is neither a man nor a woman: they may have a gender that is a mixture of masculine and feminine or some third gender which is not describable in these terms, or they may be agender (not possessing any gender at all). As with men and women, nonbinary people may have any combination of reproductive traits. In the words of Robin Dembroff, “having an intersex condition is neither sufficient nor necessary for being nonbinary. The majority of nonbinary individuals do not have an intersex condition, nor do they take themselves to.” (The ‘d’ or ‘divers’ designation recently introduced in Germany is not an example of nonbinary acceptance, as it is defined by a medical evaluation of intersex reproductive traits, rather than anything related to gender.)

Nonbinary people often use pronouns which do not impose a binary gender. In English, we are fortunate to have a grammatically-established, non-gendered singular pronoun: the singular ‘they’ (see Appendix I).

I went to my doctor and they prescribed antibiotics.

Alex is a good cook; yesterday they made risotto.

“Everybody has their failing.” [Jane Austen]

“Now nobody does anything well that they cannot help doing.” [John Ruskin]

Despite this history and present usage, in certain contexts, some people find it difficult or awkward to use singular they. When one has previously known a particular person by a binary pronoun, it may take some time and effort to switch. This is okay, and the effort is worthwhile. Having coworkers and friends who use gender-appropriate language can be a powerfully affirming experience, while constant imposition of binary, misgendering language is emotionally taxing. Some of the undersigned, having come from more inclusive institutions, have felt isolation and invalidation in the MPS.

Nonbinary Identities Are Gaining Acceptance

Many institutions, organizations and governments have already taken significant steps towards accepting and including nonbinary people. See Appendix II for a partial list of supportive academic institutions.

The most prestigious universities in the United States, including Harvard, Yale, Stanford and the University of California, have adopted policies which allow self-identified community members to specify ‘nonbinary’ or ‘other’ as their gender

on internal documents, and are adopting cultures where singular ‘they’ pronouns are normalized. Ten states have adopted a nonbinary option for official identification (identification is issued by state governments in the US), available to anyone who self-identifies as nonbinary. This has compelled businesses which rely on government identification, such as airlines, to begin accommodating nonbinary gender as well.

In the UK, where formal titles are more widely used, the gender-neutral ‘Mx.’ is widely accepted in academic, governmental and financial institutions. For example, the University of Oxford “has amended its staff and student systems so that individuals can choose to be addressed by the title ‘Mx.’” As in the United States, many nonbinary people use the pronoun ‘they.’

Steps to Make the MPS a More Inclusive Institution

There are two categories of steps which would make the MPS a more inclusive place for nonbinary people: direct changes to administrative procedure and educational initiatives to improve workplace culture. We hope the following points will begin a practical dialog between central administration and the trans and nonbinary community of the MPS.

The first change to administration would be to include an option for ‘nonbinary’ or ‘other’ on any forms or databases which record gender. This must be self-identified, and not based on any government documents or medical diagnosis. In general, the term ‘gender’ must be used in a self-defined fashion, and not as a synonym for reproductive traits. If the ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ on someone’s official identification is required, this should be requested specifically, e.g. “sex or gender in the passport.” This will avoid confusion between governments with different levels of gender acceptance. (For example, US passports are only issuable with the sex assigned at birth and are not changed for state-recognized transgender people.) As the process of lying about one’s gender can be alienating, and as these forms and databases should be limited in number, we request this change be prioritized.

Other documents should be inclusive of all gender-binary and nonbinary people. While ‘he-or-she’ phrasing is some improvement over the old generic masculine, a contract that includes, “the researcher must keep his or her password secret,” does not include researchers who are neither ‘him’ nor ‘her.’ One should write, “the researcher must keep their password secret.” As this problem applies to many existing documents, we do not expect it to be solved quickly, but we request an official policy of using gender-neutral, nonbinary-inclusive language in all *new* documents.

While we believe uncompromisingly in the importance of nonbinary inclusion, we also recognize that these concepts are unfamiliar to some people and that significant effort will be required to establish the necessary conceptual and linguistic understanding. The MPS is a diverse institution including researchers from all over the world, and the translation of concepts such as ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ may be convoluted. But the project of meaningful inclusion is important: to feel one is part of a safe and inclusive community, one must be not merely tolerated, but understood by that community. We ask that the MPS work with nonbinary MPS members to develop educational materials, such as onboarding trainings and pamphlets, to be distributed to the institutes with the benefit of central administration approval. Such materials should establish the basic idea of self-defined gender and the imperative to respect the gender identities of all people.

In Conclusion

We, the undersigned, believe that, in order to foster a work environment that is inclusive to all, the Max Planck Society must recognize and accept nonbinary people, both formally and in workplace culture.

Sincerely,

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Julian D. Rolfes, no pronoun preference | doctoral candidate, MPI for Coal Research
Erica McGale, they | doctoral candidate, MPI for Chemical Ecology

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*If you would like to add your name, email nonbinary@mpi-muelheim.mpg.de with
your name/title, personal pronoun, position, and institute. You may also endorse
anonymously or with any subset of this information.*

Appendix I: Further Reading

Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive | NCTE

An overview of nonbinary identity from the National Center for Transgender Equality in the United States

www.transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-non-binary-people-how-to-be-respectful-and-supportive

Resources | Gender Identity Research & Education Society

A collection of educational and practical resources for gender-nonconforming people in the UK

www.gires.org.uk/resources/

Trans Awareness | Equality, diversity and inclusion, Imperial College London

A set of administrative guidelines for trans and nonbinary inclusion; Section 8 of the Trans Staff Policy provides exemplary pronoun guidelines.

www.imperial.ac.uk/equality/support-for-staff/resources/trans-awareness/

Gender-neutral titles | The Equality & Diversity Unit, University of Oxford

A brief explanation of gender-neutral titles in the UK and at the University of Oxford

www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/transgender/gender-neutraltitles

Singular ‘They’ | Editors, Merriam-Webster English Dictionary

Editors of the oldest American English dictionary describe the use of singular ‘they,’ both for persons of contextually-undefined gender and nonbinary people.

www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they

A brief history of singular ‘they’ | Denis Baron, Oxford English Dictionary

Baron, professor of English and linguistics at the University of Illinois, lays out the history of ‘they’ as a pronoun referring to a single person.

public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they

Why be Nonbinary? | Robin Dembroff, Aeon

Dembroff, assistant professor of philosophy at Yale, deconstructs gender and describes the liberatory potential of “[embracing] an ontological space outside the gender binary.”

aeon.co/essays/nonbinary-identity-is-a-radical-stance-against-gender-segregation

Appendix II: Partial List of Academic Institutions with Nonbinary-Inclusive Policies

Harvard University
Yale University
University of California
Stanford University
California Institute of Technology
University of Chicago
Reed College
Cornell University
Princeton University
University of Michigan
Carleton College
University of Wisconsin
Amherst College
University of Vermont

University of Oxford
Imperial College London
London School of Economics
University of Exeter
University College London
Edinburgh University
Durham University
University of Warwick