Towards the Inclusion of Trans* Identities: The Language of Gender Identity in Postsecondary Student Documentation

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Studies show that the number of trans* students pursuing postsecondary education is rising (Beemyn, 2003; McKinney, 2005). However, there are few publications which address this fact in relation to findings that place trans* students at a considerably higher risk of experiencing physical violence and other forms of discrimination in comparison to their cisgender peers (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). The university is, like most social institutions, built on a heteronormative, binarist system which is, in part, upheld through gendered language. Many aspects of the institution serve to reinforce the gender binary, from identification cards to housing arrangements. This system does little to acknowledge the existence of trans* students, whose bodies and identities are subsequently silenced through the use of gendered language and space. I explored one aspect of this foundational problem by analyzing a selection of application and registration materials from postsecondary institutions across Canada. These observations can be used to inform the creation of inclusive documentation and destabilize systemic maintenance of the gender binary within the institution. I compared the gender options, name options, and pronoun options on application forms in order to ascertain whether or not these materials were inclusive of trans* identities or showed acknowledgement of the concept of gender identity.

In my analysis I encountered three distinct modes of asking a student's gender on application materials. The most prevalent mode instructed students to select from two binary options categorized as 'M or F', or 'Male or Female'. There were a few institutions that left room for identification outside of the gender binary. This was accomplished by adding a third category to choose from, which is designated as either 'Undeclared' or 'Other' or providing an empty box entitled 'Gender' in which students could self-identify as they saw fit. Following the gender query, each application form requested the student's first and last legal names. Many of these schools had the additional option of providing a former legal last name. Applications that allow solely for a student's legal name prohibit the student from including their preferred name unless they have completed a legal name change. This often means that a student is registered under a gendered name that may not correspond to their gender identity. The addition of 'Preferred Name' or 'Commonly Used Name' categories allowed students to record an alternate forename. The inclusion of an alternate name category is extremely important for trans* and non-binary students, especially those who have not undergone a legal name change. Conversely, if an individual has completed a legal name change, it is possible that necessary application materials or documentation may be in their prior legal name as assigned at birth. If a student changes their name following high school graduation, their secondary school transcripts will reflect their birth name and not their legal name. All application forms should include a section where students can list their previous name in full, without requiring the student to take extra measures to explain their situation and potentially 'out' themselves unnecessarily. This section could be integrated with questions pertaining to previous legal surnames. Of the documents analyzed, none included all three of these options.

An additional linguistic element that would allow students to better express themselves and their identity on application forms is pronouns. While few applications took into consideration gender identities outside of the traditional male/female options, those that included a space for self-definition or the category 'other' did not address the question of pronouns. When recognizing an individual's gender identity, it is important to acknowledge that this identity may be complex and not self-explanatory. By allowing identification outside of the binary, this means that an individual's pronouns may also exist outside of the male/female dichotomy. To acknowledge one aspect of identity is important but the institution must show dedication to acknowledging this identity as a whole. In order to ensure a student's identity is fully recognized and respected, I would argue that a preferred pronoun question should be posed alongside the gender section.

The documentation of student identity begins with application forms and extends much further. If a student is accepted, the information collected from the application form is generally sufficient for enrolment, and the institution offers no further opportunity to specify how they desire to be addressed. Students are assigned a student number, a university email account, and an identification card. After registering for classes, their name is placed on appropriate class lists, and often in a database with contact information for current students. University email accounts often include a first name or initial. If this identification does not correspond with the student's preferred name, any communication using this account risks outing them or raising questions that may be uncomfortable. For most students within institutions that recognize their preferred name, the

majority of documentation will remain under their birth name until they acquire a legal name change. This creates a distressing situation where some records reflect their true identity and some do not, leaving the student in charge of their own documentation. In institutions which do not recognize an individual's identity in any official way, the situation is even more disconcerting as they try to find ways to navigate school administration, services, and classes in the safest and most discreet manner possible. In both situations, the student is often left to continually explain themselves, educate administrative and academic staff, and advocate for themselves (McKinney, 2005; Namaste, 2000).

One of the main critiques I put forth of the bigender options on applications, documentation, and the institution's administrative system lies in the students' inability to self-identify using personal terms and preferred language. From a feminist poststructural perspective, one acknowledges that language is not neutral, but rather serves an important role in one's comprehension of reality, as well as one's ability to exert power (Weedon, 1996). If language provides a means of communicating reality, pre-set terminology that dictates identity effectively limits one's ability to express their reality, identity, and self to the world around them. Therefore, if we argue that language constitutes reality instead of being neutral ground through which reality passes, trans* identities and bodies and their intelligibility are created through language. Scholar Linnell Secomb argues that the immeasurable authority of language must not be overlooked, nor taken lightly, as "words are complex entities that may simultaneously subjugate and injure while also inaugurating the subject" (2008, p. 152). If language is productive, we must then question who produces this language.

Queer and trans* communities are unique in that they are known to create their own terminology, introducing terms such as genderqueer, pangender, and genderfluid. One might regard this language to be in a steady state of evolution as terms are created, negotiated, and reclaimed. These neologisms lack stability and inherent meaning outside of their community and act as sites of social and political conflict (Rosenberg, 2004). Even the words 'other' or 'undeclared', a potential third choice aside from the original male and female boxes, may be viewed as politically charged. 'Other' may be seen to imply that one either falls outside of what society recognizes as 'normal', or even that they are not certain of their identity. To trans* individuals, these options may feel delegitimizing or alienating. I argue against adding explicit terminology to application forms and documentation as it may force an individual to share more than that which they feel comfortable. To identify as transgender may provoke questions about if or when the individual will 'complete' their transition, as the historically dominant term transsexual implies one has undergone sexual reassignment surgery. Even within trans* communities there is a great deal of controversy over the legitimacy of experience and identities (Hardie, 2006).

Further, self-identification would be especially effective in addressing language and cultural barriers and exclusions. While my research examined only English and French applications, I would argue that predetermined categories aside from male and female, such as undeclared or other, are potentially confusing concepts for those whose native tongue is other than English, specifically international students. This further supports the idea of using an open box that allows the student to articulate their identity without automatically classifying them as 'other'. By denying the opportunity to self-identify and use one's preferred or

culturally specific terminology, students are inhibited from exercising their power and making themselves and their identities intelligible to the institution and those within it.

For any marginalized group, linguistic and bodily agency can facilitate the creation of new meaning and new spaces and may act as a method of overcoming perpetual silence and erasure, avoiding the potential loss of self. However, it can be difficult to express one's identity within the structure of the institution, illuminating the importance of enabling self-identification and protecting those identities (Cixous, 2000 ; Spivak, 1988). One of the most important revisions necessary for creating a safe and inclusive postsecondary environment is the use of language. Whether it be on a university website, in promotional materials, or on the student application itself, language constitutes much of a student's 'first impression' of any institution. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed argues that documents form the foundation of organizations such as universities as they dictate the shape and structure of the organization and allow for effective communication (2007). By paying particular attention to the use of gendered language and acknowledging its inherent binarism, these materials can be reviewed to ensure they are inclusive of all prospective students and do not inadvertently render trans* students linguistically invisible.

While institutions often face limitations through their administrative systems which may be set up to acknowledge only 'male' and 'female' identities, this does not preclude the possibility of replacing binary gender boxes with a more inclusive option on both physical and online application documents. I would recommend the use of an empty box marked 'gender', allowing the student to self-identity in a way in which they feel

comfortable. This allows students to disclose as much or as little as they choose, permits the use of cultural terms, and leaves space for new terminology as it is created. Alongside this box, I recommend adding a pronoun question that allows students to write in their personal pronoun. In order to show students that these boxes are meant to be inclusive and to encourage self-definition, a short example may be appropriate. After 'Preferred Pronouns', the form could include "e.g. he, she, they, or ze" in fine print. These are changes that can be made relatively quickly and would be a simple first step in creating an inclusive environment. The internal administrative system would benefit from this change as well, and while it may take extra time and money, having a synchronous system that recognizes gender identity, preferred names, legal names, and pronouns would be an excellent goal.

Expressing one's authentic identity can be particularly difficult within the confines of educational institutions. This is a time when a student should be able to focus on their studies and becoming part of the postsecondary community instead of taking on the role of an activist and educator, required to advocate for their voice to be heard and their rights to be protected. Trans* students should be permitted to self-define and self-identify within any social institution and have their identities acknowledged, respected, and protected. These linguistic revisions are a first step towards the inclusion of trans* identities in Canadian postsecondary institutions.

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