

# Gender and Identity in the Philosophy of Language

## *A Reply to Perfors, Piantadosi & Kidd (2023)*

Elliot Murphy, Jen Izaakson

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In a recent article published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, Andrew Perfors, Steven T. Piantadosi and Celeste Kidd (henceforth, PPK) present an argument for why using trans-inclusive language is from their perspective appropriate from a biological, social, and scientific viewpoint<sup>1</sup>. Their general justification is that sexual difference itself has little social significance and that sexual categories themselves are unstable. This is, in many ways, evocative of the rhetoric of Judith Butler and wider Queer Theory, though they are not referred to by PPK.

This is an extremely important and controversial issue for contemporary psychologists, philosophers, social theorists, and policy-makers, and hence PPK's article deserves to be assessed with care. Our intention here is to critically assess some major points of contention in PPK's article.

### Semantics of Gender

PPK begin by reviewing some important arguments in philosophy of language, e.g., that words provide instructions to build concepts, but do not directly 'pick out' things in the world, in and of themselves. We would qualify this assessment by noting that many words do of course denote aspects of explanatory scientific theories; 'language' means one thing to a novelist, and another thing to a syntactician. The same applies to 'man' and 'woman'. PPK do not mention one of the common definitions of 'man' ("adult human male"), but nor do they provide any conception of what terms like 'man' and 'woman' are meant to signify, cognitively speaking. They gesture towards "social roles" and "internal identities", but this only begs the question, precisely because the social role construal was putatively to be argued for, and "internal identity" can of course mean an infinite number of things either compatible or incompatible with 'cognitive naturalness'.

Yet, while concepts don't directly pick out things in the world, many concepts do carry a 'hidden structure' construal. An animal isn't something that merely looks like an animal, or performs like an animal; nor are gold and water (often considered 'natural kinds', incorrectly) determined purely by their physical form. There is much work on

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<sup>1</sup> Perfors, A., Piantadosi, S.T., & Kidd, C. (2023). Trans-inclusive gender categories are cognitively natural. *Nature Human Behaviour* 7: 1609-1611. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-023-01657-y>

psychological essentialism, developmental psychology, metonymy, polysemy and vagueness concerning these kinds of concepts.

This brings us to the central argument of PPK, that “gender categories that reflect the reality of the experiences of transgender people are more useful and cognitively natural than sex-based category definitions”. This is difficult to disagree with, since by definition “sex-based category definitions” are of course not going to map neatly onto *any* typology of mental and emotional experiences, precisely. Hence, PPK set up something of a category error, and then proceed to point out the existence of this error. We agree with the authors that “trans-inclusive gender categories are *cognitively natural*” (emphasis added). But we also have to acknowledge that for many people the concepts of demiboy, genderflux, antegender or innigender, often born from Tumblr during the 2010s, are difficult to construct a coherent meaning out of.<sup>2</sup>

This poses a serious challenge for PPK’s project—one that we do not think they adequately address, nor do we think they provide pragmatic, feasible ways to remedy this. For example, with many previous civil rights movements, the concepts of ‘votes for women’, ‘equal pay in the workplace’, and ‘apartheid’ have clear meanings with actionable policies attached to them.

### **Kill All Normies**

Demolishing or replacing terms like ‘woman’ or ‘man’, and shaming those who cannot easily understand the link between gendered language and self-proclaimed identities proposed by humanities fields like Queer Theory, would mean that many in the scientific community, biologists who study sexual differences, or social psychologists who explore behavioural trends amongst men and women, would find their work not just undermined, but difficult to conduct or make sense of.

This is why we feel it is too hasty, and ultimately regressive, to argue that traditional terms like ‘woman’ need to be expanded to accommodate every possible “reality of the experiences of transgender people”. Let’s stick with the example of transwomen for the moment. Instead of expanding our conception of what a possible man can be – a move that promotes empathy and understanding, and which would also serve to undermine harmful gendered stereotypes and biases feeding the current ‘crisis of masculinity’ – PPK seem to be arguing that across the board, for every case in question, we should ask women to expand their notion of womanhood to accommodate people whose lived experience is not aligned with their own conception of ‘male’.

The bottom line here, and where we strongly disagree with PPK, is that if concepts are to be fashioned to fit into this or that political/social agenda, then the politics and promotion need to be negotiated with all interested and impacted parties. This inevitably renders the results of this project unknown, and unpredictable – and messy. But we see

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.collectiveinkbooks.com/zer0-books/our-books/kill-all-normies>

no other option. The alternative solution is essentially direct conflict: Many parties seeing another's proposal as regressive rather than progressive.

We do not have a principled, moral objection to an individual's personal identity. Instead, we are aiming to negotiate into this conversation the potential impact the project outlined in PPK will have on discussions of women's issues, women's civil rights, and scientific study.

Take the intersex argument provided by PPK. Even if intersex people do not belong in either category, this neither entails a third category, nor does it disrupt the existence of male and female, since virtually every category is extensionally a bit fuzzy, especially in biology.

### **Gender Across Cultures**

Next, consider PPK's discussion of cross-cultural gender framing: "Across languages and cultures, all lexical concepts are conventions that are heavily shaped by communicative need, and people clearly need to communicate social roles and identities". They cite a number of cultures that embrace 'third genders', typically as a way to reframe homosexuality instead of heterosexuality (effeminate homosexual men reframed as heterosexual women). Piantadosi cited many more on Twitter/X<sup>3</sup>. Many of these third genders are documented to have not socialized with the men at all.

There are also, of course, many cultures over the world with various types of astrological frameworks or that worship multiple deities. All of these are perfectly "cognitively natural", and indeed highly intuitive and easy to understand. Many indigenous cultures historically carried out human sacrifices. Are they inherently useful because they are from cultures outside the West? PPK seem to presuppose this. We see no reason why all cultures and conventions, throughout human history, should not be assessed with the same universal philosophical criteria.

Philosopher Timothy Williamson once noted that the commonplace position that "all cultures and worldviews are equal, just different", while seemingly progressive, is often utilized in subtly regressive ways: If we refuse to acknowledge the possibility that our own worldview might be more scientifically accurate, more socially beneficial and just, more ethically refined, than the worldview proposed by an outside culture, then we are effectively communicating that we are also unwilling to acknowledge the opposite possibility; that other worldviews might actually be superior to our own.

PPK do not use these cultures in a way that effectively dismantles the following, simple framework: human beings are composed of (1) a *biological sex*, (2) a *sexuality and sexual preferences*, and (3) a *personality*. Many of the cultures cited by PPK invented 'third gender' categories to accommodate homosexual effeminate men into heterosexual, patriarchal social systems. But it does not follow from this that terms like 'man' and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/spiantado/status/1716482128341557382>

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'woman' cannot be used to denote biological structure. We maintain that these three factors are sufficient to explain these phenomena, and do not require a dismantling of womanhood (or manhood).

Every human being has a uniquely calibrated sexuality and psychological profile (personality). It follows from this that there are as many gender identities as there are human beings on the planet, given that each person's conception of their 'gender role' is specific to them. We feel that our position, in contrast to PPK's position, properly captures the full diversity and complexity of human life.

A crucial point here is that 'gender' falls under (3), personality; mostly to do with contentment in being so embodied. But discontentment does not mean that one is not so embodied, or some other category. We sympathize with the goal of trans-inclusive language in order to promote forms of social cohesion and to affirm an individual's self-identity, and their right to self-determination and to live a dignified life, but we also wish to interrogate the linguistic and logical bases of these arguments more than PPK seem willing to do.

For instance, intersex conditions do not disprove that there are biologically two sexes. They show that there are multiple sexual developmental differences that cause intersex conditions. Intersex does not mean 'third', nor does it indicate five, or six, or 29 sexes, simply because there is developmental sexual variation within each of the two sex categories. Intersex men are male and intersex women are female, according to, most accurately, their chromosomes. Issues of self-identity then take over, if an individual so chooses.

PPK argue that fighting against trans-inclusive language "is fighting to deny people civil rights". As mentioned, we strongly support trans-inclusive efforts to accommodate individuals with language properly aligned with their self-identity. However, unlike PPK, we also implore readers to consider the potential effects on women's civil rights and society, e.g., male rapists being housed in women's prisons, women's sports scholarships being taken by biological males, and men self-identifying into women's changing rooms and toilets for voyeuristic purposes. These examples have all occurred when those in power have become lax on the use of biological terms with clear legal status in order to accommodate biological males with a transgender identity.

In other words, no civil rights campaign has ever argued for civil rights to be *removed* from others. The Suffragettes wanted votes for women – they did not want votes to be taken away from men.

PPK dismiss these types of concerns: "[M]en and women overlap considerably on any given characteristic and many people do not fall into a simple binary classification". QED.

PPK then write: "Appropriate medical decision-making requires not only knowledge of natal sex but also information about gender and direct measurement of the relevant

physiological variables”. This is no doubt relevant to a number of types of medical treatment, but the only work that PPK cite in support of this claim, Bale and Epperson’s 2017 paper in *Neuropsychopharmacology*, argues very strongly that “[t]he inclusion of sex as a biological variable in research is absolutely essential for improving our understanding of disease mechanisms contributing to risk and resilience”<sup>4</sup>. When discussing the interface of sex and gender, Bale and Epperson note that some examples of relevant topics include “opportunities for education and enrichment, exposures to particular types of trauma and injury, and access to and uptake of behavioral health treatment”. When discussing how sex as a biological variable (SABV) applies to transgender populations, they note that research here “is nonexistent for most medical conditions”, and so they put the topic to one side and focus instead “on SABV in organisms/individuals for whom the gonadal hormonal milieu is consistent with their chromosomal sex”. There is only a single mention of “transgender” in Bale and Epperson’s entire article; specifically, when they note that they will not be talking about transgender research.

The vast majority of controversial cases in gender debates in the political and academic worlds have historically pertained to transwomen aiming to seek access to segregated spaces, and not transmen fighting to gain access to men’s prisons and locker rooms. Of course, these controversial cases only implicate an extremely small percentage of trans-identified people. Yet, this is no reason not to consider how best to respond to these situations, on a case-by-case basis, with care and compassion for all parties impacted. These themes of direct consequences and implications are not even acknowledged by PPK.

### **Roles and Conventions – Wherefore Art Thou?**

Effectively, PPK set up a straw man argument against gender critical philosophers. Instead of citing and engaging with their arguments, they claim that these philosophers maintain that only biological terms are useful, and then proceed to show through a number of examples that many terms are defined mostly in relation to social roles. Words have a *conventional* meaning, they argue. Still, it does not follow from this (neither in logic, nor in reality) that a woman cannot refer to herself as a woman and *not* be doing so to highlight her putative ‘social role’. Indeed, we would argue that to do so ultimately reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, instead of interrogating and undermining them.

Human beings are surely much more than just their gendered ‘social role’ (self-determined or otherwise), just as they are also much more than their physical features. PPK write: “A transgender person is no more making a claim about the size of their gametes when they state their gender than a person who doesn’t identify as trans is when they state theirs. Instead, both are communicating a social role”. We object to this characterization of what people are stating when they discuss their gender.

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<sup>4</sup> Bale, T.L., & Epperson, C.N. (2017). Sex as a biological variable: who, what, when, why, and how. *Neuropsychopharmacology* 42: 386-396. <https://www.nature.com/articles/npp2016215>

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By highlighting the legitimacy of trans-inclusive attempts at respectful language use, PPK lose sight of the importance of built-in, physical, lived existence; something that many people (especially many women) cannot escape by dint of pronoun selection. Can girls identify out of FGM? Can women living under the Taliban declare themselves male and begin university studies? The politics of the real world pose a nuisance to PPK's project, and they do not discuss ways to negotiate their agenda into the fabric of the real world (i.e., outside of Anglo-American academia). We think that PPK have a serious responsibility to address these concerns upfront.

In addition, we worry that PPK's ideas about categories and rigid gendered social roles could also be used as an argument for racial and caste-related terms. There are no shortage of "cognitively natural" racist categories in circulation. In addition, if social roles determine gender, then how are women to escape their particular social roles? If a woman does not want to do the washing up every night, is she actually a man? Why is it socially naturally for men to be free from domestic labour, but not women? If a man performs the same role as a 1950s housewife, what implications does this have for his 'gender'? Under our framework, we see no implications whatsoever. But for PPK, it is unclear.

For example, PPK discuss transwomen using terms such as the following: "[E]ven if they have lived as female since childhood, even if hormones and surgery have greatly altered their body, and even if their social experience has been almost indistinguishable from that of cisgender women". While we take issue with much of this phrasing, we take particular issue with the phrase "lived as female since childhood". What does it mean to live as female? Other than, say, navigating a sexist world, the basis of which, is sex?

Another point to stress here is that part of living "as a woman" includes both being treated as a woman by dint of one's physical characteristics, and having to deal with the consequences of such characteristics, especially during puberty.

Given the changes to social roles over time, does it follow that many women in today's world are not women judged by past standards, but many stay-at-home fathers are? This seems absurdly regressive—almost comically so. PPK say nothing about these types of conflicts.

We nevertheless feel that any notion of social role must be orthogonal. If 'woman' means a social role, then someone who denies that they are a woman could end up counting as a woman *if they adhere to a certain social role aligned with 'woman'*, whether they wanted to or not. Moreover, someone who self-identifies as a woman but who remains in some adjacent social role would also therefore not be a woman, which means that self-identification is not necessary or sufficient. This renders the whole issue opaque, especially given that no-one knows what a social role of a woman is supposed to be.

The project proposed by PPK attempts to empty the terms 'woman' and 'man' of all meaning, and instead replace them with a social use perspective, which says that the term 'woman' or 'man' can be utilized by any human being who wishes to do so. They are

concerned with finding “useful labels in day-to-day life”. Their claim is that this is a liberatory move, and frees a number of people struggling to come to terms with their personal identity. No academic with any degree of compassion could not also consider that, on the other hand, it would necessarily involve the status, rights, and possibility of self-organization for biological women coming under question. PPK do not explain what they mean by “useful” when discussing lexical conventions with respect to trans-inclusive language. “Useful” in what way?

### **Utility, Respect, and Things**

Ultimately, the argument that transwomen are women can clearly be motivated from a *social utility* perspective. Namely, to use the pronouns people wish for reasons of inclusivity and endorsing their identity. We agree that this is justified based on social utility, societal inclusion, and so forth. We should behave, perform, and act in a way that shows respect for each other’s self-identification. This essentially reduces the formula “transwomen are women” to “treat people like they want to be treated, with kindness and respect”. We have already noted a number of examples in which this approach can lead to harmful consequences, but we certainly acknowledge that for the vast majority of individuals, showing respect results in receiving respect in return.

But we also wish to stress that, while language may of course be vague, as PPK note, this does not help with the circular definitions of womanhood that arise from their formulation, which have been well explored in the philosophy literature, most clearly by Prof. Kathleen Stock’s book *Material Girls* and Dr. Holly Lawford-Smith’s book *Gender Critical Feminism*. PPK cite and dismiss, but do not engage with, these critiques.

If circular definitions were acceptable here, then we should be able to say to each other: “I collect blargs. A blarg is something that is identified as a blarg”. We should then be able to ask: “Point to the thing in this room that is a blarg”. The issue seems self-evidently problematic to us, and many others<sup>5</sup>.

Basic Freudian thought and materialist philosophers are also supportive of the notion that words do not trump material circumstance, and believing it does is a form of idealism that postulates mind over matter. A female faced with horrifying sexual exploitation through sex trafficking cannot escape this reality by simply identifying as a man. As indicated above, it is to the harsher realms of material reality that we are mainly directing our critique, and we do not disagree with PPK in their more general call for the importance of language and compassion.

Though we do not doubt the significance of recognizing and respecting personality differences and non-conformity across the sexes, we also note that in a world where most young people expect to have lower prospects than their parents and have a lower chance to own property than generations before them, a reliance on language to subjectively reproduce themselves is no surprise. More and more, we are facing a competition of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHxHSD4qWEM>

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language versus materialism, not in terms of academic tradition, but in ways that cast language as constituting the fabric of reality itself.

Social and cultural issues and categories are, for certain, more “cognitively natural” and easier to comprehend than the cold, detached world of material existence and socioeconomics. Turning away from materialism can have extremely productive, creative outcomes for exploring new conceptual and psychological spaces—but this can also carry problematic effects, creating conflicts between material reality and identity claims.

“Things”, writes Kazuo Ishiguro in *The Buried Giant*, “take strange shapes in the mind”. Our framework wholeheartedly embraces the strangeness, the complexity, of these shapes. We fear that PPK’s article, intentionally or not, is focused on embracing an influential contemporary current to gender discourse, but without much thought given to the difficult issue of material consequences and conflicts in civil rights.