


Psychology and cis-realism

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ENG Abstract: This article explores the shifting landscape of psychology as a discipline, focusing on how the transphobic backlash reshapes discourses of science, identity, and realism. It critiques the resurgence of 'cis-realism'—a pseudo-scientific stance reinforcing normative gender binaries—and links this to the historical complicity of psychology with capitalist and reactionary ideologies. The article calls for resistance to the appropriation of psychology in anti-trans discourses and reflects on emerging progressive spaces within the discipline that challenge traditional epistemologies.

Keywords: capitalist realism; cisgender; critical psychology; feminist epistemology; transphobia.

ES Psicología y cis-realismo

Resumen: Este artículo explora los cambios en la psicología como disciplina, centrándose en cómo la reacción transfóbica reconfigura los discursos sobre la ciencia, la identidad y el realismo. Critica el resurgimiento del 'cis-realismo', una postura pseudocientífica que refuerza las normas binarias de género, y lo vincula con la complicidad histórica de la psicología con ideologías capitalistas y reaccionarias. El artículo incita a resistir la apropiación de la psicología en discursos antitrans y reflexiona sobre los espacios progresistas emergentes dentro de la disciplina que desafían las epistemologías tradicionales.

Palabras clave: epistemología feminista; personas cisgénero; psicología crítica; realismo capitalista; transfobia.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Psy professions. 3. Sex and gender. 4. Psychology, research and society. 5. Back to science, now to cis-realism. 6. Strange bed-fellows. 7. Mind your language. 8. Spsychology. 9. Data availability. 10. Statement of LLM usage. 11. References.

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on how the discipline of psychology is changing, and the limits set by the backlash against trans people. This is now framed by those who pathologise trans as 'woke', and the backlash aims to return psychology to the conservative positions that guaranteed social stability and the production of well-behaved citizens (Hughes, 2025). The discipline of psychology, which fashions itself as a science of the individual, took root in the personnel divisions of US American corporations at the beginning of the twentieth century, and since then it has expanded as an academic study of individuals and professional practice to encourage and enable people to cope as normal in capitalist society. Psychology was never scientific, but it guarded its supposed expertise through what some psychologists still call prediction and control. The discipline nowadays primarily concerns itself with cognition, how we think, and behaviour, and brings those two elements together in

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), which aims to correct supposedly wrong thinking and behaviour and adapt people to what the psychologist deems to be healthy work, family and citizenship roles (Loewenthal and Proctor, 2018).

However, crucially, psychology, which dedicates itself to the normalization of behaviour in order to keep people in line, is peopled by many well-meaning academics and practitioners who went into psychology to understand and help people. Those people and progressive arguments have come to the fore of the field, but now there is a backlash, one that targets trans people. This paper provides a brief review of the problem—traditional normalizing psychology—and of the way a backlash against progressive ideas in the discipline that is targeting trans people is emerging in the UK; a context that, as Judith Butler (2024) has pointed out, is emblematic of the dangerous rise globally of reactionary 'gender critical' ideology. That backlash has consequences for the oppressed who organize to claim their identity as a form of resistance

(Dashtipour, 2012) and that is precarious in the context of recent 'anti-woke' attacks on identity, claims that one should wish for the end of identity, in the field of psychological research (Hughes, 2025).

2. Psy professions

Psychology is often confused with the range of other 'psy professions' that have blossomed in the last century, and it struggles to keep its place in the status pecking order to prove its use. It differentiates itself from psychiatry, which often has more status, and which relies on a medical model of distress. Psychiatrists are trained as medical doctors before they specialise in psychiatry, and they then carry their biological understanding of the body into their knowledge of the mind and behaviour. Psychotherapy and counselling are lower down the food chain, and psychology tries to maintain its position above these rivals by claiming expertise in, for instance, CBT, and through protected titles like clinical psychology or counselling psychology (Parker, 2007).

On the margins is psychoanalysis, a psy profession that is viewed with some suspicion for its loyalty to Freud and his followers, but which is often as much of an obstacle to social change as the other approaches, and there have been challenges to the transphobia inside psychoanalysis, opposition to the normalization agenda that pervades that clinical theoretical approach to distress (Gherovici, 2017). CBT is only one part of psychology, though nowadays its most successful part, and most psychology courses include a ragbag of theories only held together by its supposedly scientific experimental method. This is mainly a quantitative, reductive, pretend-scientific experimental method in which behaviour is measured, and internal mental states, the cognitions, are speculated about. Something that obsesses many psychologists is how to explain what gender and sex really are, which normalizes certain kinds of body to be acceptable within a sex-binary understanding of human experience (Roselló-Peñaloza, 2018).

3. Sex and gender

The aim of explanation in psychology is to predict and control behaviour, and so in experimental studies there is always a search for causes for what pushes and pulls people to do things. The many rather ridiculous experiments in the history of psychology extract people from real life and manipulate the conditions, the variables, so that the researcher can pin down what's what. This approach plays out in the ideological specification of 'gender' in child development (Klein, 2017). One of the most popular research questions that often pops up in questions after a talk on a psychological study is about 'sex differences'. Actual significant results of sex difference research are sparse; the differences are more sought for than found. And, symptomatically, psychologists routinely forget that the 'Turing test', used as a benchmark for marking out artificial intelligence as different from human intelligence revolves around gender rather than the difference between man and machine.

Psychology has worried away for years about what role sex differences play in different kinds of situations, and the study of sex differences is at the

heart of much developmental psychology and personality theory. There has then been much puzzling about an argument that was made forcefully by feminists, that there is a big difference between biological sex and social gender roles. Eventually, psychologists seemed to get it, to get the point that sex does not determine gender and certainly does not cause it. But then, arguments from second and third-wave feminism, particularly from queer theory, upset and confused things again, confused the psychologists trying to look for causes of behaviour.

Queer theory, and the range of different perspectives in LGBTQIA+ politics, showed us that even sex was not a scientifically fixed baseline against which gender or anything else could or should be measured. People are assigned a biological sex at birth, and that is something that is often made invisible, which produces pain and exclusion to intersex people. Descriptions from so-called biological or evolutionary psychology about X and Y chromosomes are suffused with ideological assumptions, more ideology than pure science. Queer perspectives have challenged the perverse way that psychology frames behaviour and experience, and the transphobia that results from mainstream approaches (Tosh, 2014).

4. Psychology, research and society

These political arguments, particularly by feminists, and including feminists inside psychology from the 1970s onwards, opened a space for a challenge to what the discipline claimed as a science (Burman, 1990). There are now forms of feminist psychology and lesbian and gay psychology, both of which jostle for room alongside 'transpersonal psychology' and other kinds of approaches. These critiques of mainstream psychology then enable an intersection between feminist and anti-racist perspectives (Nayak, 2014). Some are optimistic about these approaches, seeing a dramatic change in the discipline, while others are skeptical, arguing that turning different progressive political movements into psychology does not do us any favours, that there is always the risk of the 'psychologisation' of our lives (De Vos, 2012).

At any rate, there has been a sea-change, with a new openness to kinds of research that do not search for causes of behaviour but instead ask people for their reasons for doing what they do. Many of the old certainties about what gender and sex have been thrown into question, for example in a new attention to the 'performative' dimension of our lives (Butler, 2024). That is, the performance of our identity and what we want identity to do in social relationships and society is of overriding importance, over and against so-called expert opinions, never mind psychologists, telling us who we really are and what we are. These new political spaces inside psychology have led to different ideas about science, so instead of research simply collecting brute facts, we notice how the description of facts is always connected to history, ideology and our own standpoint. In recent years, some progressive ideas about collective action and social change have also appeared in the discipline, leading to a backlash. It is this backlash against progressive, if slow and limited shifts in psychology that is now so toxic.

5. Back to science, now to cis-realism

In conditions of austerity and creeping fascism, some psychologists have retreated to hard-core individualist assumptions that were always there at the birth of the discipline (Hughes, 2025). It is there that appeals to science are bolstered by realist arguments that cut against the lives of those who 'deviate' from the norm, who deviate from the cis position that wants to make gender correspond to taken-for-granted biological difference. The term 'cis' is used to describe that which falls on one side of a supposed sex binary or other, male or female, in contrast to 'trans' which denominates the more fluid actual experience of being gendered in a patriarchal society (Roselló-Peñaloza, 2018). It is there that the backlash in psychology poses a particular threat to trans lives. A battleground now is over what science is about and who it is for. What kind of science psychology is has always been contentious. Most psychology is underpinned by an empiricist approach that only takes what can be observed in experimental research seriously. This approach limits human beings to what is observed about behaviour currently, at this point in history to capitalism. A recent player in the debate has come from an approach called realism, which sometimes even styles itself as 'critical realism' (Collier, 1994). This ostensibly 'critical' approach uses the motif of 'realism' to argue that empirically real biological phenomena, including male and female bodies, can be observed and treated. Whichever way you play it, whether the threat comes from empiricist experimental research or from realist attempts to tell us what is hidden under the surface, psychology ends up slap-bang in the middle of what Mark Fisher diagnosed as 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009).

Most psychology is a form of capitalist realism, which tells us that nothing can be changed since this is the way the world is. The message that «there is no alternative» comes through time and again in psychological research about what we must be and how we must behave and think to be happily adapted to society. In the process, trans life, which challenges existing ideological categories of sex and gender, is erased, rendered invisible, or it is pathologised; that is, it is treated as abnormal.

6. Strange bed-fellows

Here, we find some strange bed-fellows in the backlash against innovative, progressive shifts of perspective inside the discipline of psychology, a backlash that puts trans lives in the firing line. We know from the political realm that there has been a vicious transphobic assault on trans and that this has often drawn explicitly or implicitly on psychology. We will focus here on the UK, where, as Judith Butler (2024) has noted, the backlash against trans is particularly virulent, though their book does also have international scope. There are corresponding critiques of psychology in other parts of the world that also deserve attention, ranging from South Africa, where there is a focus on the intersection between gender, sexuality and 'race' (Judge, 2017) to India, where there are attempts to 'queer' what we understand by 'mental health' (Chatterjee, 2018).

Butler devotes a chapter to those characterised in the UK as trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS). This is a controversial labelling of those who like to present themselves as 'gender critical,' but it is important to be clear about the difference between what 'ideology' and 'critical' means to those of us on the left, and what it means to those who are either already on the right, fuelled by religious zeal, or who are twisting the terms 'ideology' and 'critical' into weapons against trans people. Butler points out that the 'gender critical' activists who call themselves 'radical feminists,' and who cite figures like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon as their predecessors, are rewriting history. For all their faults, Dworkin and MacKinnon were radical feminists who were trans-inclusive; it is an irony of history that the TERFS are, Butler writes, woeful complicit with the key aims of what Butler characterises as a 'new fascism'.

There is, in this movement that has gained a hold among some ex-feminists in the UK, a betrayal of feminism as a politics of alliance, and the danger that we are fighting our corner at the expense of others. Much as the TERFS, and those on the religious right, try to define what the 'sex' is that they take as the basic underlying binary that must define all worthwhile identity, they cannot escape the fact that what we assume or claim to be 'gender' goes all the way down into what we experience of our bodies. These apparently 'theoretical' arguments have direct consequences on the lives of trans people (Fortune et al., 2025).

We see this in the *Cass Review* (Cass, 2024) released by the UK government in 2024, which, after noticing that the National Health Service 'Gender and Identity Services' (GIDS) were under-resourced and failing trans people, weirdly and ideologically turned its attention to the causes of an increase in trans people. This was classic reductive and distracting psychological reasoning (Pearce, 2024). We saw it in the ruling Labour Party quickly adapting to a transphobe position, welcoming the *Cass Review* and not only endorsing the report but falling in line with the even more reactionary spin on it that accompanied its release in the tabloid press. Here, the old transphobe obsession with toilets re-appeared, and instead of all public toilets being made safe for everyone, for anyone, there were calls for gender-segregated toilets. And, tragically, we have seen a range of left organisations parroting anti-trans arguments.

There is something 'psychological', an appeal to the normative discipline of psychology, that holds these different arguments together, a pretend scientific argument that is a twist on capitalist realism that tells us that we cannot change what we know to be the case about the world today. The worst of ideology in capitalist society often appeals to psychology to give scientific legitimacy to its arguments. Complementing capitalist realism is a kind of Stalinist realism that comes from the left or ex-left (Parker, 2022). It is Stalinist in the sense that it defines what underlying reality is as a bedrock human nature that cannot be changed and it defines that underlying reality in line with reactionary political positions.

Just as forms of organisation on the far left have often been affected by old forms of Stalinist organisation, and this is the case even for many Trotskyist groups or libertarian socialist organisations that should know better, so many forms of politics on the far left have often been infected by forms of stalinist realist reasoning; the logic of this reasoning is that since this is what we see in the world and what we deep-down believe, it must be true, this is the way things must be. This assumption is what plays itself out now in the backlash against trans lives, in and alongside psychology as 'cis realism'.

7. Mind your language

One example in the UK is a group that includes ex-leftists called 'BPS Watch' and claims to be «querying what goes on at the British Psychological Society». One thing that is indicative, ideologically symptomatic about this group is the semiotic twist on 'queer' into 'querying', quite possibly a quite unintentional, even unconscious mutation from questioning of sex and gender into some kind of quasi-vigilante discourse. The name of the group will also evoke for some on the left and feminist movements something more sinister, the so-called 'Red Watch' websites set up by fascist groups decades back. What the BPS Watch group has in their sights now is what they see as the promotion of transgender lives by the British Psychological Society (BPS), the 60,000 strong organisation that brings together most academic and practising psychologists in the UK. The BPS has published recent issues of its house magazine *The Psychologist* that are trans-inclusive, and 'BPS Watch' views these developments as signs of corruption, hailing the *Cass Review* as exposing what it frames as the psychology-led Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) service at the Tavistock Clinic.

What BPS Watch activists particularly dislike is the turn from science in psychology into a concern with language, something that is, understandably, viewed as a threat to the Stalinist realist mode of the so-called realist approach its supporters advocate. Here there is evident annoyance not only at kinds of language that they do not like but also at the reflection on that language that has gone alongside the turn from fake-scientific research to newer forms of qualitative, feminist and discursive research. That reflection challenges the naturalisation of sex, gender and racial differences that have always operated ideologically outside psychology, naturalisation that has also often entailed 'psychologisation'. The transphobes seeking to turn the clock back complain about the word salad language of queer and trans politics, hating the word 'cis', which so usefully names the disavowed standpoint they are pushing. What they don't notice about how their BPS Watch website is written is that they themselves throw together a word salad in each posting drawn from tabloid-press commonsense. This is why they use the twisted phrase «gender critical» to attack queer critiques of traditional gender

and sex binaries. This is realism about sex and gender that cashes out as transphobe hatred of people who do not live and speak in the taken-for-granted normative categories of identity that psychology as a discipline traditionally traded in.

8. Spychology

We should always distrust what a self-claimed expert in our psychology tells us about who we are and what we can be. That applies to even the nicest psychologists and the best, most progressive psychologists who have been questioning things inside the discipline will know this and will see that they should not be defining what is normal or abnormal about sex or gender or being trans. As a discipline that likes to wear the mantle of science, psychology has often operated under capitalism as a tool of prediction and control, a form of 'psychology'. This designation resonates with a critical-psychological analysis of the way that the discipline is embedded in a paranoid process of searching out what is thought to be 'woke', a process of 'psycurity' that is also colonialist in its derogation and control of other cultures (Liebert, 2019). Now we should take notice of the backlash against progressive, more open ideas inside psychology, against the space we have to speak for ourselves inside the discipline and grasp the way that the appeals to science and realism usually amount to little more than a toxic form of cis-realism, what we could see as 'cisology'. Cis-realism is the approach that psychology has traditionally taken towards 'sex differences', specifying these differences as underlying 'real' biological entities, and 'cisology' names psychology as a paranoid disciplinary research approach that insists on normalizing behaviour and experience in line with heteronormative norms.

Has traditional psychology not always been a form of cisology, something the transphobe backlash wants to return us to? This type of naturalisation is what psychology has always at root been about, and so cisology and its underlying pretend-scientific stance of cis-realism is something progressive colleagues inside or outside the discipline should notice and find alternatives to in alliance with those who suffer it. This enactment of cis-realism in the discipline of psychology that effectively functions as a form of 'cisology' poses new challenges for those who collectively resist the imposition of some kinds of identity demanded by the discipline and tactically claim an identity of their own.

9. Data Availability

No new data was generated or analyzed, and no materials of interest—such as bibliographies, tables, images, observation protocols, interview scripts, or AI prompts—were used.

10. Statement of LLM usage

This article has not used any text generated by an LLM (ChatGPT or others) for its writing.

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