

Cisgender and Cissexual

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The term *cissexual* is usually defined as “non-transsexual,” and the term *cisgender* is usually defined as “non-transgender.” *Cissexual* and *cisgender* disrupt the marked–unmarked relations between transsexuality and non-transsexuality and between transgender and non-transgender, relations in which non-transsexual, non-transgender womanhood is an unmarked norm for womanhood and non-transsexual, non-transgender manhood an unmarked norm for manhood.

The prefixes *cis-* and *trans-* are antonymic: roughly, *cis-* means “on this side of” and *trans-* means “to the other side of.” The *cis*–*trans* distinction was introduced into sexology by Ernst Burchard in 1914. Burchard contrasted *Cisvestitismus* (a type of inclination to wear clothing associated with one’s sex) with *Transvestitismus* (transvestism, or cross-dressing). *Cissexual* was coined by sexologist Volkmar Sigusch in 1991. *Cisgender* began circulating in online transgender discussion groups in the mid-1990s. Dana Leland Defosse and John Hollister used it in 1994, and Carl Buijs coined it independently in 1995. Biologist Julia Serano popularized *cissexual* and *cisgender* in 2007. *Cisgender* became increasingly widespread in gender and sexuality studies classrooms in 2008 and in peer-reviewed publications in 2009. Its deployment in gender and sexuality studies has come under intense critical scrutiny, particularly by A. Finn Enke (2012).

Cissexuality is usually conceptualized as the constitutive outside of transsexuality. By a traditional definition, a transsexual

is a person with two characteristics: first, the person develops a gender identity (a sense of self as female, male, or otherwise) that is opposite of the sex at birth; second, the person aligns the majority of his or her primary and secondary sex characteristics with the gender identity through hormone replacement therapy and sex reassignment surgery (the latter now commonly called gender confirmation surgery).

More recently, the relation between these two characteristics has been destabilized by phenomena such as, first, no-hormone (no-ho) and non-operative (non-op) transsexuality and, second, genderqueerness. First, if a person with a transsexual gender identity is no-ho and non-op, then the person does not pursue and has not received hormone replacement therapy or gender confirmation surgery, because medical transition is too difficult to access (especially for someone who is underage, poor, racialized, or undocumented), too risky (especially in the absence of professional supervision), or otherwise undesirable. Second, a person may pursue or may have received hormone replacement therapy and gender confirmation surgery but have a non-binary gender identity (such as genderqueer) or no gender identity.

Today, a typical explanation of the distinction between transsexuality and cissexuality is as follows: a transsexual is a person with a gender identity that is opposite of the sex at birth, whereas a cissexual is a person with a gender identity that *matches* the sex at birth. This explanation is contested in at least four ways. First, if cissexuality is conceptualized as the constitutive outside of transsexuality, then this explanation effaces non-binary gender identities. Second, in contrast to the adjectival forms *transsexual person* and

cissexual person, the noun forms *transsexual* and *cissexual* objectify people by defining them only by their transsexuality or cissexuality rather than also by their personhood. Third, the word *opposite* denies the possibility that femaleness and maleness are, or may be socially constructed as, analogues. And fourth, sex at birth is not a stable ground from which one can measure the distance to gender identity.

Common replacements for the phrase *sex at birth* include *sex*, *sex assignment*, *sex assignment at birth*, *gender assignment*, and *gender assignment at birth*. This variability suggests the extent to which sex is a contested category. Sex may be conceptualized from the perspective of essentialism or social constructionism. According to an essentialist perspective, femaleness or maleness is an essential property of the body. A social constructionist may emphasize the discursive assignment of sex (through language such as *clitoris*, *penis*, or *ambiguous genitalia*), the surgical assignment of sex (through genital surgery), or the administrative assignment of gender (through documentation such as a birth certificate). The discursive assignment may be female, male, or intersex; the discursive, surgical, and administrative assignments may or may not align normatively; and these assignments may or may not change over time. This myriad of possibilities raises complicated questions about the relation of cissexuality to embodiment.

Just as cissexuality is usually conceptualized as the constitutive outside of transsexuality, *cisgender* is usually conceptualized as the constitutive outside of transgender. Distinctions between transsexuality and transgender are predicated on distinctions among sex (which may be defined as biological femaleness, maleness, or intersexuality), gender (which may be defined as social femininity, masculinity, or androgyny), and sexuality (which may be defined as comprising erotic

desires, erotic behaviors, and identities based on those desires and behaviors). In 1965, psychiatrist John F. Oliven used *transgenderism* as a preferred synonym for *transsexualism* to distinguish the desire to change gender from erotic desire. In 1969, transgender activist Virginia Prince coined the term *transgenderal*, explaining that whereas transsexuals change their sex (through medical intervention), transgenderals change their gender (through self-presentation). In the 1970s, alternative forms such as *trans-gender* became umbrella terms that designated a spectrum from transsexual people to cross-dressers. In the 1980s, *trans-* terms came to signify an even broader spectrum of “gender bending.” In 1992, transgender activist Leslie Feinberg politicized *transgender*, describing “transgender liberation” as a movement to end the oppression of all who defy gender norms.

Usage of *cisgender* depends on that of *transgender*. If *transgender* is used as a preferred synonym for *transsexual*, then *cisgender* is used as one for *cissexual*. In contrast, if *transgender* is used as an umbrella term for gender non-normativity, then *cisgender* is used as one for gender normativity. The latter usage expands the purview of *cis-* from gender identity to gender expression and sex (insofar as sex is biological gender rather than discrete from gender).

As a term for gender normativity, *cisgender* is controversial when deployed in reference to people. The controversy centers on three issues. First, insofar as everyone deviates from, and is disciplined by, gender norms, *cisgender person* has an absent referent. To deny this absence is to efface the gender variance of, and the disciplinary power of gender norms for, non-transgender-identified people. Second, when individuals do not self-identify as *cisgender*, identifying them as such may disrespect their self-identities and right to self-definition. And third, in subcultural communities that center or value gender

non-normativity, identifying individuals as cisgender may marginalize or denigrate them.

Alternative forms of *cissexual* and *cisgender* include *cis*, *cis-*, and *cisgendered*. *Cis* may serve as an abbreviation of *cissexual*, *cisgender*, or both. The hyphen in *cis-* signifies open-endedness, indicating that the user does not wish to foreclose possibilities for the word stem (possibilities such as *sex* and *gender*). *Cisgendered* – a past participial adjective, as in *cisgendered person* – implies that *cisgender* is a verb. That is, expressed in the active voice, someone or something cisgenders a person; expressed in the passive voice, the person is cisgendered (by someone or something); thus, a cisgendered person exists. If scholars continue to use the past participial adjectival form, then they may wish to identify, and theorize the nature of, the entity or process who/that cisgenders.

The cis family of concepts includes the cisgender gaze (a gaze that objectifies and misgenders transgender people), cisgenderism (an ideology that privileges cisgender), cisplaining (condescendingly explaining gender to transgender people), cisnormativity (the governance of cis norms), cissexism (an ideology that privileges cissexuality), cissexual assumption (the assumption that cissexual experiences of embodiment are universal (Serano 2007)), and cissexual gender entitlement (the belief that cissexual people are “the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men” (Serano 2007, 166)).

The most generative cis-related concept is cis privilege. By a typical definition, cis privilege is the opportunity to improve one’s life insofar as this opportunity is conferred on the basis of one’s cis identity. Some interpret identity in such a definition as *self*-identity (one’s psychological sense of self), whereas others interpret it as *public* identity (the visible representation of oneself by oneself or others). These interpretations implicate competing

understandings of the nature and function of privilege, particularly at times when transsexual/transgender (trans) people “pass” as cis.

The concept of cis privilege was popularized by the “Cis Privilege Checklist” (Cedar 2008). This checklist details examples of cis privileged access to healthcare, identity documents, legal counsel, media representation, and public restrooms, as well as privileged expectations of privacy, recognition, respect, self-determination, support, and validation. Subsequent scholarship analyzes cis privilege in particular social contexts, such as gay male social spaces (Walls and Costello 2010) and airports (Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012).

The reality of cis privilege is denied by members of a radical feminist subculture sometimes known as trans-exclusionary radical feminism. Members of this subculture believe that gender privilege/oppression operates exclusively along the axis male/female: gender privilege is bestowed through raising some people as male, and gender oppression is imposed through raising others as female. From this perspective, *cisgender’s raison d’être* is as follows: trans people who were raised as male deny their privilege by claiming that they are oppressed as transgender, and they deny the oppression of women raised as female by claiming that these women are privileged as cisgender. This argument leads to the conclusion that *cisgender* obfuscates rather than names gender privilege.

Perhaps the most promising direction for future scholarship on cissexuality and cisgender is analysis of cis privilege from an intersectional perspective (one that acknowledges the distinct experiences produced by intersecting axes of privilege/oppression). Noting that gender normativity is always already mediated by race, nationality, class, and ability, Enke (2012) calls for interrogation of the mutual constitutivity of cis privilege and privilege along those other axes. Moreover, because some women who were

assigned female at birth have developed a self-concept as victims of gender oppression, they resist the idea that they experience gender privilege, such as cis privilege; conversely, because of the same self-concept, some trans people resist the idea that they experience gender privilege, such as male or masculine privilege. Scholars may wish to illuminate a path out of this impasse by considering how gender itself comprises not a monolithic axis of privilege/oppression, but multiple intersecting axes, including cissexual/transsexual, cisgender/transgender, male/female, and masculine/feminine.

SEE ALSO: Feminism, Radical; Gender Bender; Genderqueer; Intersectionality; Intersexuality; Privilege; Sex Versus Gender Categorization; Transgender Movements in International Perspective; Transgender Movements in the United States; Transsexuality

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