

Articulating and navigating non-binary identity: insights from language

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Outline

1. Background

- > Positionality
- > Previous work (broad)

2. Queer and genderqueer speech (QGS – Andy/Ynda)

- > Research questions
- > Methods
- > Sample

3. Gender map and system (Andy/Ynda)

4. Semantics of identity (Sol – Sebastian)

- > Previous work (specific)
- > Research questions
- > Methods and sample
- > Initial insights:
 - > Articulations
 - > Becomings
 - > Stress

5. Recommendations

Positionality

- > Community-internal/external
 - > Sebastian: gay cis
 - > Andy: queer non-binary
- > Who gets to talk about and represent non-binary/trans people?
 - > Popular debate around cis playing trans in film/TV (e.g. *The Danish Girl*)
 - > Standpoint epistemology/feminist standpoint theory
- > But not always simple
 - > “we can do better than ‘cis = problematic and trans = not problematic’” (Vincent 2016)
 - > insider/outside (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996, 2013)
- > Stance
 - > “research *on, for and with*” (Cameron *et al.* 1992: 14–22)
 - > Most importantly: we should seek to represent the plurality of lived experiences



Previous research

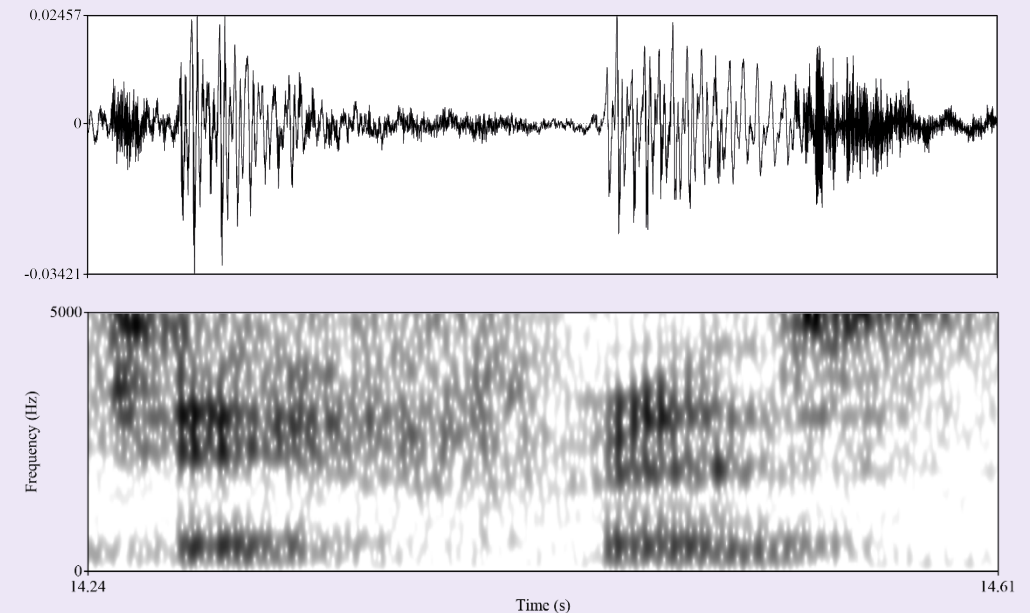
- > “Researchers interested in the linguistic construction of gender and sexuality continue to frame their research in terms of the well-established binaries” (Zimman et al. 2014: 1)
- > Sociolinguistics key to understanding binaries and what lies beyond (Bershtling 2014; Bucholtz 2014)
- > **Until last few years:** small body of work on non-binary identities, mostly discourse-focused (e.g. Blackwood 2014; Davis 2014; Zimman et al. 2014); lack of sociophonetic and broader quantitative work on non-binary people
- > **Beginning to change:** a number of postgraduate researchers in the West
- > **In trans studies:** traditional focus on phenomenological, humanities-based approaches over empirical, social scientific – again, beginning to change

QGS: research questions

- 1a How do queer and genderqueer individuals use speech to construct and present gendered and sexual identities?
- 1b How does this practice vary by context, topic and political/ideological affiliation, and what can such variation tell us about contemporary structures of gender and sexuality in Britain?
- 2 To what extent are gender and sexuality indexed differently across age groups? In particular, have recent changes in British society's treatment of gender and sexuality affected the ways in which queer, lesbian/gay/bisexual, genderqueer and trans individuals use language to construct their identities?

QGS: methods

- > Interviews (60-150 minutes) and self-recordings
- > Sociophonetics (primary)
- > Individual/social/contextual factors
 - > Setting (who/where)
 - > Topic of discussion
 - > Political/ideological alignment
- > Historical processes (Levon 2014: 101): social/legal advances
- > Discourse analysis (secondary)

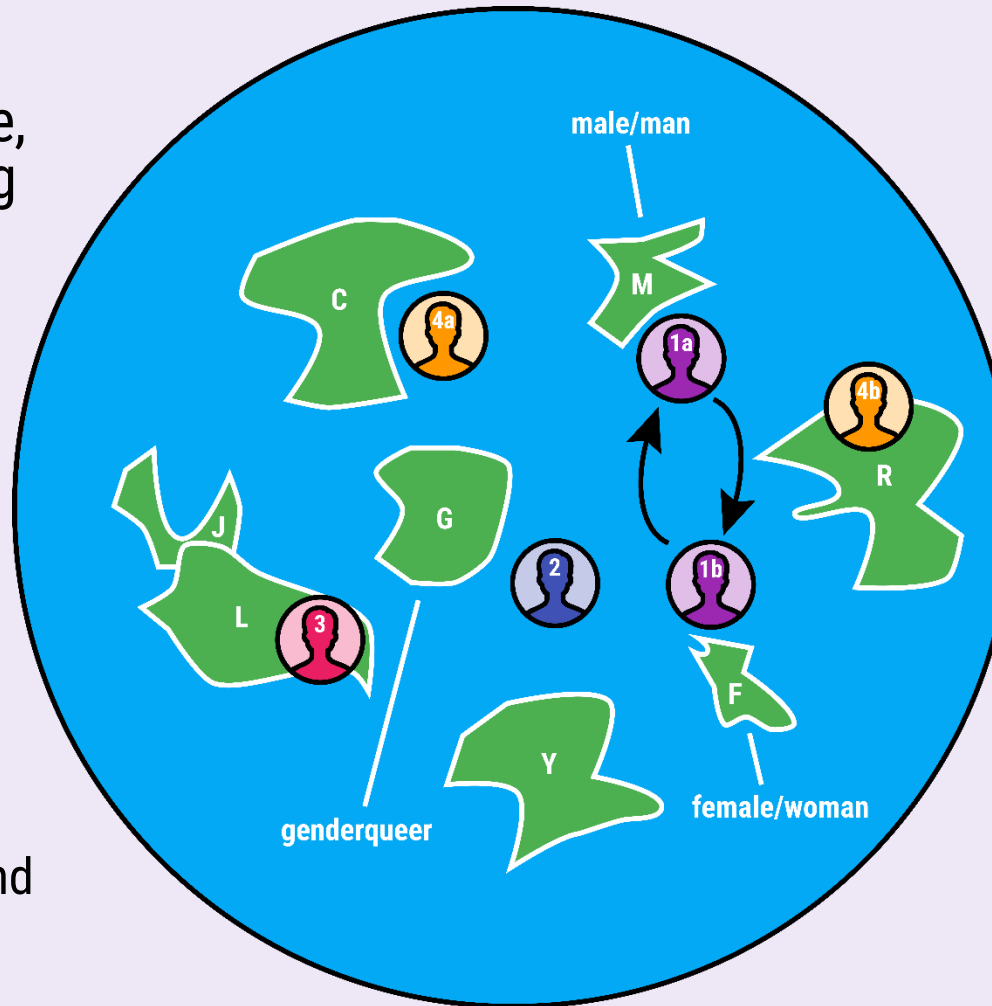


QGS: speakers (so far)

- > **Southern England English:** South England most of school (mostly South East)
- > **Age** at which major legal acts of 2004 (Civil Partnership; Gender Recognition) received royal assent (current range: 18-47: mean: 28.44)
- > **Ethnicity:** majority White British (limitation)
- > **Pronouns:** 9 they, 7 she, 4 he, 3 she/they, 1 he/they, 1 any
- > **Gender:** 18 non-binary (umbrella), 4 binary trans (3/4 male), 3 cis (1 “mostly”)
- > **Sexuality:** 8 with multiple categories (7 of which queer and something else), the rest single categories: 6 queer, 6 bisexual, 3 gay, 2 pansexual

Mapping gender

- > Inherently imperfect!
- > Map is different for everyone, based on own understanding of gender categories and what constitutes them (see subdimensions)
- > On the map
 - > 1: genderfluid (female/male)
 - > 2: (demi-)genderqueer (slightly weak alignment)
 - > 3: hypothetical gender “L” (strong alignment)
 - > 4: bigender (hypothetical genders “C” and “R”)



- > Shapes/positional gender categories (islands on map)
- > Positioning (avatars on map)
- > Metadata (represented on map)
 - > number
 - > fluidity/stasis
 - > proximity/strength of alignment
 - > trans/cis (potentially)
- > Dimensions (unrepresented on map)
 - > femininity/masculinity
 - > expression/embodiment/presentation/semiotic enactment
 - > behaviour
 - > social roles and positioning (power)
 - > romantic/sexual orientation (in some cultures)

Subdimensions?

inform

Dimensions

for example:

- femininity/masculinity
- expression/embodiment/presentation/semiotic enactment
- behaviour
- social roles and positioning (power)
- romantic/sexual orientation (in some cultures)

inform

Shapes

categorised as:

- female/woman
- genderqueer
- male/man
- neutrois

inform

(in combination with
own positioning)

Metadata

(relationship between shapes and own positioning)

for example:

- number
- fluidity/stasis
- proximity/strength of alignment
- trans/cis

categorised as:

- agender
- bigender
- demigender
- genderfluid
- trans

Sol: previous research

- > Psychological impact of gendered language
 - > Generic 'man' and other sexist language on women's performance and comprehension of texts (Weatherall 2005)
 - > **Cisgenderist** language impacts on the sense of exclusion of trans people (Ansara and Hegarty 2012)
 - > Cisgenderism: the ideology that undermines individuals' right to self-actualise and self-designate their gender

Sol: research questions

- 1 What are the experiences of being non-binary in relation to language usage and identity?
- 2 What are the daily challenges non-binary people face because of their gender identity?
- 3 Does employing neutral language aid non-binary individuals' sense of identity and belonging?
- 4 Does strictly binary language use in reference to non-binary people (i.e., misgendering) have an impact on non-binary people's identity construction?

Sol: methods

> Data

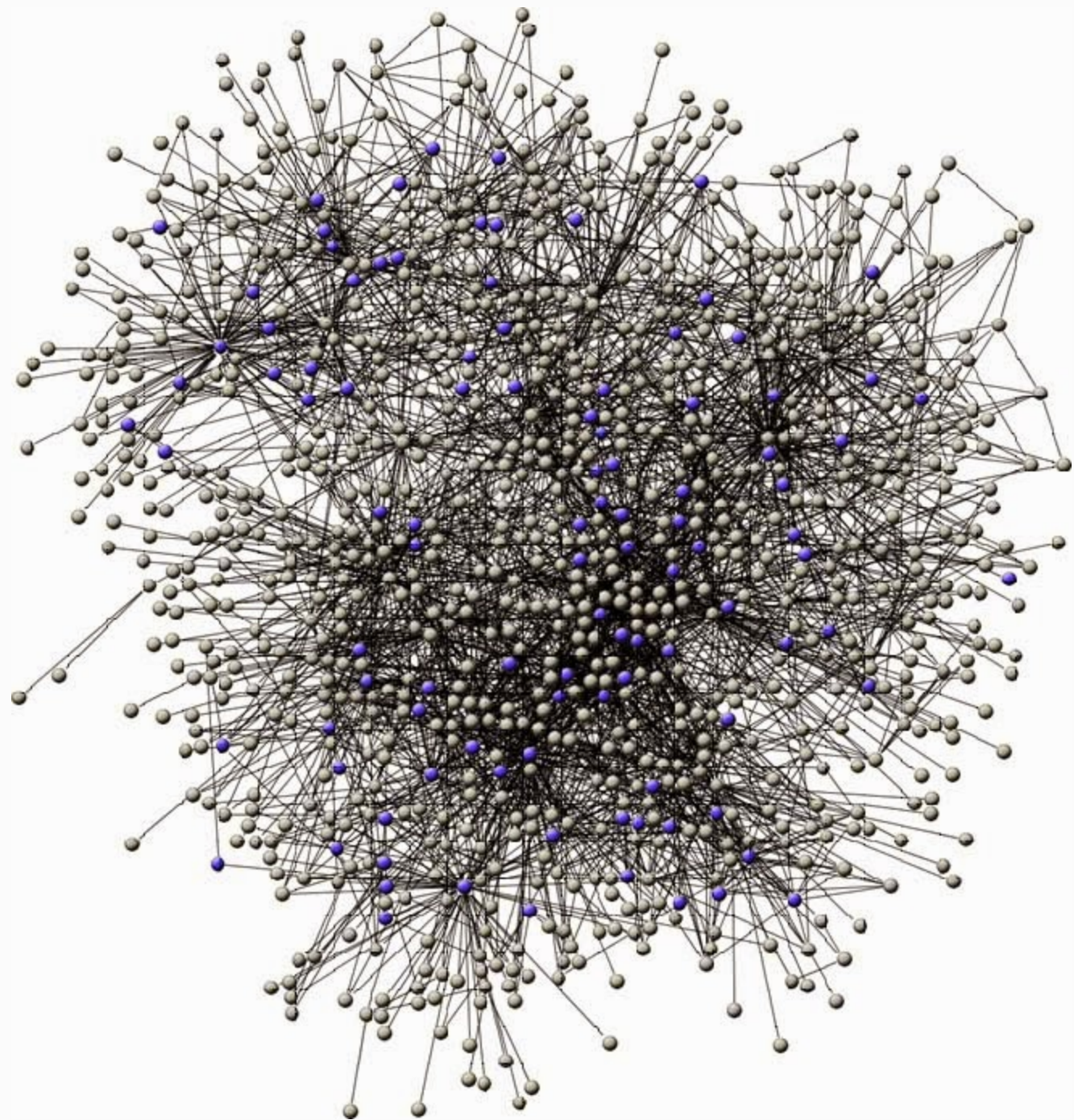
- > 22 semi-structured interviews
- > 22 short stories

> Analysis

- > Thematic Analysis
- > Discourse Analysis
- > Corpus Linguistics

Sol: articulating NB identities

- > Gender *becomings* (*assemblages*)
 - > The continuous and multiple **processes of becoming** (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) that affect and are *affected* by intensities geared to *territorialising* non-binary gender identities
 - > These affective intensities included particular **moments, proximities, and realisations** – which were experienced throughout the participants' lives
- > Linguistic *becomings*
 - > Discovering the language that best describes their relationship with gender
 - > Adopting that language



Sol: linguistic becomings

- > Language was indeed a central aspect in the constructions, maintenance, and constant development of a non-binary identity

“[Learning about non-binary identities was] so important! I think it pushed me towards finding new ways of expressing my gender identity. And also it gave me *new words* to understand my sense of self, and it gave me a drive to take steps towards seeing what feels good and what doesn't feel good - and what other words I want to use about myself and what other ways I wanna [use to] express my gender.”

(Elliott, they/them, genderqueer woman, AMAB)

Sol: linguistic becomings

- > **Gender labels:** all participants identified as non-binary
 - > Genderqueer (n=7)
 - > Agender (n=4)
 - > Trans (n=4) > “non-binary trans guy”
- > **Sexuality labels**
 - > Queer (n=9)
 - > Bisexual (n=9) > three people described themselves as both queer and bisexual
 - > Pansexual (n=3) > two out of three participants also described themselves as both pansexual and bisexual
 - > Two participants identified as asexual
- > **Names:** most participants either changed their name completely or used a gender neutral version (typically a shortened version) of their name

Sol: linguistic becomings

> Pronouns

- > 90% (20/22) of participants used they/them pronouns – three of which used other pronouns in addition to they/them
- > One participant used e/eir/em pronouns
- > In most cases, “*anything but*” their pronoun assigned at birth was tolerable

> Titles: most participants used Mx as their title

- > One participant was comfortable with Ms
- > One did not want to use any title for themselves

> Gender neutral language: the biggest issue related to language came from family and romantic relationships

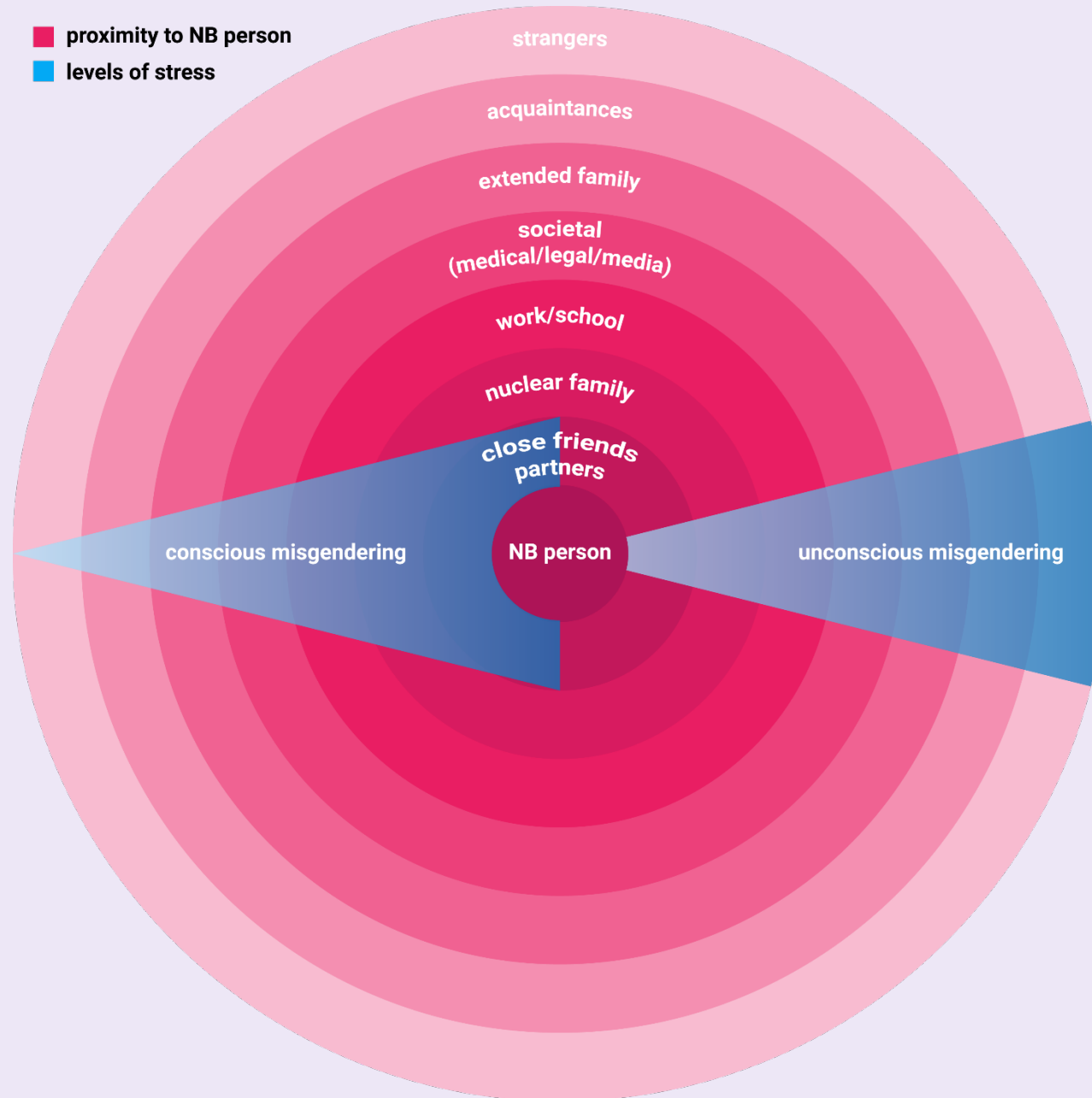
- > Sibling, child, nibling
- > Date, mate, babe, partner, lover etc.

Sol: linguistic becomings and stress

- > The intensity of the *linguistic becomings*, consequently, related to the stress that linguistic cisgenderism (i.e., misgendering) causes on the individuals
 - > Misgendering is more distressful when it comes from those who already know about the participants' gender and linguistic becomings – that is, the **proximity** to the individual

“Sometimes it hurts more than others when people use language to refer to you that is misgendering. But even when you sort of blow it off, like I said, most of the time at work, it’s just fine. But sometimes it just feels like **a thousand paper cuts**. And you know, by the end of the day you’re like, “how many times has someone misgendered me today?” It’s really difficult to speak about someone without using a pronoun, particularly when you’re not aware that’s a problem. And so, sometimes by the end of the day you just feel like, you’ve just been **robbed raw** and you’re like, “how many billions of times did someone refer to me as she and Miss today?”

(Dana, they/them, genderqueer, AFAB)



Recommendations

- > Vincent (2018): importance of trans history, assurance of transparency, nuanced language, feminist methodological contributions, intersectionality and respecting trans spaces
- > In the linguistics and social science context, we add*:
 - > Be clear on how you define terms (e.g. gender, sex, assigned gender/sex) and why you're interested in those categories (and not others)
 - > Avoid modelling and language that reifies binaries and cisnormativity (don't centre cis experience)
 - > Privilege self-identification (don't assume gender, sex or that everyone is cis)

* partial credit to Katka Showers-Curtis – some ideas developed in collaboration with Andy/Ynda for a conference workshop

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