

Rejecting the Group-Based View of Oppression

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I. Standard View: Oppression is Group-Based

- a) Groups are the primary subjects of oppression (it is groups that are oppressed)
 - i. Frye: birdcage metaphor for oppression, “The “inhabitant” of the “cage” is not an individual but a group, all those of a certain category”
 - ii. Young: “oppression is a condition of groups”
 - iii. Cudd: oppression is a social injustice that is done “on social groups by social groups”
- b) Individuals are only oppressed as members of a social group (it is because you are G)
 - i. Comes out of the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression
 - ii. Frye: “One is marked for application of oppressive pressures by one’s membership in some group or category. Much of one’s suffering and frustration befalls one partly or largely because one is a member of that category.”
- c) Oppression organizes groups into a hierarchical relationship along a social axis (privileged group > oppressed group)
 - i. Illustration: Men who are oppressed are not oppressed *as men* (Frye)

II. Intersectional Critique

- a) Single-axis picture of oppression doesn’t capture inseparability of gender, race, class, etc.
 - i. Devon Carbado: “The claim that Black men experience discrimination based only on one marginal category obscures that Black men experience discrimination (e.g., in the criminal justice system) precisely because they are Black and men—not because they are Black in some ungendered sense or because they are marginalized as Black but not as men.”
 - ii. Converse point can also be made about, e.g., white women
- b) Falsely universalizing
 - i. In taking groups to be the primary subjects of oppression, the group-based view suggests that all members of an oppressed group will be subject to the same oppressive forces
 - ii. This does allow for some differences – but any differences must be explained by appealing to forces along some other axis/ membership in another group
 - iii. But as intersectionality scholars have emphasized, not all members of a group face the same oppressive forces or barriers (e.g. critique of Friedan)

III. First Revision to Standard View: Group-based, but more fine-grained groups

- a) Helps with:
 - i. Capturing differences/ avoiding falsely universalizing claims
 - ii. Moving away from single-axis picture and capturing the inseparability of race, class, gender, etc. (e.g. police violence faced by Black men)
- b) Problems:
 - i. Note: do need to let go of binary/ fixed-hierarchy conception of oppression
 - ii. Regress worry (end up dissolving groups?)
 - General worry for metaphysics of groups—“multiple genders” response to intersectionality
 - Specific worry for group-based view of oppression
 - iii. Ignores similarities – theoretically and strategically important

IV. Second Revision: Abandon groups as primary subjects, hold on to “oppressed(/privileged) because G”

- a) Circularity problem – another metaphysical worry
 - i. Views attempting to respond to metaphysical regress worry (e.g. Haslanger)
 - ii. Circular relationship between group membership and oppression

- b) Group membership doesn't do the explanatory work (e.g. bi person seen as straight or gay, but not bi)

V. Lessons/ Gesturing at an Alternative View

- a) Shift from focus on groups to thinking about categorization
- b) Like the second revision, can take a holistic perspective—all of the different ways that one is categorized, in fine-grained and more coarse-grained ways, across different contexts
- c) How one is categorized need not track one's identity – like in Helen's case
- d) Categorization isn't just something external or individualistic
- e) Categories need not track any real kind (e.g. "witches") or be unified in the way we take groups to be—avoids the metaphysical problems