MARTINA GIOVINE
Vita-Salute San Raffaele University
martinagiovine@outlook.it

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MISGENDERING FOR TRANS* INDIVIDUALS

abstract

This paper examines the psychological and ethical implications of misgendering, understood as a form of microaggression that undermines the gender identity of trans individuals. Drawing on psychological, medical, and philosophical literature, it explores how structural injustices and social gender norms contribute to the vulnerability of trans* people and affect identity formation. While scholars such as Dembroff and Wodak (2018) and Kapusta (2016) have already identified psychological harm as one reason to morally oppose misgendering, this study develops that argument by providing a more detailed analysis of its psychological impact. The paper evaluates Dembroff and Wodak's twofold claim: a moderate duty not to misgender trans* individuals and a radical duty to eliminate gender-specific pronouns altogether. It endorses the moderate claim, while challenging the radical one, arguing that gendered language can play a crucial role in affirming personal identity. Finally, it calls for context-sensitive strategies to prevent misgendering and promote inclusive linguistic practices.*

keywords

misgendering, gender, microaggression, identity, psychological harm

Phenomenology and Mind, n. 29 - 2025, pp. 124-137
DOI: 10.17454/pam-2911
https://www.rosenbergesellier.it/eng/journals/phenomenology-and-mind

ISSN 2280-7853 (print) - ISSN 2239-4028 (on line)

Introduction

Social recognition of an individual's gender identity, that is, their internal sense of being male, female, or non-binary,[1] is fundamental to well-being, self-construction, and life planning within a given social context. As Jae M. Sevelius (2013) argues, such recognition is important for affirming a person's sense of self and shaping how they wish to be perceived and treated by others, including family members, friends, and strangers (Sevelius, 2013).

Linguistic practices reflect and facilitate this recognition. For instance, research has shown that using a person's preferred name and pronouns is crucial, serving as distinctive gender identity markers (Gibbs, 2024).[2] Using language that aligns with an individual's gender identity in social interactions is a fundamental act of acknowledgement. This social recognition tends to occur more readily for individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth and gender expression. However, trans* individuals (both binary and non-binary)[3] are significantly more likely to experience a lack of social acknowledgement of their gender identity (Sevelius, 2013).[4] This is particularly evident when incorrect names and pronouns are used, a practice known as "misgendering".[5]

1 The term "non-binary" refers to a range of gender identities, including those whose gender identity falls between or outside of the traditional male and female categories, those who may identify as a man or a woman at different times, and those who have no experience of having a gender (Matsuno & Budge, 2017).

2 The names and pronouns that people use may not always match those assigned to them at birth, particularly in the case of trans* individuals. To respect a person's identity, people should use their chosen name and the pronouns, even if their identification documents show a different name or gender. Further information can be found in the National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center's published glossary, available at: https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/.

3 Please note that in this work, the term "trans*" generally refers to individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. For clarification, the sex assigned at birth refers to when a person is categorised as female, male, or intersex based on the appearance of their genitals and/or their sex chromosomes (LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2024). Using the term "trans*" rather than simply "trans" means that it encompasses both binary and non-binary trans* people. To specifically refer to non-binary people, therefore, I will use the term "non-binary trans* people".

4 The term "gender expression" refers to the "external appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behaviour, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviours and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine" (Human Rights Campaign, s.d.). Further information is available in The Human Rights Campaign's glossary of terms at the following URL: https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

5 Deadnaming, i.e., referring to a person by the name they were given at birth rather than the name they

Misgendering is widely recognised as a form of *microaggression*, that is, a practice that conveys hostile, derogatory, or negative insults towards an individual or group of people based on their membership of a social category. Although misgendering may sometimes stem from ignorance rather than overt malice, this does not negate its impact. Microaggressions, whether intentional or unintentional, can cause significant harm (Sue, 2010). The discriminatory nature of such acts has been extensively discussed in psychological and medical literature (see, for example, Sue, 2010; Nadal et al., 2016), and these discussions have also been explored in philosophy. Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak (2018), as well as Stephanie Kapusta (2016), offer compelling arguments for the moral contestability of misgendering. They argue that misgendering can cause psychological harm, constitute a moral wrong, and impose political disadvantages, each of which is a distinct reason to oppose this linguistic practice (Kapusta, 2016; Dembroff &Wodak, 2018).

One of the most significant consequences of misgendering is its psychological impact. Studies have shown that it can cause distress, anxiety, and depression in trans* individuals (Kapusta, 2016; Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). As McLemore (2015) observes, these effects are closely linked to how individuals recognise their own identities and how others perceive them. The recognition of a person's gender identity operates at both an interpersonal level and a collective level of social belonging. Therefore, a failure to acknowledge a person's gender identity can have a profound impact on their mental health (for an overview, see McLemore, 2015). This issue highlights the importance of avoiding misgendering trans* individuals.

Although Dembroff and Wodak (2018) and Kapusta (2016) have addressed the ethical dimension of misgendering, including its psychological harm, they do not examine this harm in detail or situate it within the broader framework of microaggressions. This study builds on their arguments by providing a more in-depth analysis of the psychological consequences of misgendering, focusing on its destabilising effects on personal identity formation. To this end, I begin by discussing how structural injustices, such as transphobia and social gender norms, shape identity formation (§1). I then turn to the medical and psychological research that frames misgendering as a microaggression. I pay particular attention to its characteristics, as well as to the distinction between intentional and unintentional acts (§2). Next, I discuss two philosophical claims put forward by Dembroff and Wodak (2018). The first is a moderate claim that we have a negative duty not to commit misgendering towards both non-binary and binary trans* individuals (§3). The second is a radical claim that we have a moral duty to refrain from using gender-specific pronouns for everyone (§4). I conclude by affirming my agreement with the authors' moderate claim and, in contrast, I argue that the radical claim remains highly contentious. In support of this, I present compelling arguments put forward by Hernandez and Crowley (2024), which illustrate the significant role that expressing gender through language can play in affirming personal identity and how this may ultimately challenge and displace the radical claim.

1. Recognition of personal identity and structural injustice

The construction of personal identity is a multifaceted process that unfolds within specific social and cultural contexts. It is closely interwoven with the acknowledgement and the recognition of the gender identities of others. This process is shaped by the social implications inherent in each gender category. Specifically, each gender-based social category implies certain "constraints and enablements" (Jenkins, 2023) and is associated with social roles, expectations, norms and practices, and self-conceptions (Dembroff, 2018,

prefer, is a form of misgendering. Further information can be found in the following document: https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/.

p. 24). Moreover, the social positioning of individuals within gender categories is deeply influenced by structures of injustice, such as transphobia. These structures often operate through dominant social meanings attached to gender, producing marginalisation and oppression for individuals perceived as members of certain gendered social classes. For instance, normative assumptions about embodiment, such as the idea that women must have specific biological traits, may hinder trans* women's access to recognition and social resources. Such structural constraints contribute to the continued marginalisation of trans* identities (Jenkins, 2023).

Trans* individuals may encounter various forms of oppression and marginalisation in different areas of society, including terms of societal discourse, legal and economic practices, conceptual limitations, the use of derogatory language, medical barriers, and other social systems. For example, the misrecognition of the existence of non-binary trans* identities due to a binary conception of society is a prevalent conceptual gap. This concept stems from the idea that the feminine and masculine genders represent the full gender spectrum.[6] Structures of injustice, such as transphobia, are manifested through institutional norms, including denying trans* individuals the right to self-identify their gender on official documents, as has been seen in numerous US states.[7] These structures of injustice result in the exclusion and impediment of self-representation (Dembroff, 2018).

Language also influences the potential for self-narration, as well as its limitations and, in extreme cases, the complete negation of personal identity. Unjust social structures, such as transphobia, are perpetuated through linguistic and discursive practices. Misgendering, for example, constitutes an unfair linguistic practice that contributes to the marginalisation of trans* individuals. As Jenkins (2023) argues, the social meanings attached to gender categories can shape the conditions under which people are recognised, and therefore determine whose identities are affirmed and erased. While not focused specifically on language, her account shows how gendered structures of recognition can undermine the self-expression and social legitimacy of trans* individuals (Jenkins, 2023). Furthermore, the trans* community has emphasised the importance of using the correct language for recognising the gender identity of trans* people. They have emphasised that this is not merely a matter of preference or an optional choice: addressing an individual with the wrong pronouns or name can be perceived as disrespectful, harmful, and even dangerous. Failing to respect and acknowledge a person's gender identity can be considered a discriminatory act (Sevelius et al., 2020). Consequently, the use of language can either facilitate or hinder the recognition of gender identity.

Misgendering can therefore be considered a form of oppression that undermines the social existence and self-narration of trans* individuals. Jenkins (2023) emphasises that misgendering is not merely a matter of individual perception, but rather it has concrete effects on one's ability to exist as a recognised social subject and impacts people's agency (Jenkins, 2023; Kapusta, 2016). In the personal sphere, misgendering may therefore conflict with many individuals' identities. Furthermore, in a social context, this linguistic practice may conflict with the social needs of the trans* community.

6 According to Dembroff (2018), non-binary trans* individuals experience systemic misrecognition and neglect. Their marginalisation extends beyond that experienced by binary trans* identities and manifests in various domains, including education and medicine (Dembroff, 2018).

7 The regulations relating to gender declaration vary across different geographical jurisdictions. In the United States, for example, some states prohibit individuals from declaring a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth. In other states, however, the process of changing gender on official documents is subject to rigorous procedural requirements. For example, in some states, certification of surgical interventions is a prerequisite for gender transition, though these interventions are often financially inaccessible to trans* individuals (Dembroff, 2018).

A substantial body of medical and psychological literature has demonstrated that misgendering can invalidate the identity of trans* individuals, causing social and psychological distress and gender dysphoria. "Gender dysphoria" refers to "distress experienced by some people whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth based on societal expectations; or distress experienced when a person's gender identity and/or gender expression is not affirmed" (LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2024).[8] To examine this phenomenon in greater depth, the subsequent section will review the existing literature on the psychological consequences of misgendering and its connection to the formation of personal identity.

2. Misgendering as a microaggression

Misgendering, i.e., referring to someone using pronouns or names that do not reflect their gender identity, is increasingly recognised as a form of *microaggression* (Rogers, 2021). Derald Wing Sue (2010) defines microaggression as any brief and common verbal, behavioural, or environmental humiliation that communicates hostility towards an individual or group of people based on characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion (Sue, 2010). While originally used to describe forms of racial discrimination, the concept has since been extended to include gender-based forms of exclusion (Arijs et al., 2023).

Microaggressions often go unnoticed by both those who commit them and those who experience them, as they are deeply embedded in normative social practices. They can take many forms, from body language and facial expression to terminology, offhand comments, and discriminatory institutional policies. Trans* individuals, for instance, frequently report experiencing denigrating and dismissive treatment in settings such as healthcare, when acts of misgendering communicate otherness and can cause embarrassment or humiliation. These interactions often stem from misperceptions and dehumanising beliefs that depict gender transition as invalid or unnatural (Nordmarken & Kelly, 2014).[9]

These acts are not isolated but often persistent, shaping the everyday lives of marginalised individuals. As Sue (2010) argues, microaggressions can reflect cultural worldviews saturated with ethnocentric values, prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes. They sustain binaries such as inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, desirability/undesirability, and normality/abnormality (Sue, 2010). In the case of misgendering, this process renders stereotypical understandings of gender visible and explicit (Nordmarken, 2014). The use of incorrect pronouns can signal that a trans* person's self-defined identity is not recognised as legitimate, and in the case of non-binary individuals, that their identities are not acknowledged at all.

Crucially, microaggressions may be intentional or unintentional, but both forms produce harm (Sue, 2010). Unintentional misgendering, often resulting from ignorance, lack of exposure to gender diversity, or assumptions based on appearance, is widespread and perceived as less severe. Yet its apparent harmlessness makes it more pervasive and insidious (Sue, 2010). As Kevin L. Nadal (2016) notes, the pervasiveness and the continuous and daily nature of the microaggressive of these experiences contribute significantly to psychological distress. Victims often report gender dysphoria, feelings of validation, and a diminished sense of belonging (Nadal et al., 2016).

There are many reasons why unintentional misgendering occurs. These include

8 The LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center (2024) highlights that the severity of gender dysphoria can vary greatly among trans* and gender diverse individuals (LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2024). Further information can be found at the following URL: https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/.

9 It should be noted that Sonny Nordmarken and Reese Kelly (2014) have themselves questioned the term "microaggression" itself, pointing out that the negative impact of individual cases may not always be minimal (Nordmarken & Kelly, 2014).

misunderstanding or misinterpreting the gender identities of the victims, or having insufficient information about their gender (Nordmarken, 2014). As Mylene Gibbs (2024) reports, trans* individuals (whether binary or non-binary) are especially vulnerable when their expression is perceived to match the gender assigned at birth. This misalignment can lead to others incorrectly perceiving a person's gender identity (Gibbs, 2024). Moreover, Kai Jacobsen et al. (2023) highlight that in the case of misgendering non-binary trans* individuals, there is the additional issue that non-binary genders have not yet achieved widespread social acceptance (Jacobsen et al., 2023). Moreover, an empirical study by Quinn Arijs et al. (2023) revealed that non-binary participants experienced a higher prevalence of using incorrect pronouns and deadnaming when their gender expression aligned with expectations for their sex assigned at birth. Furthermore, participants reported that these practices caused dysphoric feelings and resulted in the perception that their identities were being denied (Arijs et al. 2023). Offenders often downplay the act, dismiss the victim's experience, or excuse themselves by citing habit or difficulty in adapting, responses that worsen the psychological toll and obstruct empathetic understanding (Nadal et al., 2016).

Intentional misgendering, though less common, is often more traumatic. Motivations may include transphobia, a refusal to acknowledge trans* identities, or a desire to ridicule and delegitimise. Some testimonies describe perpetrators who deliberately misgender to provoke or incite others to do the same. Others minimise the victim's experience and the harm caused by claiming that using correct names and pronouns requires too much effort. It should be noted that intentional misgendering is often perceived as more severe and violent than unintentional misgendering (Arijs et al., 2023). In both cases, misgendering functions as a mechanism of exclusion and symbolic violence.

Finally, misgendering occurs across contexts, from interpersonal and familiar to institutional and systemic. A common example of interpersonal misgendering is when family members refuse to use the correct pronouns or names of a trans* relative. On a systemic level, misgendering is embedded in institutions that fail to recognise self-defined identities. For instance, systemic misgendering is when bureaucratic systems do not allow individuals to modify their gender markers, such as in documents, or when public spaces are structured according to the gender binary, such as bathrooms reserved exclusively for women and men (Nadal et al., 2016). These systemic practices do not merely reflect social norms but actively reinforce them, denying recognition and perpetuating inequality.

3. The negative duty not to commit misgendering

Given their moral and political implications, the importance of using pronouns that align with an individual's gender identity has been explored in philosophy. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) discuss two philosophical claims: a moderate one and a radical one. The moderate claim asserts that we have a negative duty not to use binary pronouns when referring to non-binary individuals. Notably, this argument is an intermediate step in the authors' broader argument in support of their radical claim, which is addressed in the next section. The moderate claim is supported by an argument from analogy: just as it is wrong to use male pronouns to refer to a trans* woman, so it is likewise wrong to use binary pronouns to refer to a non-binary individual (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

In support of this argument, the authors cite the example of Group Captain Catherine McGregor, a trans* woman who was publicly misgendered with the pronoun "he" by Mark Latham, the former leader of the Australian Labor Party. According to Dembroff and Wodak (2018), this act constituted a moral wrong. While there may not have been a positive moral duty to refer to McGregor with the pronoun "she", since alternatives like "Catherine McGregor" or "Group Captain" were available and morally correct, there was nonetheless a negative duty not to refer to her as "he". This reasoning extends by analogy to non-binary

individuals: we are under a negative duty not to refer to them using male or female pronouns (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

According to Dembroff and Wodak (2018), the negative duty to avoid misgendering (whether the individual is binary or non-binary) is grounded in the harmful consequences it entails. These consequences include: (i) expressions of disrespect, (ii) denial of resources, (iii) undermining of intelligibility, and (iv) reinforcement of oppressive ideologies. Firstly, (i) misgendering a binary or non-binary trans* person expresses disrespect towards their social identity and denies their gender identity. Misgendering McGregor, for example, is equivalent to disrespecting her gender identity. In other words, misgendering a binary trans* individual communicates disrespect for their identity, and the same goes for a non-binary trans* individual. Furthermore, the authors argue that misgendering can cause severe physical and psychological health problems, whether intentional or not. Secondly, (ii) misgendering implies the potential denial of resources to which one is entitled. For instance, classifying a trans* woman as male means that she cannot apply for women-only positions or access female spaces. Conversely, using binary pronouns for a non-binary person implies that they must fit into a binary organisation that allocates resources based on gender. A third consequence is (iii) the undermining of the intelligibility of actions and choices. Generally, a variety of social norms can be applied to actions and choices with respect to a given social category, such as gender. For instance, the idea that women shave their legs could be considered a gender-specific norm, and individuals can choose whether to adhere to or violate that norm. However, if a trans* woman is referred to with masculine pronouns, these norms are not recognised as applying to her, consequently rendering her unable to violate or adhere to them. This results in the suppression of an important form of expression. The same is true for non-binary trans* people: misgendering can undermine their ability to reject the norms associated with being male or female. Finally, (iv) misgendering contributes to maintaining the systems of concepts, language, and social norms that underpin the aforementioned problems. While public discourse significantly influences socially operative concepts, private discourse also reinforces ideology (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). Among these reasons, I focus particularly on point (i), i.e., the argument concerning the expressions of disrespect and the psychological consequences of misgendering.

Research consistently shows that microaggressions negatively affect the mental health of members of marginalised social groups. They are associated with lower self-esteem, higher prevalence of depressive symptoms, lower levels of psychological well-being, and greater intensity of negative emotions (Nadal et al. 2016). Nadal et al. (2014) highlighted common reactions to microaggressions experienced by trans* individuals. The authors identified three response domains to microaggressions: emotional, behavioural, and cognitive (Nadal et al., 2014). Firstly, (i) the emotional response domain includes feelings of anger, betrayal, despair, exhaustion, and feeling invalidated and misunderstood. Secondly, (ii) the behavioural scope of the response domain includes confronting the microaggressor by setting boundaries or avoiding situations where microaggressions are likely to occur. Other behavioural responses include passive coping strategies,[10] such as avoidance, or attempting to appease the microaggressor in order to defuse a tense situation. Thirdly, (iii) cognitive reactions include rationalisation, such as seeking justification by assuming that the microaggressor is uneducated. Consistent emotional reactions involving negative

10 The American Psychological Association defines a coping strategy as "an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation". Further information can be found at: https://dictionary.apa.org/coping-strategy.

feelings and emotional distress have been identified, as well as similar cognitive strategies such as rationalisation and behavioural strategies to avoid or minimise confrontation (Nadal et al., 2014).

Research shows that the psychological consequences of misgendering are consistent with those of identified in cases of microaggressions in general. Kevin A. McLemor (2018) reports that misgendering is associated with psychological distress and the perception of the presence of stigma in society. Having a social support network helps individuals to identify instances of prejudice and discrimination more accurately. Consequently, individuals who report high levels of social support tend to perceive a stronger correlation between the frequency of misgendering and the feeling that trans* individuals are more widely stigmatised in society (McLemore, 2018).

However, the impact of misgendering can vary depending on several factors, such as the context in which it occurs and how much a person's sense of self is defined by their collective identity. It can also depend on how it intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as those based on race, class, or sexual orientation. The intent behind the misgendering is also relevant: intentional misgendering tends to be perceived as more harmful than unintentional errors, the distress caused by which may vary depending on the circumstances (Gibbs, 2024).

In their work on the effects of microaggressions on gender non-conforming individuals, Arijs et al. (2023) report that being referred to using incorrect pronouns and names is commonly experienced, particularly within the family context. These incidents often arise from a lack of acceptance or entrenched language habits. Participants described a range of reactions: some felt that being misgendered by relatives amounted to a denial of their identity, leading to feelings of gender dysphoria; others interpreted the misgendering as unintentional and attributed it to unconscious habits rather than hostility. Nevertheless, many participants reported that repeated misgendering caused emotional distress, self-doubt, and reluctance to express their gender identity openly. Some also felt inhibited in their identity development or even began to question the validity of their own gender identity. As one interviewee explained: "It had the effect on me that I stopped myself to be open about my gender identity to my environment, and to myself" (Arijs et al., 2023, p. 15). Another admitted: "First I thought, am I just kidding myself, like am I being serious with myself but yeah, I know that I am still searching so then I sometimes got remarks like oh you're just confused, you know" (Arijs et al., 2023, p. 15).

In conclusion, research on misgendering highlights the negative psychological impact frequently experienced by trans* individuals, effects that are broadly consistent with findings from research on microaggressions in general, which have been discussed previously (§ 3.3). Overall, these harms significantly affect mental health, and their severity varies depending on the aggressor's intent, the social context of the interaction, and the victim's perception of the act. As Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue, not all four reasons (i-iv) need to apply equally, or even apply at all, in every instance of misgendering to support the moderate claim. In general, these arguments suffice to establish the moral wrongness of misgendering, even if only some reasons are present or vary in intensity depending on the context. Their argument holds as long as enough of these reasons are in play to ground a duty not to misgender, in both binary and non-binary trans* cases (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018). The psychological and medical literature reviewed here supports this claim, as it shows that misgendering has clear negative psychological consequences for trans* individuals. These harms affect people's lived experiences and sense of identity, making gendered language a salient and potentially violent speech act when used in a way that disrespects someone's self-identification.

4. The duty not to use gender-specific pronouns altogether

As anticipated, Dembroff and Wodak (2018) also discuss a second claim, the radical one. The radical claim asserts that we have a moral duty not to use gender-specific pronouns altogether, including when referring to binary individuals. This means avoiding both "he" and "she", regardless of the referent's gender identity, and also rejects non-binary pronouns such as singular "they". To support this claim, the authors present three arguments.

The first argument (i) is that there is no better alternative than eliminating gender-specific pronouns altogether. According to Dembroff and Wodak (2018), once we accept the moderate claim, that we have a moral duty to avoid using binary pronouns for non-binary individuals, two main options remain if binary pronouns ("he" and "she") are to be retained:

(1) Introducing a third, catch-all pronoun (e.g., singular "they" or "ze") for non-binary referents.

(2) Using a distinct pronoun for each non-binary identity.

Both approaches are considered problematic. The first (1) is inegalitarian: it preserves two specific pronouns ("he" and "she") for men and women while collapsing all non-binary diversity into a single generic pronoun (singular "they" or "ze"). This reinforces the perception that binary identities are more "natural" or legitimate. The second option (2) is deemed unfeasible due to the cognitive burden of learning and using an open-ended set of new pronouns, especially given that pronouns are a closed grammatical class and non-binary identities are fluid and evolving. For these reasons, the authors conclude that eliminating gender-specific pronouns altogether offers the most consistent and equitable solution (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

The second argument (ii) that Dembroff and Wodak (2018) discuss in support of the radical claim is that providing gender information can compromise the referent's privacy. They argue that the use of gender-specific pronouns (such as "he" and "she") often places individuals in a morally problematic position they call "Disclose or Deceive": they must either disclose private information about their gender identity or sexual orientation, or deceive others, explicitly or implicitly, about these aspects of themselves. Through illustrative examples, they show how individuals like Asher (a trans man) or John (a gay man) may be forced to correct others' assumptions to avoid misgendering or heteronormative assumptions, thereby revealing sensitive information they may prefer to keep private. Alternatively, by remaining silent, they risk misleading others and potentially being perceived as dishonest if later "outed" (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).[11]

Finally, the third argument (iii) advanced by the authors to support the radical claim concerns the harmful cognitive and social effects associated with the use of gender-specific pronouns and other gendered linguistic markers. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that linguistic devices such as pronouns, gendered suffixes (e.g., "-ess" in hostess), and grammatical gender in general do not merely reflect but actively shape social beliefs about gender. In particular, they claim that gendered language contributes to the reinforcement of essentialist

11 The authors further argue that even adopting gender-neutral pronouns (like singular "they" or "ze") does not fully solve the issue, as these forms can carry pragmatic implications, for instance, suggesting that someone is non-binary or hiding something, thus still putting pressure on individuals to disclose. Importantly, they reject the idea that this is merely a symptom of broader discrimination: gender-specific pronouns themselves exacerbate the problem by embedding assumptions about gender and making them harder to challenge. Even in a world without discrimination, they argue, individuals have a legitimate autonomy-based interest in controlling when and how to disclose intimate aspects of their identities. Ultimately, they contend that because pronouns are pervasive and presuppose gender information, they systematically contribute to the reproduction of discriminatory norms and thus represent not just a symptom but part of the cause (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

beliefs, i.e., the idea that gender is an intrinsic and explanatory feature of individuals, shaping psychological traits and social roles (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).[12]

Although the use of gendered language can reinforce essentialist assumptions, it is important to acknowledge the positive and empowering roles that gendered linguistic resources can play, particularly for trans* individuals. Pronouns and proper names are fundamental to affirming gender identity and social inclusion (Gibbs, 2024). Far from being mere expressions of a binary system, these linguistic elements are often actively used by trans* people to assert agency, affirm identity, and foster joy. In this regard, E. M. Hernandez and Archie Crowley (2024) have criticised the tendency, common in philosophical debates on gender and language, to focus primarily on the potential harms of gendered languages while overlooking how trans* individuals themselves use such language in constructive and life-affirming ways. According to the authors, trans* people engage with language through what they call "recognition use", "playful use", and "joyful use", three modes of linguistic agency that contribute meaningfully to personal and collective well-being (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).

The recognition use involves employing gendered linguistic resources, such as pronouns, labels, and names, to accurately represent one's gender identity, enabling one to be recognised as such by others. For example, in societies with binary gender norms, creating and using non-binary labels enables individuals to express their gender identity and be understood, thereby fostering both self-definition and mutual understanding (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).[13]

The playful use, drawing on Maria Lugones's (2003) notion of "playfulness", refers to the subversive appropriation of gendered language that resists oppressive norms without fully internalising them (Lugones, 2003). Hernandez and Crowley (2024) give the example of trans* individuals who use gendered anatomical terms in non-standard ways, for instance, to refer to their bodies regardless of surgical status. One example is trans* people who refer to their genitals as "dicks" or "cocks" without having undergone genital surgery, thereby reclaiming and re-signifying these terms in a way that affirms their gender identity without conforming to cisnormative expectations (Zimman, 2014). This recontextualisation allows them to explore gendered language creatively, without adhering to its normative "rules", and to engage critically with dominant gender ideologies. For instance, by using terms like "dick" to refer to a vulva or by reclaiming traditionally gendered anatomical labels in ways that affirm their own embodied experiences, trans* individuals unsettle the assumed correspondence between language, anatomy, and identity, revealing the contingency and normativity of dominant linguistic conventions (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).

Finally, the joyful use refers to the profound sense of euphoria that many trans* people report when addressed with gender-affirming names and pronouns. Studies have shown that the use of appropriate gendered language is closely linked to psychological well-being and

12 To illustrate this point, the authors present a thought experiment: imagine a fictional world where people use different pronouns depending on body weight, "fee" for thin individuals and "fum" for fat individuals. In such a world, even those who usually accept gender-specific pronouns would likely find this linguistic system objectionable, since it implies that body weight is always relevant to communication. The example demonstrates how pronoun systems can make certain traits permanently salient, reinforcing their perceived importance in all social contexts. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that gender-specific pronouns in our world work similarly: by routinely invoking gender, they convey the implicature that gender is a meaningful and explanatory feature of people's behaviour and social identity, even when it is not (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).

13 Hernandez and Crowley (2024) present a series of pertinent examples that show how diverse linguistic communities use gendered linguistic resources to recognise varied identities, even in the absence of gender pronouns. In some cases, these communities use these linguistic resources to challenge traditional gender expectations. For a more comprehensive overview, please refer to Hernandez and Crowley (2024).

gender euphoria (Beischel et al., 2022; Hernandez 2021). As Hernandez and Crowley (2024) observe, this dimension of language use highlights its capacity not only to validate but to generate joy and self-affirmation. Consequently, as the authors observe, the use of gender-appropriate language in expressing one's gender can elicit profound feelings of joy. This joy is not merely affective but politically significant: it emerges as a form of embodied affirmation that resists cisnormative structures and affirms the legitimacy of one's self-identification. In this sense, joy becomes a transformative effect that challenges the marginalisation of non-normative identities and asserts the right to linguistic and existential self-determination (Hernandez & Crowley, 2024).

Taken together, these forms of engagement show that gendered language is not inherently oppressive or reductive, but rather a flexible and powerful tool. Trans* individuals use it in ways that range from affirming identity to critiquing and reimagining normative structures. This underscores the significance of pronoun usage and the linguistic resources available for effective gender identity expression. Furthermore, Hernandez and Crowley (2024) contend that the profound applications of gendered language can prompt a re-evaluation of Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) radical claim, potentially rendering it subject to criticism. The project of eliminating any personal reference to gender may not be the optimal approach, as it would result in the loss of the full range of benefits that gendered language offers (Hernandez & Archie Crowley, 2024).

Finally, as Dembroff and Wodak (2018) note, their argument is developed with English in mind, a language that has gender-specific pronouns but does not explicitly encode gender pervasively. They acknowledge that their radical proposal might be easier to implement in English than in languages with more pervasive gender systems, such as Portuguese, and leave open whether it could apply to them (Dembroff & Wodak, 2018).[14] As Francesca Cesarano (2022) observes, in grammatical gender languages, even if gender-specific pronouns were to be avoided, which is a challenging enough task in itself, gender information would still be pervasively provided in most nouns and target agreement. Therefore, while it may be possible to avoid gender-specific pronouns in languages such as English, this could be more difficult in grammatical gender languages (Cesarano, 2022). However, this topic will not be explored further in this work due to space limitations.[15]

Conclusion

Social recognition of gender identity is fundamental to both individual well-being and the construction of a personal gender identity. Whether intentional or not, misgendering is a form of microaggression that has the potential to cause significant psychological distress and

14 English, according to the classification of Stahlberg et al. (2007), is a "natural gender language". In natural gender languages, such as English, gender information is not provided as pervasively as it is in other languages. Gender information is mainly provided by gender-specific pronouns such as "she" and "he" and by lexically gender-marked nouns such as "mother" and "father". In other languages, called "grammatical gender languages", such as Italian, French and Spanish, it is very difficult to avoid giving gender information. Grammatical gender languages have a grammatical gender system, and most nouns are assigned a gender. In the case of animate entities, grammatical gender typically aligns with the referent's gender (Corbett, 1991; Thornton, 2022). For human referents, terms are declined in the masculine or feminine form based on referent gender, such as the Italian personal nouns "maestra" (teacher[F]) and "maestro" (teacher[M]), which are typically assigned to a feminine and masculine referent, respectively. Furthermore, personal pronouns and other grammatical forms align with the gender of the noun, thus also conveying information about the gender of the person to whom the noun refers. Therefore, in these languages, gender information is provided pervasively (Stahlberg et al., 2007).

15 In her exploration of the phenomenon of misgendering, Francesca Cesarano (2022) examines the discourse surrounding the moderate and radical claims of Dembroff and Wodak (2018). Through discussing these claims, Cesarano (2022) also reflects on the feasibility of implementing the project in languages such as Italian, highlighting the associated challenges. For a more comprehensive overview, please refer to Cesarano's work (2022).

to reinforce systemic exclusion. As I have discussed in this work, misgendering has an impact that extends beyond interpersonal interactions, shaping broader social and institutional dynamics.

Having examined the philosophical arguments presented by Dembroff and Wodak (2018), I conclude that their moderate claim that we have a duty to avoid misgendering both binary and non-binary trans* individuals is strongly justified. This conclusion is supported by compelling arguments, particularly with regard to the psychological harm caused by misgendering and its role in perpetuating systemic injustices. However, I find the authors' radical claim that we should eliminate all gender-specific pronouns to be more contentious. While I acknowledge the potential benefits of such a shift, I conclude that gendered language plays an important role in constructing personal identity and affirming gender.

Particularly interesting is what Dembroff (2018) emphasises the importance to observe trans* and queer contexts for understanding how linguistic and social practices can be reconfigured to better support gender diversity. In particular, many trans* communities have developed gender-neutral linguistic strategies, designated inclusive physical spaces, and practices centred on the use of self-chosen names and pronouns. These structures foster greater autonomy in gender expression and challenge normative gender roles, thereby creating social environments in which individuals can affirm and reclaim their identities (Dembroff, 2018).

Furthermore, given that misgendering often occurs unintentionally, it is important to reflect on the reasons behind these instances and adopt strategies to counteract them. As previously discussed (§ 2), people may unintentionally commit misgendering for various reasons, such as misunderstanding, misinterpreting gender identities, or lacking sufficient information about gender (Nordmarken, 2014). This underscores the importance of increasing awareness about gender issues and respecting gender identities by using appropriate language. Institutions can play a crucial role in addressing the lack of awareness about gender diversity and the importance of mindful communication through education. However, delving into institutional strategies to counter misgendering is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is worth noting that much of the existing psychological and medical literature focuses on cases of misgendering involving binary trans* individuals, with trans* individuals who identify as binary, with individuals who identify as non-binary being absent from the discussion. In other cases, researchers do not distinguish between binary and non-binary trans* instances. This implies that the differences in misgendering experiences between these two categories are not adequately captured (Jacobsen et al., 2023). Fortunately, however, attention to this topic beyond gender binarism is growing in literature. With this article, I have aimed to explore the psychological implications of misgendering and highlight why this type of harm can be used to argue against misgendering. These considerations lay the groundwork for addressing other issues, such as the differences in experience between binary and non-binary trans* individuals. Understanding these differences could help to identify ways to counteract this type of microaggression and, more broadly, help to contrast the perpetuation of ethnocentric values, prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes.

REFERENCES

Arijs, Q., Burgwal, A., Van Wiele, J., & Motmans, J. (2023). The Price to Pay for Being Yourself: Experiences of Microaggressions among Non-Binary and Genderqueer (NBGQ). *Youth. Healthcare*, *11*, 742. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11050742;

Beischel, W. J., & Van Anders, S. M. (2022). A little shiny gender breakthrough: Community understandings of gender euphoria. *International Journal of Transgender Health, 23*(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2021.1915223;

Cesarano, F. (2022). On misgendering and the feasibility of changing grammar rules to respect all gender identities. *Degree Thesis, Scuola Universitaria Superiore IUSS*;
Corbett, G. G. (1991). *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;
Dembroff, R., & Wodak, D. (2018). He/She/They/Ze. *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy 5* (20201214). https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.014;
Dembroff, R. (2018). Real talk on the metaphysics of gender. *Philosophical Topics, 46*(2), 21-50. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201846213;
Gibbs, M. (2024). Misgendering as a Microaggression: gender Expression and Trans Pedagogy. *McNair Research Journal SJSU*, Vol. 20, Article 6;
Hernandez, E. M. (2021). Gender-Affirmation and Loving Attention. *Hypatia*, 36(4), 619-635. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.45;
Hernandez, E. M., & Crowley, A. (2024). How to Do Things with Gendered Words. In E. Lepore & L. Anderson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press;
Human Rights Campaign. (s.d.). Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions. HRC. https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions;
Jacobsen, K., Davis, C. E., Burchell, D., Rutherford, L., Lachowsky, N., Bauer, G., & Scheim, A. (2023). Misgendering and the health and well-being of nonbinary people in Canada. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2023.2278064;
Jenkins, K. (2023). *Ontology and oppression: Race, gender, and social reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197666777.001.0001;
Kapusta, S. (2016). Misgendering and its Moral Contestability. *Hypatia* 31 (3): 512-519;
Lugones, M. (2003). *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield;
Matsuno, E., & Budge, S. L. (2017). Non-binary/Genderqueer Identities: A Critical Review of the Literature. *Current Sexual Health Reports*, 9(3), 116-120. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-017-0111-8;
McLemore, K. A. (2018). A Minority Stress Perspective on Transgender Individuals' Experiences With Misgendering. *Stigma and Health, 3*(1), 53-64. https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000070;
Nadal, K. L., Whitman, C. N., Davis, L. S., Erazo, T., & Davidoff, K. C. (2016). Microaggressions Toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Genderqueer People: A Review of the Literature. *The Journal of Sex Research*, May-Jun, 53(4-5): 488-508. doi: 10.1080/00224499.2016.1142495;
Nadal, K. L., Davidoff, K. C., Davis, L. S., & Wong, Y. (2014). Emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions to microaggressions: Transgender perspectives. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 1(1), 72-81. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000011;
National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. (2024). *LGBTQIA+ Glossary of Terms for Health Care Teams*. https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/glossary/;
Nordmarken, S., & Kelly, R. (2014). Limiting transgender health: Administrative violence and microaggressions. In V. L. Harvey & T. H. Housel (Eds.), *Health care disparities and the LGBT population*. Plymouth: Lexington Books;
Nordmarken, S. (2014). Microaggressions. *TSQ* 1, 1 (1-2): 129-134. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399812;
Rogers, M. M. (2021). Exploring the Domestic Abuse Narratives of Trans and Nonbinary People and the Role of Cisgenderism in Identity Abuse, Misgendering, and Pathologizing. *Violence against Women*, 27 (12-13): 2187-2207. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220971368;
Sevelius, J. M. (2013). Gender Affirmation: A Framework for Conceptualizing Risk Behavior

among Transgender Women of Color. *Sex Roles*. Jun 1; 68(11-12): 675-689. 10.1007/s11199-012-0216-5. PMID: 23729971; PMCID: PMC3667985;

Sevelius, J. M., Chakravarty, D., Dilworth, S. E., Rebchook, G., & Neilands, T. B. (2020). Gender Affirmation through Correct Pronoun Usage: Development and Validation of the Transgender Women's Importance of Pronouns (TW-IP) Scale. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Dec 19; 17(24): 9525. 10.3390/ijerph17249525. PMID: 33352630; PMCID: PMC7766835;

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons;

Thornton, A. M. (2022). Genere e igiene verbale: L'uso di forme con ə in italiano. *Annali del Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati. Sezione linguistica*, 11-54 Paginazione. https://doi.org/10.6093/2281-6585/9623;

Zimman, L. (2014). The discursive construction of sex: Remaking and reclaiming the gendered body in talk about genitals among trans men. In L. Zimman, J. L. Davis, & J. Raclaw (Eds.), *Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (pp. 13-34). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299892505_The_Discursive_Construction_of_Sex.