

On My Mind: Pronouns, gender identity, and our community



Editor's note: This is a discussion put together by aspiring psychology student Truda Silberstein and edited by Truda Silberstein, Charles Silberstein, and Laura Roosevelt.

Identity

Charles (he/him)

My name is Charles Silberstein. A part of me recoils at the idea of using pronouns when identifying myself. I think of myself as a man, but pointing out that I use the pronouns “he, him” with every email or introduction feels like over-simplifying who I am. I don’t like labeling myself as he/him anymore than I would label myself outside of professional encounters as “Doctor” or by my religion or by what schools I went to.

However, one of the big problems in our society, regardless of where you fall on the political spectrum, is that we often fail to treat others with kindness and respect. As a physician and psychotherapist, I view it as particularly important to recognize my patients as they see themselves, and honor their requests to use the pronouns they feel are appropriate for them.

In many areas, we all fall somewhere along a spectrum. This YouTube video does a wonderful job of explaining spectrums: Explaining ‘Spectrums’: The Many Levels of Identity, Sexuality, Even Political Affiliation | Advocate.com. The gist is that almost no one is 100 percent male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, monogamous or polyamorous. Understanding and expressing our true selves is central to our mental health and that of our children, patients, and neighbors.

Truda (They/Them)

I’m Truda Silberstein. I use they/them pronouns. I grew up here on the Island. Charles is my father. I’ve been working at Community Services as a therapeutic mentor for the last year, and also at Scottish Bakehouse, which funnily feels also relevant.

Kae (They/Them)

Queerest place on Martha's Vineyard.

Truda

Totally. And it's funny because If you'd asked me for my pronouns six months ago, I'd have responded with something like, "She/her/they/them... uh, I don't know. Whatever you want." But the more I accept the idea of not being she/her, the better I feel. Gender is the set of societal constructs and norms that are associated with one's genitalia, but it's also just a feeling that we each have about who we are. A lot of attention is being given to it now because so many people are at least questioning the idea that gender must be an either/or thing and conform to what's assigned to us at birth. Thinking of myself as female doesn't feel right in my body, but thinking of myself as no gender does. I can stand up straighter. It feels like I go from retreating inward, from being stuck in a role of femininity, to feeling like a truer version of myself. It's partially about what people see in me and think of me, but it's also just about who I allow myself to be.

It feels important for people to understand that the queer and gender nonconforming community exists here on the Vineyard, and it also feels affirming to me to be open about who I am.

Kae

My name is Kae Vecchia-Zeitz. I use they/them pronouns. I've never felt like a girl or a woman. I convinced myself for a long time that that's what I had to be because I wanted to please other people. For a long time I just didn't want to deal with it, because that would mean letting down people's perceptions of me (especially my parents' perceptions, and those of people in certain work environments or school, places like that) and letting go of the ease and privilege of being part of a group that doesn't face disapproval and discrimination.

It's been incredibly freeing, though, to be perceived how I want to be perceived, especially in a community like Martha's Vineyard where there are narratives told about you from a very young age that will travel with you throughout your entire life. I've found that identifying as gender nonconforming (i.e., not identifying with the gender assigned to me at birth) has enabled me to break down the boundaries and barriers to connection with myself, and also with other people. It's allowed me to love myself in a way that I didn't know I was capable of.

There are so many people here, especially kids, who are struggling with gender identity and self love. A lot of kids don't have parents like I did, who are incredibly supportive and open, who struggle with it but want to learn. I want kids on this Island to know that it is okay to be whoever you want to be, any gender.

I've always seen myself as both and neither a girl or boy. Sometimes I revel in my femininity. Being able to accept myself for my entire gender spectrum has allowed me to actually be okay with feeling my feminine parts. But I took a lot of pride in how masculine I was as a child. It felt safe to me. I often bonded better with boys. Sometimes I feel a lot more like a boy than a girl. Sometimes people who transition away from their assigned gender still have both feminine and masculine parts. There's a push to pick a side, but I don't want to pick. Maybe one day that will change, but for right now, I don't want to.

Hanno (they/them/he/him/she/her)

I'm Hanno Webster. My pronouns change daily. I think it's because I don't want to be pigeonholed. There's so much weight to certain pronouns, and others' perception of you is affected by that. I really hate that moment where people are reading you and applying your pronouns to you, and you can see their calculations in their eyes. Don't force me into a label of your making, let me show myself to you. I feel relatively fluid, not in a day-to-day way, but more in the trajectory of my life. Once I give my pronouns to someone, it feels like I'm not allowed to change them again because that means to other people that I'm unstable with who I am, like I don't know myself. My answer will also change based

on how extroverted I'm feeling, how much attention I'm willing to accept, and what I want to deal with on that day. When I was a kid, I was such a tomboy. There were always whispers behind my back. My older cousin came out when I was 12, and after that there was chatter within the family about me, people wondering, "Is Hanno going to also be gay?" I hated that. And I remember thinking, "Whatever happens, I won't be like that because I don't want people talking about me." I didn't come out of the closet, at least with my sexuality, until I graduated high school and had a girlfriend. I didn't want to deal with all the things that come with being seen. Once I got top surgery, though, I finally started to feel like myself. I'm able to see myself a little bit more clearly now that weight has been lifted. The same feeling has come from taking T (testosterone).

It all comes down to being seen. I'd like a little bit more freedom for all of us to be allowed to be different. Sometimes we, as an Island, don't think we have a problem with prejudice about gender fluidity because we don't see or experience violence, but there is aggression, whether micro or macro.

Expectations

Truda

It's violent here, just maybe not as overtly violent.

Hanno

It's not so much physical violence. It's mostly a different kind of violence: it's erasure. I don't remember any conversations in school or my childhood about queerness — about being different in terms of your sexuality or gender identity. None. We need to be having these conversations now, so that it's normalized and so that kids don't have to go through this trauma of feeling like they have to break out of something.

Charles

So it's violent in that it's not letting you be you. It's saying you're not allowed to express yourself the way you want to, and that feels aggressive and hostile.

Hanno

Yes. Sometimes the aggression is overt. Last night I was at a bar in Oak Bluffs with friends, and the bouncer tried to make me leave. He said the bar was closing, but the bartender was still pouring drinks for other people. Even after the bartender came to my defense, the bouncer insisted I had to go. I hadn't done anything wrong; I guess he just didn't like the way I looked.

Kae

There is a queer community here but it feels pretty subtle and often gets overpowered. Hanno and I went to queer prom last year, and it was the first time ever on Martha's Vineyard that I was surrounded by what seemed to be all queer people in one room. It would be great if we could cultivate that feeling of safety and joy more broadly here.

Charles

I have heard several people in both the gay and straight communities who disdain people who call themselves bisexual. There's the attitude that "you're just gay and in denial or ashamed of it, so you're calling yourself bisexual."

Hanno

The same is true with nonbinary people (people who don't identify as either male or female). There's the idea that if you're not one or the other, you're not real.

Kae

Or if I'm dating a man, then I must actually be a woman and must actually be straight. People say, "You're not bi, you're dating a man."

Hanno

People expect that I'm going to fully transition. There's this attitude that I have to have all of the surgery to become a man, as if that is the destination. But no, I have arrived. Here I am.

Truda

And also nobody's ever going to arrive.

Hanno

True. I think we're all afraid of being imposters. When I was going through the process to have my top surgery, I wasn't on T at the time. I felt like I wasn't trans enough or I wasn't queer enough. I felt like by using genderqueer labels, I was taking something that was not mine to take.

Truda

It must be hard, once you pass a threshold of passing as another binary gender, that people expect you to conform totally to that one. Any feminine quality confuses people because they might see you exclusively as a boy.

Hanno

After my surgery the doctor handed me this certificate stating that I could now legally change my gender to "male." But that wasn't something I asked for. It was weird, like "My tits are gone, so I guess I'm a boy now? I guess all of that womanhood was just dangling right on me the whole time, and now it's gone." My boss says I look taller. My shoulders have gone out. My posture has gotten better. But does all that make me a man?

The Pandemic and Gender Identity

Truda

I really only started thinking about my gender last spring. I know a lot of people who experienced that in the pandemic. Being isolated meant that people stopped having to conform to roles imposed by others, and had the time and freedom to think about who they truly are.

Hanno

I started taking testosterone during lockdown, and when I could start leaving the house, people I hadn't seen in a while did doubletakes. It was good to have the privacy to go through most of the changes outside of the public gaze.

Truda

It took a long time for the parts of me that were a female mask (my voice, how I dressed, how I laughed, how I interacted with people, etc.) to fall away. Being a girl had helped me feel safe. Then, during lockdown, I noticed that my voice was lower... that I didn't have to laugh as much, to be smiling all the time, to dress to look cute to certain people. None of that really felt like me. It was put on for other people. It was such a relief to get back here and find people like Kae, who were willing to see me as I now saw myself.

But the response to this version of myself from most people here was more like confusion and denial, and it did push me back into the other direction. For example, I know I dressed more feminine at Community Services.

Pronouns

Charles

It is hard for me and a lot of other people to get the grammar right. Using “them” or “they” to refer to an individual is particularly challenging. How does it feel when people refer to you with pronouns that don’t feel right to you?

Kae

It makes my heart race and then sink. But it’s not a surprise. That’s how you’ve been taught to see me.

Truda

It’s also why I often don’t come out. Because the second I tell you, if you don’t at least try to respect that, it feels like you’re choosing not to see me.

Kae

Yeah. I didn’t come out to my parents for so long because I didn’t want to be misgendered by them. I didn’t even tell them I was going by Kae for the first six months. They do their best, but most of the time they’re still calling me Kaela. They’re still using she/her pronouns. It hurts every time, but I try not to let it.

Charles

What hurts about it?

Kae

It feels like they’re not trying as hard as they can to respect me and see me and understand me. Being understood is one of the most essential parts of any relationship. I know my parents aren’t hurting me intentionally. I know they want the absolute best for me, and they love me, and I think they’re very proud of the person I am, but it doesn’t feel like they really understand sometimes.

Truda

When I give you my pronouns, it’s my way of wanting to connect with you, of wanting you to see me for who I am and how I see myself. I’m giving you this because I want us to have a genuine connection in which we see and understand each other with reciprocity and generosity.

Kae

It’s saying “I trust you. I trust you to be able to handle it.”

Hanno

It’s being vulnerable. When people disregard it, it feels like a rejection.

Charles

Having this explained is so helpful. Sometimes I struggle to remember to use my patients’ preferred pronouns. You have helped me to understand why it is essential for me to get this right. When I ask about gender identity and respect my patients’ choices, often they light up. I guess it helps them feel seen.

Truda, why haven’t you asked me and your mother to refer to you by they/them?

Truda

I have.

Charles

I don’t recall that.

Truda

I have asked. To be fair, probably only once or twice. I don't correct you when you say she/her about me the way I do when you misgender others, because it feels easier to stand up for others than for myself. Also, I understand that you love a version of me that feels threatened by calling me they/them, and I don't really want to take that away from you. It feels almost cruel to force you out of something that has so much joy for you, even though she/her doesn't bring joy to me. But going by they/them doesn't threaten our relationship or my memories of it and my childhood. I've always been here, this person has always been here. I'm more interested in having a conversation about who I am as a person than what pronoun you use for me.

Charles

I want to connect with you, and I promise to try to change.

Truda

Thank you.

Language**Kae**

Getting accustomed to the idea of gender nonconforming people is not as hard as some people make it out to be. You can understand it. It just might take a little bit of work.

Charles

Is part of it just learning a language?

Kae

I think it's more un-learning a language. Because isn't the language we're talking about gender language? Gendered, binary language?

Charles

It's both learning a language and unlearning language. I understand why you, Truda, might want me to refer to you as my child rather than my daughter, but all my life I've thought of you as my daughter. I have to unlearn that term and learn to use child instead.

Truda

But, Dad, you have said to me "I think of you as your whole self with all of your different versions of yourself." So if you can see me as somebody who's not just one or the other, that's the biggest hurdle. Once you acknowledge that people can be ambiguous and fall in different places on various spectrums, the rest falls into place.

Kae

It's important to remember that gender is created. Gendered language is also created. And language changes over time. It's not this constant we've been pummeled into believing it is.

I wasn't born a girl. I was born with a body that our society had deemed female and I was told I was a girl. There have been Indigenous communities all over the world for centuries where gender is not set up as a binary between man and woman. But those communities have historically been targeted and colonized by others and so we tend to forget they ever existed.

Fluidity

Hanno

For straight people, whether they think about their gender on a daily basis, consciously, like a queer person would, they still experience it every day and in everything that they do. And I think it's destabilizing sometimes for a CIS person (someone who identifies with their gender assigned at birth) to hear that they don't have to be inherently something that they've always felt that they are, that there is actually a lot more movement and fluidity to gender than they're used to considering. It can be scary for them to feel that you're debasing something they've always held as truth.

When I signed up for therapy, I specifically asked for a therapist who had a specialty or at least a proficiency in the language of gender fluidity. I'd like to be able to speak a full sentence without having to stop and explain certain words. Knowing that they think that I actually exist and that my feelings and my experiences are valid is really helpful. It was so obvious to me at the bar last night what was happening, but to everybody else, I was the one who had to apologize. If I were to go to a trained professional, I'd like for them to understand what happened and not invalidate it.

Kae

That cultural competency is crucial.

Truda

I've run into professionals who say their clients are changing their gender because it's cool, or imply that being transgender is what is making them mentally unstable or hospitalized. This is about young adults and kids. And that breaks my heart.

In so many regards, these people who are clinicians want to care and help and know their patients and clients, but maybe they want to know them in the easiest way possible. And that goes into the whole mental health crisis on the Island. It's hard to find the time to meet people on their terms when it feels like you don't have enough help or resources, but our children, our clients, our patients, our friends and neighbors need to be seen and respected for who they are. Even when who they are is fluid and changing.

Hanno

Everything, when it comes to adequate healthcare, is harder if you're trans.

Change, grief, and play**Charles**

Of course, we all are on a spectrum of how we think of ourselves: gender wise, politically, etc. The binary system just fails us in terms of our psyches and how the world actually is.

Hanno

Not only is it a spectrum, but it's fluid and ever-shifting. Just like our emotions are different every day. Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm sad, sometimes I feel more masculine, sometimes I feel more feminine.

Charles

So when you have gender affirming surgery, doesn't that limit you in terms of your spectrum?

Hanno

For me, it was more of an expansion of my options. Whereas Truda and Kae felt like they were putting on an act when trying to fit into the gender that was assigned to them, I felt I was muted. I felt like I was a non-human. I felt like my masculinity was always so apparent that I retracted and I shoved every part of me down. Once I had top surgery, I felt like I could make better eye contact and I could be more of a person.

But I do see what you're saying. There are moments of limitation and loss. I found this really cool sweater in a thrift store a year ago before top surgery and before T. It was so cool and at the time, it looked like it made sense on me. But then once my mustache started coming and my shoulders broadened, I suddenly felt like a man in a woman's sweater. And there was a moment of grieving. I felt that I had lost an ability that I used to have to be a little bit more androgynous. I used to be able to be read differently depending on what I wore. Now, I've lost that, but I feel so much more myself that I can be so much more in other ways. I think transitioning has been so expansive. But there have been moments of grieving.

Charles

Every relationship ebbs and flows and changes all the time, even to oneself. Every relationship has moments of disappointment and pleasure. That's just part of being alive.

Hanno

Though now that I pass more as male, I don't want to lose my queerness. There's a visibility within that community that I want, and that I feel like I'm losing. Not visibility in the larger world — I feel like I'm becoming more visible as I want to be within the world at large.

I have to reshape how I fit into my community now. But it's also sort of fun. Even with pronouns, it's sort of fun to see what people will throw at me. Sometimes it's fun or funny, but it also sucks. It's sad but also really exciting.

Charles

Maybe you have more self confidence to play with gender now that you feel more confident in yourself.

Hanno

Experimentation and play are always a good thing.

Just Ask

Truda

I think that often in the CIS, straight community there's a lot of fear around asking questions. They're afraid to get in trouble or to get something wrong, but we're never going to grow or understand anything if we can't talk about it.

Kae

Yeah, it certainly depends on the question, but I'd so much rather you ask me your questions than resent me for who I am. It's always okay (and should be encouraged) to ask a person their preferred pronouns.

Hanno

Yes. Just ask me. The worst thing that could happen is I don't want to talk about it and you get a little rejected, but that's not the end of the world. It's important to be able to talk. That is what makes us all feel seen no matter where on any spectrum we fall.

Glossary

Agender: People who do not identify with any gender or their corresponding societal norms.

Binary: In this context, refers to people who identify as male or female (whether or not it was assigned to them at birth). Non-binary people, therefore, do not identify with one end of the gender spectrum or

the other.

Cisgender (CIS): Someone who identifies with the gender assigned to them at birth.

Gender: Usually refers to the social constructs such as behaviors, expectations, and roles, that are associated with the binary male or female sexes.

Gender Affirming Surgery: Surgery that corrects one's body to correspond with one's gender identity.

Gender Non Conforming: Also sometimes called gender-fluid, when behavior or attributes do not correspond with assigned gender.

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, etc. i.e. all those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender.

Heteronormative: Refers to the norms and expectations inherent in traditional heterosexual and cisgendered society.

Non-binary transperson: Not all transpeople identify as one gender or another.

Preferred pronouns: The pronouns (she/her/he/him/they/them) that are associated with one's gender identity.

Polyamory: refers to people who have multiple romantic relationships at the same time.

Queer: Usually used as an umbrella term to refer to people who do not identify as straight or who do not identify with the sex assigned them at birth (also called genderqueer when just referring to gender and not sexual orientation).

Sex: Usually assigned at birth according to external genitalia. Regarded by many as a social construct.

Straight: Heterosexual

T: Testosterone

Top surgery: Gender affirming surgery in which one's chest is modified to suit their identified gender.

Transgender: Referred to individuals for whom gender identity or expression doesn't match with assigned sex.

Transsexual: Generally someone who has medically and/or surgically transitioned to another gender.

Transman: Assigned sex female. Gender identity male.

Transwoman: Assigned sex male. Gender identity female.