
‘TRANS’ IS MY GENDER MODALITY: A MODEST TERMINOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

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Currently, no word exists in our vocabulary for the broad category which includes being trans and being cis. This terminological blind spot interferes with clinicians, theorists, and transgender people’s ability to speak about important realities at a higher level of generality. The absence of this higher order term has tended to reproduce a strict dichotomy between cis and trans which has hindered discussions on the gendered experiences of intersex people as well as those non-binary people who do not consider themselves trans. Whereas the gay-straight binary, which renders invisible bisexual, pansexual, and other queer people, can be avoided through discussions couched in terms of sexual orientation, no analogous notion exists in relation to trans and cis people.

To address this gap, I propose the adoption of a new term: gender modality. Gender modality refers to how a person’s gender identity stands in relation to their gender assigned at birth. It is an open-ended category which includes being trans and being cis and welcomes the elaboration of further terms which speak to the diverse experiences people may have of the relationship between their gender identity and gender assigned at birth: the cis-trans binary is challenged by some non-binary people—especially agender people—some intersex people, some gender creative youth, and some people who were raised

in a fully gender neutral manner. It also creates a space for reflection on how gender is culturally situated and how terms like trans and cis do not reflect understandings of gender in all societies.

Whereas I typically define cis and trans as the presence or absence of correspondence between gender identity and gender assigned at birth, I chose to define gender modality through ‘standing in relation to’ because the all-or-nothing nature of ‘correspondence’ may be too constraining for the nuances gender modality wishes to capture.

I chose the word modality because it is a ‘manner or state of being, as distinct from its substance or identity’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Gender modality is about modalities of gender, about different ways of being our gender which do not alter its fundamental essence. The terminology recognises the difference between, say, trans and cis women, while at the same time recognising that this difference is not one that makes trans women any less or worse women. Whereas trans and cis women have a different gender modality, they share the same gender identity: woman.

Discrimination against trans people is often described as discrimination based on gender identity. However, it would be even more accurate to say it is discrimination based on gender modality, as trans people face discrimination because their gender identity doesn’t correspond to the gender they were assigned at birth—that is, because of their gender modality. A richer and more accurate vocabulary enhances our collective capacity to describe and improve our material circumstances. I believe that the notion of ‘gender modality’ fits this bill perfectly.