

Rejecting the Group-Based View of Oppression

DRAFT – Dec 2023 – Annette Martín

1. Introduction

The standard view of oppression is that it is group-based. Groups are standardly taken to be the primary subjects of oppression, and it is thought that individuals are oppressed by virtue of their membership in an oppressed group. While this view is so standard as to frequently be taken to be definitional of oppression, not much has been said to actually elaborate or defend it.

In this paper I consider the group-based view of oppression in more detail and argue that we should reject it. I demonstrate significant implications of the claim that groups are the primary subjects of oppression, and show that these make the view a target for intersectional critiques. I further consider ways that one might try to revise the view, and show that these also fail.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I identify what I take to be the central commitment of the group based view – that groups are the primary subjects of oppression – and point out significant implications of this view. In Section 3, I argue that these implications of the group-based view give rise to a picture of oppression that is additive and falsely universalizing, and thereby fails to do justice to important intersectional insights. In Section 4, I consider a revised version of the view that lets go of the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression, and instead centers the explanatory claim that individuals are oppressed by virtue of their membership in certain groups. On this revision, individuals are oppressed on the basis of their social position, where this is understood in terms of the overall combination of groups that the individuals is a member of. I argue that while we should go in for a positional view of oppression, we should not analyze these positions in terms of group membership, because group membership fails to do the relevant explanatory work. I conclude that we should reject the group-based view of oppression.

2. The Group-Based View

My target in this paper is the view that takes oppression to be group-based. I will identify what I take to be the central idea behind the group based view, which is that groups are the primary subjects of oppression, and identify some commonly accepted implications of this claim that give shape to the standard, group-based view of oppression.

The group-based view of oppression centrally takes oppression to be something that is done to groups, rather than individuals. Frye, for instance, elaborates her classic birdcage metaphor for oppression by specifying that “the “inhabitant” of the “cage” is not an individual but a group, all those of a certain category.”¹ Young, likewise, describes oppression as “a condition of groups” and as referring to “structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group.”² Cudd, meanwhile, describes oppression as a social injustice that is done “on social groups by social groups.”³ Groups are thus taken to be the primary subjects of oppression. Oppression is something that is done, in the first instance, to social groups.

Oppression theorists do not altogether deny that individuals are oppressed, but rather see individuals as only being oppressed secondarily – it is only as members of an oppressed group that individuals are oppressed. As Frye states, “If an individual is oppressed, it is in virtue of being a member of a group or category of people that is systematically reduced, molded, immobilized.”⁴ Again, group oppression is primary, and the oppression of individuals is to be analyzed in terms of the oppression of the group. It is only as a member of an oppressed group that an individual is oppressed.

Note that there is an important explanatory dimension to this idea: saying that individuals experience oppression by virtue of their group membership helps explain why particular individuals have the experiences of injustice that they do, and also why others don’t have those experiences.⁵ It is *because* of an individual’s membership in a particular social group that the individual faces certain kinds of oppressive treatment.⁶ I take this explanatory claim to also be a central part of the group-based view.

Another key idea that emerges from the claim that groups are the primary subjects of oppression is the idea that oppression organizes social groups into hierarchical relations of domination. These hierarchical relations of domination occur along particular axes of race, class,

¹ (Frye 2008: 44)

² (Young 1990: 40,42)

³ (Cudd 2006)

⁴ (Frye 2008: 45)

⁵ Throughout the paper I will talk about individuals’ experiences of oppression. To be clear, by this I do not mean to suggest that the individual always recognizes these experiences as being oppressive, nor do I mean to be alluding to some particular kind of phenomenology. I am rather taking a more externalist stance.

⁶ (Frye 2008: 48; Haslanger 2004). Somewhat differently, McAfee suggests that group membership could also play a justificatory role: an individual’s membership in G could be taken to justify oppressive treatment. McAfee acknowledges that there will often be a causal dimension to this justificatory explanation. See (McAfee 2018).

gender, and so on— or in other words, along axes defined by different ways of carving up the social world into groups.

This view stems from idea that oppression is done to social groups. But it is not just that oppression is done *to* social groups, but again, as Cudd puts it, it is also done *by* social groups. Young is explicit in claiming that “for every oppressed group there is a group that is privileged in relation to that group.”⁷ Frye also gestures at this idea when she considers that men, and not only women, face structural barriers; her response is to say that we must analyze who systematically benefits from the barriers, and who is systematically disadvantaged by them. Men, she indicates, systematically benefit at the expense of women.

Note that these comments suggest that oppression either constitutes or gives rise to a binary relationship between social groups: one group is privileged at the expense of another that is oppressed.⁸ The privileged group is systematically advantaged by the oppression of the other, such that the privileged group is dominant and the oppressed group is subordinate.⁹ In this way, the binary relationship of group (dis)advantage establishes a hierarchy of power along an axis, wherein privileged groups rank above oppressed groups.

As will be important for my later discussion, the resulting picture is what has been called an *additive* view of oppression.¹⁰ The view is additive in the sense that it analyzes oppression by separately analyzing oppression along each social axis and then combining these independent analyses. To illustrate, consider Frye’s discussion of the oppression of certain men:

If a man has little or no material or political power, or achieves little of what he wants to achieve, his being male is no part of the explanation. Being male is something he has going for him, even if race or class or age or disability is going against him. Women are oppressed, *as women*. Members of certain racial and/or economic groups and classes, both the males and the females, are oppressed *as* members of those races and/or classes. But men are not oppressed *as men*.¹¹

Again, because it will be important for the first part of my critique, I want to highlight how these comments reflect the central commitment to the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression. Since the group *man* is privileged in relation to the group *woman*, the group *man* is not an oppressed group. Since individuals can only be oppressed as members of an oppressed

⁷ (Young 1990: 42)

⁸ (Hominh Forthcoming) also notes that the standard view of oppression includes these binary assumptions, and argues that we should take a more graded approach.

⁹ This is seen clearly in (Haslanger 2000), for instance.

¹⁰ See, for instance, (Carastathis 2014; Collins 1993).

¹¹ (Frye 2008: 49)

group (because groups, again, are the primary subjects of oppression), individual men cannot be oppressed as men; as men, they are advantaged and occupy a dominant position. If a man is oppressed then, it cannot be in connection to their being a man, but must instead be along some other dimension, by virtue of their membership in some other social group that is oppressed.

Frye is not the only one who explicitly draws out these additive features of the group-based view of oppression. This idea is also reflected in Haslanger (2000), and Cudd explicitly endorses what she terms a “vector force” picture of oppression, suggesting that individuals’ experiences are to be analyzed as the sum of vector forces applied along different axes of privilege and oppression.¹²

To summarize, I have identified three related parts of the standard view that oppression is group-based: (1) that groups are the primary subjects of oppression, (2) that individuals are only oppressed as members of an oppressed group, and (3) that oppression establishes hierarchies of power along independent social axes. Both (2) and (3) stem from (1): the idea that individuals are only oppressed as members of an oppressed group is a corollary to the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression; and the hierarchical view comes from combining the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression with the idea that for every oppressed group there is a group that either enacts or at least systematically benefits from that oppression.

I thus take the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression to be the central claim of the group-based view, and the implications of this core commitment will be my target in the next section.

3. Against Groups as the Primary Subjects of Oppression

Using Frye’s discussion of Black and otherwise marginalized men as a starting point, and drawing especially on work done by Black feminists, I will now argue that the central claim that groups are the primary subjects of oppression is subject to important intersectional critiques. I will target this central claim by targeting its implications. In particular, in the previous section I showed that one implication of this central claim is that it gives rise to an additive picture of oppression; I will further show that the group-based view has falsely

¹² Although (1) Haslanger is not directly theorizing oppression, but rather leveraging the hierarchical, group-based view of oppression in order to theorize race and gender; and (2) Haslanger does make a notable departure from Frye in acknowledging that there are contexts in which “being male is not something that a [Black] man ‘has going for him’”. However, Haslanger’s means of accommodating this still retain a commitment to the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression in a way that runs into issues. (Cudd 2006: 47; Haslanger 2000: 41)

universalizing implications. Intersectionality theorists have demonstrated the errors of additive and universalizing approaches to oppression. One might think that these problems can be avoided by incorporating intersectional complexity into the conception of the groups themselves, but I will argue that such a move still fails to adequately address intersectional concerns.

3.1. Single-Axis Critique

As previously illustrated, the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression leaves us with an additive picture of oppression. Again, within this logic, Black men can't be oppressed *as men*, because men occupy the privileged position along the gender axis of the oppression hierarchy, and so are not an oppressed group. If Black men are oppressed it must thus be along some other dimension, as members of some oppressed social group – in this case, as Black. Black men's experience is thus to be analyzed by adding together their experience of oppression as Black, with their experience of being privileged as men. As men, they can only be privileged.

But saying that Black men can only be privileged in relation to their gender seems clearly to be false. As Carbado emphasizes:

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.¹³

An important part of understanding what it means to be a Black man in the American context is to understand the ways in which Black men have been constructed in the dominant ideology as dangerous, criminal, and super-predatory. This cultural construction of Black men, which is simultaneously gendered and racialized, has been repeatedly used to justify and reproduce grave injustices in interactions with the police and the criminal justice system, as well as in the history of lynching and other contexts. As Carbado emphasizes, Black men are not oppressed as Black “in some ungendered sense,” but in a specifically gendered sense in these contexts. We cannot understand the nature of their oppression without appealing to gender. To say that they are oppressed as Black, but not as men, fails to capture the role of gender in their experience of oppression.

This is not to say that Black men do not experience any systematic advantages in connection to gender. Rather, what it reflects is that one can be both oppressed and privileged

¹³ (Carbado 2013: 813)

along the lines of gender – something that the group-based view of oppression does not allow for. On the group-based view, one is either oppressed or privileged (depending on the status of the group one is a member of) along any given axis, but not both. However, this stands in contrast to the reality of Black men’s experiences. Given the ways that Black men are constructed within the dominant ideology, Black men are sometimes privileged and sometimes oppressed in connection to gender.

This point does not only apply to Black men, or to marginalized subsets of a privileged group, but applies more generally. To take a converse example, the group-based view would say that white women are oppressed as women and privileged as white. But white women can also function as oppressors in connection to their gender – for instance, when they weaponize the cultural construction of white women as something to be protected by white men in order to threaten or harm Black men. Such cases cannot be analyzed by appealing merely to white women’s racial privilege, independently of gender, as the group-based view would require. These women make strategic use of their gendered position in order to enact harm.

Thus far I have emphasized one aspect of the additive picture that emerges from taking groups to be the primary subjects of oppression: that one is either oppressed or privileged (but not both) along a single axis, as determined by whether one is a member of a group that is oppressed or privileged along that axis.¹⁴ Another, related, aspect of the additive picture that these cases tell against is the very idea that the “axes” are independent. In the example above, both race and gender shape Black men’s vulnerability to police violence; Black men’s experience of police violence cannot be adequately understood without simultaneously considering race and gender. This illustrates the intersectional idea that race, class, gender, and similar social divisions are inseparable and mutually constituting. That is, race, class, gender, etc. function together to shape individuals’ experiences. Likewise, Black feminists have emphasized how Black women’s experiences of oppression differ from that of white women in ways that reflect a combination of race and gender. The Combahee River Collective, for instance, points to the “the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression” as an illustration of the ways in which race and gender inseparably shape Black women’s experiences of oppression.¹⁵ Because the group-based view of oppression analyzes oppression in terms of independent axes defined by different ways of partition the social world into groups, it takes

¹⁴ This formulation highlights another background assumption of the group-based view, which is that groups are either oppressed or privileged, but not both.

¹⁵ (Collective 2017: 19). See also (Crenshaw 1990; Harris 1989).

oppression due to race to be separate from oppression due to gender. Gender oppression and racial oppression target different groups, and so are independent forms of oppression. But this means that the group-based view cannot do justice to instances of oppression that are simultaneously shaped by race and gender.

This point does not only apply to race and gender, or to thinking about oppression. A straight white man's experience, for instance, will be simultaneously shaped by race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. As Carbado emphasizes, *everyone's* experiences of both oppression and privilege will be shaped in these mutually constituting ways.¹⁶

In giving rise to an additive view of oppression, the group-based view fails to capture the important intersectional insight that experiences of oppression and privilege do not result merely from the addition of experiences across independent axes, but often reflect the inseparable combination of race, class, gender, etc., such that individuals can be both oppressed and privileged in connection to a social category.

3.2. Universalizing Critique

Another failure of the group-based view is that it offers a falsely universalizing picture of oppression. That is, in taking groups to be the primary subjects of oppression, the view suggests that all members of an oppressed group will be subject to the same oppressive forces and barriers.

Multiple theorists discussing the group-based nature of oppression explicitly name this as a feature of their view. As part of describing her additive, "vector force" picture of oppression, for instance, Cudd states that: "My account supposes that in the world there are constraints that apply to all women, others to all men, others to all African Americans, and so forth."¹⁷ Similarly, this universalizing element characterizes Jenkins' gloss of what it means to take oppression to be group-based:

When I say that oppression is group-based, I mean that it does not include social limitations that are targeted at individuals qua individuals but *only social limitations that apply to all individuals with a particular feature or features*, where this feature is fairly widespread.¹⁸ (Emphasis added.)

We can understand this universalizing element as arising from the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression. If groups are the primary subjects of oppression and individuals are only oppressed insofar as they are members of an oppressed group, then there

¹⁶ (Carbado 2013)

¹⁷ (Cudd 2006: 47)

¹⁸ (Jenkins 2023: 53)

isn't anything that would account for variation in oppressive treatment among members of a social group. If what the oppressive forces are seeking out is G-ness, then those forces shouldn't discriminate between members of G; all members of G should be equal targets of the injustice by virtue of being G, as it is the group G that the injustice is primarily aimed at. Substantive differences could thus only be attributed to some other kind of oppression that targets a different oppressed group. This again leads to just the kind of additive, "vector force" picture that was discussed above: all women, for instance, are subject to the same oppressive treatment as women – this is the force along the gender axis of oppression – and any substantive differences in their experiences of oppression must be attributed to membership in some other oppressed group, i.e. a force along some other axis of oppression.

To be clear, the group-based view does allow for some variation among group members, due to the combination of different vector forces. Consider Haslanger:

My view is that the practices in question are oppressive to all members of the group, but of course to different degrees and in different ways, depending on what other social positions they occupy. For example, a wealthy woman who can afford to take a taxi whenever she is anxious about her security on the street is not oppressed by the prevalence of violence against women to the same extent as a poor woman who must use public transportation and walk several blocks home from the bus stop after her shift is over at midnight.¹⁹

So while the group-based view makes some allowances for intra-group diversity, these are due to the interactions with other axes of oppression. The oppressive practices, forces, constraints, etc. tied a particular form of oppression, which target a particular group, are universal to all members of the group.

The problem is that the universalizing feature of the group-based view, even with these allowances, still stands in tension with important intersectional insights. Intersectionality scholars and activists have long criticized the tendency of white feminists (and other relatively privileged members of a group) to take the barriers that they face to be universally representative, when in fact they only apply to some women.²⁰ bell hooks, for instance, critiques Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* for taking it to be *the* condition of women that they were trapped as housewives and not permitted to pursue careers, when in fact this only described the barriers and limitations faced by a very particular group of women: those who were white, married, college-educated, and middle- to upper-class.²¹ Working class women and women of

¹⁹ (Haslanger 2004: 113)

²⁰ I here draw primarily on the Black feminist tradition of intersectionality.

²¹ (hooks 2015)

color had long had no choice but to work to survive; barriers to entering the workforce that applied to more privileged women, and which did play a significant role in shaping the oppressive conditions of *those* women, were not universal to all women. Nor does it make sense to say that the experiences of the working-class women and women of color were the result of the addition or interaction of gender oppression and racial or class oppression. It is not that the working-class women were trapped in their role of housewives, but also faced some kind of class discrimination on top of it that modulated their experience of being trapped housewives. The gendered barriers and oppressive forces simply looked different for different kinds of women and were not, as the group-based view would suggest, universally shared by all women.

Similarly, Angela Harris points to beauty ideals to highlight the errors of universalizing assumptions. Harris notes that one feature of the gender oppression faced by white women is that they frequently find themselves trapped in chasing unrealistic beauty ideals. These beauty ideals, however, inherently code beauty as white, such that Black women are conceptually excluded from the possibility of beauty altogether.²² As Harris puts it:

There is a difference between the hope that the next makeup kit or haircut or diet will bring you salvation and the knowledge that nothing can. The relation of black women to the ideal of white beauty is not a more intense form of white women's frustration: It is something other.²³

The oppressive force of the beauty ideal that helps constitute white women's experience of gender oppression is not universal, and not all women have been shut out from the very possibility of beauty in the way that Black women have been. Nor, again, can this be isolated purely to the effects of race, as the additive, vector force picture of oppression would suggest—there is a distinctively gendered component to the experience Harris describes. Thus, again, it is not that there is a universal force or barrier that applies to all women but affects different women differently. Rather, the oppressive forces that help make up the experience of gender oppression can vary for different members of the group.

Thus, taking groups to be the primary subjects of oppression has the consequence of depicting oppression as being universal among members of an oppressed group. But oppressive barriers and forces are not universally shared by group members, and universalizing claims typically privilege those with relatively more power at the expense of those with less

²² (Harris 1989)

²³ (Harris 1989: 597)

power.²⁴ The group-based view thus once again offers a picture of oppression that fails to match up with the realities that intersectionality scholars have drawn attention to.

3.3. Fine-Grained Groups?

I have argued that the central claim of the group-based view – that groups are the primary subjects of oppression – provides a universalizing, additive view of oppression that fails to accommodate important intersectional insights. I next want to consider a way that one might try to address the intersectional critique while holding onto the group-based view by building intersectional complexity into the conception of the relevant groups.

In particular, one might observe that the examples discussed largely revolve around the idea that race, class, gender, and similar social categories do not function in parallel, but are rather complexly intertwined. One might thereby think that the group-based view can be salvaged if we simply shift our conception of what the relevant social groups are. That is, perhaps we should identify and focus our analysis of oppression on fine-grained groups like *Black men*, rather than taking Black men to stand at the intersection of two separate groups: *men* and *Black people*. This move holds on to the claim that groups are the primary subjects of oppression (and privilege), and so retains the additive and universalizing implications, but it seeks to identify fine-grained groups such that the universalizing and additive implications are *true*.

This move to a fine-grained conception of social groups seems to hold some promise for addressing the concerns previously noted. For instance, the fine-grained, group-based view can say that the group *Black men* is oppressed, and would no longer need to say that Black men are oppressed as Black and privileged as men. Likewise, by taking Black women and white women to be members of different groups, this view would no longer entail that Black women's and white women's experiences of oppression are the same – since the groups are different, the oppression is also different. Thus, this view can easily accommodate the diversity of different women's experiences of oppression. More generally, the strategy behind this move is to build into the conception of social groups the intersectional idea that race, class, gender, etc. are inseparable and mutually constituting. Indeed, some feminists have responded to intersectional concerns about whether there is a unified group *woman* by adopting precisely this kind of “multiple genders” strategy (so called because on this view, instead of two groups, *men* and

²⁴ For instance, hooks draws attention to the overlooked power dynamics that exist between women – in particular, Friedan does not consider the working-class and non-white women who would be called upon to take over the domestic labor of upper-class white women seeking careers. (hooks 2015)

women there will be multiple gendered groups, such as *working-class white women, working class Black women, etc.*).²⁵

However, this adaptation of the group-based view still faces significant problems.

The first problem is an analogue of a classic worry raised about the multiple genders strategy. Young, for instance, puts this worry as follows:

This strategy can generate an infinite regress that dissolves groups into individuals. Any category can be considered an arbitrary unity. Why claim that Black women, for example, have unified gender identity? Black women are American, Haitian, Jamaican, African, Northern, Southern, poor, working class, lesbian, or old.²⁶

While Young and others have addressed the multiple genders strategy from the perspective of the metaphysics of social groups, a parallel worry arises when we consider the move to fine-grained groups as a response to the additive and universalizing critiques of a group-based view of oppression.²⁷ Recall that from the perspective of responding to the universalizing critique, the point of moving to more fine-grained groups is to land upon some group whose members actually do face universally-shared barriers. The regress argument suggests that there will always be important differences between the challenges and forces faced by members in any group – the barriers faced by Black women, for example, will vary depending on whether the women are American or Haitian; the barriers faced by American Black women will vary depending on whether they are affluent or poor; the barriers faced by affluent American Black women will vary depending on whether they are straight or lesbian; and so on. Thus, the regress argument suggests that the attempt to find homogenous groups pushes us to consider finer- and finer-grained groups until we are ultimately just left with a collection of individuals.²⁸ The regress worry thus suggests that there are no suitably homogenous groups to be found, and

²⁵ See, for instance, (Spelman 1988). Note that this move has been made primarily from the angle of concerns about the metaphysics of woman, rather than from the angle of applying intersectional considerations to the group-based view of oppression, as I do here. Feminists *have* been concerned about the implications of intersectionality for oppression, but primarily because they conceive of feminism as organizing around the oppression of women. Thus, the worry has been that if there is no group women, then there is no way of conceptualizing women's oppression. For instance, see (Mikkola 2007; Young 1994). Cf. (Martín 2024).

²⁶ (Young 1994: 721)

²⁷ More generally, many feminists in particular have worried about how to reconcile social groups like women with intersectionality, which raises questions about the metaphysical foundations of the group-based view. However, I will set aside questions about the metaphysics of social groups in this paper.

²⁸ Gasdaglis and Madva take this worry even further, noting that even individuals' circumstances (e.g. level of ability, employment status, immigration status, and so on) will vary over time. They thereby suggest that the regress does not even leave us with individuals, but rather time slices of individuals. (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020)

attempting to rely on homogenous, fine-grained groups to get around the universalizing critique ultimately undermines the view that oppression is group-based.

Further, this view is also subject to intersectional critique, albeit from a different angle than the one previously considered.

Given the historical tendency on behalf of scholars and activists to make falsely universalizing claims, discussions of intersectionality often emphasize important differences between members of a social group. However, intersectionality scholars have not only been concerned with overlooked difference, but also with overlooked similarity.

In particular, Crenshaw's initial aim in articulating intersectionality was not merely to highlight differences between Black women and white women, but rather to highlight the ways in which American legal courts simultaneously (1) expect Black women to be just the same as white women and Black men (respectively), such that Black women's distinctive experiences of discrimination fail to be adequately addressed by the law; while also (2) taking Black women to be "too different" from white women and Black men, such that they are effectively barred from representing these larger groups that they are part of, and thereby limited in seeking legal redress.²⁹ As Carbado summarizes it, "Too similar to be different and too different to be the same, Black women were 'impossible subjects' of antidiscrimination law."³⁰ Both similarities and differences between group members have been elided at the expense of Black women, and others with relatively less power.

In attempting to account for difference by shifting to fine-grained groups, the view fails in the other direction – it takes Black women (and other kinds of multiply marginalized subjects) to be too different.³¹ This has both theoretical and strategic implications.

First, while the fine-grained version of the view that separates women into race-class-gender(-etc.)-specific groups may be able to account for important differences between different women's experiences, it doesn't explain important similarities that also exist. For instance, many women experience catcalling and sexual assault, feel bound to restrictive beauty ideals, are expected to do a disproportionate share of care work, face barriers to reproductive care, and are paid less than their male counterparts. While it is, again, crucial to note that these experiences are not universal, that they may take different forms for different women, and that they impact

²⁹ (Crenshaw 1989). See also (Carbado and Harris 2018) for helpful discussion.

³⁰ (Carbado 2013: 813)

³¹ Note the implicit standard here – too different from whom? Presumably white (upper-class, straight, able-bodied, etc.) women. See (Carbado 2013; Crenshaw 1989).

different women to different degrees, these also seem to represent significant patterns of experience related to gender oppression. The fine-grained, group-based view doesn't offer resources for explaining these similarities – on the group-based view, the groups are different, and so the oppressions based on those groups are also different. The view doesn't offer anything in the way of connection, or that would explain similarities across these different groups.

This explanatory inadequacy is not only theoretically significant, but also has strategic implications. An example from Gasdaglis and Madva helps bring this point into relief. They imagine a group of Asian-American women who would like to bring forward a claim of race-based sexual harassment against their workplace:

The worry is that these twelve women cannot represent a protected class, because the discrimination suffered by the middle-class Vietnamese woman cannot in principle be the same as the discrimination facing the working-class Chinese woman. They could not claim discrimination qua Asian-American women, because each of their Asian-American, gendered experiences would be distinct. They could not purport to represent all Asian-American women, let alone all women of color, all women, or all people of color.³²

On the fine-grained, group-based view, the middle-class Vietnamese woman is not part of the same oppressed group as the working-class Chinese woman, and likewise for the other Asian-American women who would like to make a collective claim of harassment. Because they are not part of the same oppressed group, on the group-based view of oppression their oppression is not and cannot be the same – again, different groups means different oppressions. These individuals thus cannot coherently make collective claims of oppression, and are thereby prevented from pursuing recourse for the injustice that they seem to face.

Thus, the fine-grained, group-based view not only struggles to explain important similarities between different women's experiences of oppression, but it also presents a strategic barrier to pursuing recourse for oppressive treatment. More fundamentally, it renders many claims of collective oppression conceptually incoherent.

4. Against the Claim that Individuals are Oppressed by Virtue of Group Membership

I have shown that the central claim of the group-based view – that it is groups that are oppressed, and individuals are only oppressed as members of oppressed groups – gives rise to

³² (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020: 1302).

an additive and universalizing picture of oppression that fails to account for intersectional insights. In light of these implications, we should reject the claim that groups are the primary subjects of oppression. Still, there is another important claim connecting oppression to groups that one might appeal to as a way of retaining a group-based view of oppression – this is the explanatory claim that individuals are oppressed by virtue of their membership in certain groups. This claim will be the focus of my arguments in this section.

To step away from the problems highlighted in the first part of the paper, we can take this explanatory claim to relax the requirement that the groups in question be oppressed groups. Instead, one could simply take an individuals' experience of oppression and/or privilege to be a function of all of the groups that they are members of.

We can think about this as shifting to a picture that takes an individual to be oppressed on the basis of their unique social position, rather than analyzing oppression in terms of each group's experience and understanding individuals' experiences in terms of combinations of group experiences. This centrally retains a group-based element insofar as an individual's social position is analyzed in terms of the groups that they are members of. Different aspects of their position may be relevant in different contexts, but overall it is because an individual is a member of groups G_1, G_2, \dots, G_n that they have the experiences they do.

This view has several benefits. By letting go of the idea that groups are the primary subjects of oppression, it avoids the additive and universalizing implications of the standard view. Further, the holistic element of the positional view – that it simultaneously considers all of the groups that an individual is a member of – allows it to capture important similarities as well as differences between group members' experiences. By recognizing that white women and Black women, for instance, are both women, and that this factors into their respective experiences of oppression, the view can make sense of similarities between their experiences. At the same time, insofar as Black women and white women differ with respect to their overall sets of group memberships (and thus in their overall social position), the view can also account for differences. Further, the positional view can allow that Black women's race will modulate their experiences of gender oppression, and vice versa. In this way, the positional view is able to accommodate intersectional insights that the standard view could not.

Ultimately, I think that we should go in for a positional view of oppression. But recall that the key way that the positional view is meant to retain a group-based picture of oppression is by saying that it is membership in particular groups that explains individuals' experiences of

oppression (or privilege). I will argue that we should reject this explanatory claim as a general or fundamental claim about oppression.

4.1. Explanatory Inadequacy

To start, I want to consider the case of a bisexual person – let’s call her Helen – who, in line with common experiences of bi erasure, is typically read as straight (strictly heterosexual) when she dates men, and as gay (strictly homosexual) when she dates women. In contexts where she is read as gay, Helen is vulnerable to violence and other macro- or micro-aggressions motivated by sexual prejudice; in contexts where she is read as straight, Helen is protected from these forms of sexual prejudice.³³

What explains Helen’s experiences? That is, what is it that selects Helen for the kinds of treatment she receives in these contexts? I maintain that what determines how she is treated in these contexts is how others categorize her in these contexts, rather than her group memberships. One argument for this position is to consider the contrasting experiences that Helen has when she is dating women versus when she is dating men. In particular, if it is Helen’s group memberships (and in particular, her being bisexual) that makes her a target for the kind of oppressive treatment that she experiences when she is dating women, then why doesn’t she have these same experiences when she is dating men? After all, Helen remains bisexual across these contexts; her group membership does not change. If it is her being bisexual that makes her a target for sexual prejudice, then one would expect Helen to experience the same kind of oppressive treatment regardless of who she is dating, as the relevant explanatory factor is present in both cases. But this is not Helen’s experience.

While Helen’s actual group membership is not able to explain her experiences across contexts, the *perception* of her group membership is. What makes Helen a target when she is dating women is precisely that she is presumed gay when seen dating women. It is because the relevant agents categorize her as gay that Helen becomes a target for sexual prejudice in those contexts. In contrast, Helen does not become a target for sexual prejudice in the contexts where she is presumed straight. It is how Helen is categorized by others, rather than her actual group membership, that explains her experience across these contexts.

Some might object that Helen’s bisexuality can explain her flip-flopping experience across these contexts – for instance, if we take bisexuality to only be penalized when bi people

³³ To be clear, the injustices that Helen faces are not all dependent on how her sexual orientation is interpreted by others. For instance, Helen will be oppressed by many laws or policies that discriminate against same-sex couples regardless of how she is read by others.

engage in same-gender relationships. On this thought, Helen's overall experience can be explained by her being bisexual because it is characteristic of bisexual oppression that bi people experience oppressive treatment precisely when they date someone of their own gender. This response will not do, however. For one, it overlooks aspects of bi oppression that are independent of whom one is dating. For example, bi erasure does not depend upon whom one is dating, and yet it is a feature of many bi individuals' experience of oppression.³⁴ Further, to return to Helen, this response cannot explain other differences between cases that hold fixed the gender of who she is dating. For instance, suppose that Helen has only dated men. In line with harmful stereotypes that portray bi people as promiscuous and sexually deviant, Helen has repeated experiences wherein the men who know she is bi treat her in inappropriate, hypersexualizing ways, and does not have these experiences with men who assume she is straight. In both cases Helen is dating men, so it is not that biphobia only manifests in the context of same-gender romantic interaction. The difference, and what explains her respective experiences, is how Helen is conceived of by the men she is dating.

Other kinds of cases also tell against the claim that group membership is what explains individuals' experiences of oppression. Singh and Wodak, for instance, use misperception cases to argue that race does not explain racial discrimination.³⁵ They consider, among other examples, Sikhs who are systematically misperceived as Muslims (due to ignorance that associates Muslims with wearing turbans) and thereby subjected to Islamophobic hatred and violence. Parallel to Helen's case, it is not *being Muslim* that explains these experiences — Sikhs are not Muslims. Rather, what explains the oppressive treatment is how the individuals are categorized — it is because they are mistakenly *categorized* as Muslim. Whereas I held fixed the actual group membership and used differences in experience across contexts to argue that group membership is not the relevant explanatory factor, Singh and Wodak hold fixed the experience and vary the group membership — e.g., a Sikh and a Muslim who are both subjected to Islamophobic violence. Using these cases, they argue that group membership is not explanatory by noting that actual group membership is superfluous to the explanation.³⁶ In essence, "if the target's perceived race is sufficient to explain why they were discriminated

³⁴ See (Stewart 2021) for discussion of the harms of bi erasure.

³⁵ (Singh and Wodak Forthcoming)

³⁶ Singh and Wodak focus on discrimination, but I take it that their argument will apply to thinking about oppression, because the experiences of discrimination help constitute the individual's oppression in these cases.

against [in cases like the Sikh's], then the target's actual race is redundant in explanations of discriminatory acts."³⁷

Further, there are cases in which oppression occurs without their being any actual corresponding group that the victims are a member of— recall, for instance, the history of “witches” being condemned and burned at the stake. Group membership cannot be explanatory here, as witches are not real; there is no corresponding group. These individuals were not killed because they were witches, but because they were thought to be witches. All of these cases reinforce the idea that it is not because they are members of certain groups that individuals are oppressed. The explanatory claim striving to connect oppression to group membership does not hold up.

Recently, Haslanger has provided another reason for thinking that oppression is not fundamentally group-based. For Haslanger, while some forms of oppression are group-based, others cannot be. In particular, she distinguishes social formation models of oppression and discrimination models of oppression. On the discrimination model, “individuals are targets of wrongful treatment because of their... group membership.”³⁸ In contrast, on the social formation model, “the group in question is *produced* through the oppressive structure, i.e., the individuals constitute a group because they are similarly positioned in the structure.”³⁹ While she takes discrimination-model forms of oppression to be group-based, she notes that this second type of oppression cannot be group-based: in social formation cases, the existence of the group is dependent upon the oppression, and so the oppression cannot be group-based. This is another strike against the idea that it is characteristic of oppression that individuals are oppressed by virtue of their group memberships. But further, note that the previous arguments indicate that oppression is also not group-based for the discrimination models of oppression. Individuals in these cases are *not* targeted on the basis of their group membership, but rather on the basis of how they are categorized. Thus, group membership should not be taken to be the basis for oppression on either of these models of oppression.

Stepping back, what the arguments against the discrimination-style cases reflect is that group membership is generally not something that is directly accessible to individuals or institutions. Instead, individuals and institutions rely on a variety of signals or markers in order

³⁷ (Singh and Wodak Forthcoming: 16, pre-print).

³⁸ (Haslanger Manuscript: 2)

³⁹ (Haslanger Manuscript: 2)

to categorize individuals as belonging to a group.⁴⁰ These signals can vary widely – e.g. bodily features, clothing and other aspects of appearance, testimony, knowledge of ancestry, the sound of one’s voice, one’s name, the use of mobility aids, markers on one’s identification documents, and so on. Importantly, these external features are not perfect indicators of group membership; further, individuals may simultaneously have features that signal membership in opposing categories, and different features may be used as a basis for different categorizations across contexts.⁴¹ For example, a gender non-conforming man may in some contexts be mis-categorized as a woman based on his clothing, and in other contexts be accurately categorized as a man the basis of, e.g., his bodily features, name, voice, or declared gender identity. Further, as illustrated by the bi, Sikh, and witch examples, the association between features and categories is itself dependent on whether and how groups are generally conceived of, and these conceptions can be significantly disconnected from reality. As a result, the discrimination-style cases (which I take to encompass forms of oppression that are in an important sense “aimed at” members of a real or imagined group) do not in fact track group membership, but rather track categorizations in particular contexts on the basis of particular features, in ways that depend upon a particular conception of the social world. This may often align with membership in a certain group(s), but it is not by virtue of being members of certain groups that individuals are oppressed in these cases.

These arguments may still allow that there are some cases in which the best explanation for why someone is oppressed appeals at least in part to their membership in a particular group(s). I take it that the best hope for finding such a case would be to focus on instances that do not require an individual to be categorized in a particular way by someone in the relevant

⁴⁰ It should be noted that this is not a new idea. For example, Haslanger’s classic account of gender takes individuals to be situated in hierarchies of oppression based on their being “observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s [or male’s] biological role.” However, the significance of this for the claim that oppression is group-based appears to be under-appreciated. See (Haslanger 2000)

⁴¹ This small point has some important and under-appreciated implications, particularly when it comes to thinking about gender oppression. Consider views such as Jenkins’ that take the dominant ideology to determine which individuals experience gender oppression – the general idea being that the ideology offers a picture of who is a member of the group *women*, and that individuals are oppressed based on this ideological determination of their social group membership. However, this point shows that individuals can become targets for gender oppression based on the features that are picked up on in a particular context, even if the dominant ideology would not characterize the individual as a woman when given a more “complete” picture of the individual’s features. One significant upshot of this is that it is not only cis women who are subject to gender oppression (or oppressive treatment “aimed at” women), as often seems to be assumed. See (Jenkins 2016).

context. For example, inaccessible spaces pose barriers to individuals with disabilities irrespective of how they are categorized. In such a case, is the individual oppressed because of their group membership (i.e. by virtue of being disabled)?

I think it is certainly important to recognize that structural barriers can be oppressive in ways that do not depend on how individuals are categorized. However, I am not convinced that examples such as this one are best conceptualized as cases in which individuals are oppressed by virtue of their membership in particular groups. The worry is that this explanation paints with too broad a brush, falling subject again to falsely universalizing tendencies. Returning to the example, it should be noted that what is accessible or inaccessible for one disabled person will not necessarily universalize, but will instead depend on the particularities of that person's disability. Most obviously, it will depend on the kind of disability. But even focusing on more specific forms of disability, such as blindness, something that poses a structural barrier to one individual may not pose a barrier to another. For example, a crosswalk that has a sidewalk indicator in large print, but no tactile or auditory indicators of whether it is safe to cross, may be accessible to someone with low vision, but inaccessible to someone who can only perceive light and shadow. As with other social groups, blind people are not a monolith, and what constitutes a structural barrier for someone will depend on particular features of the individual's situation.⁴² Thus, it does not seem that it is by virtue of being a member of the group *blind people* that a blind person is oppressed in cases of this kind, even if the structure is a barrier to them because of or in connection to their blindness.⁴³

Returning to the starting idea of this section, what I think this shows is that we should analyze and explain oppression in terms of an individual's unique social position. However, we should not understand social positioning in terms of individuals' memberships in certain groups, as these group memberships are not what explain individuals' experiences of oppression. Attempting to explain oppression by reference to membership in certain groups misses the ways in which experiences of oppression depend upon factors that do not neatly or necessarily track group membership – including how individuals are categorized, ideological conceptions of social groups, and the particular ways in which structural barriers affect people depending on the details of their circumstances, which can vary even for individuals who are

⁴² This does not imply that we should not strive for principles of universal design.

⁴³ Indeed, this example seems to shed light on cases of group formation. For instance, suppose that all or most crosswalks were like this. This could then be the sort of systematic structural barrier that would give new significance to a subset of the group blind people and potentially generate a new group.

members of all of the same social groups. Further, the explanatory claim also overlooks social formation cases of oppression. We should thus accept a positional view of oppression without taking on board the explanatory claim that individuals are oppressed by virtue of their membership in certain groups.

4.2. But don't we sometimes need to appeal to groups?

Some may worry that I am suggesting that we should remove groups altogether from our thinking about oppression. After all, even if groups are not the primary subjects of oppression, and group membership doesn't explain individuals' experiences of oppression, don't we need to understand that, say, Muslim bans are aimed at Muslims, or that abortion bans are aimed at controlling women, in order to properly understand and respond to the corresponding forms of oppression?

In response, I agree that it is important to understand when certain forms of oppressive treatment are aimed at certain groups; likewise, it may be important to understand the history of or between certain groups in order to understand particular cases of oppression.

However, we should distinguish between taking groups to be the basis of our analysis of oppression and allowing groups to play some role in our inquiry into particular forms of oppression. For instance, while it seems important to understand the history of Islamophobia in order to recognize Trump's executive order as a Muslim ban, analyzing Islamophobia in group-based terms provides an incomplete picture. As previously emphasized, injustices "aimed at" Muslims do not necessarily affect all or only Muslims. To adequately address Islamophobia, we need to understand both the ideology and institutional mechanisms through which it operates. A closer look at these structural processes reveals, for instance, the systematic mistreatment of Sikhs who are frequently assumed to be Muslim – something that is overlooked if we instead focus on membership in the group *Muslim*. Again, part of what this reflects is that in considering treatment aimed at certain groups, what matters is not the actual groups so much as the conception of these groups and the particular mechanisms that attempt to target group members. This is reflected not just in the stereotypes of Muslims that lead Sikhs to be targeted, but also in the fact that non-Muslim citizens of the predominantly Muslim countries affected by the executive order were also impacted by this structural barrier. Rather than focusing primarily or fundamentally on social groups as the basis of our analyses, we should focus on the structural mechanisms that systematically enact oppression, and consider who is affected or made vulnerable by those structural mechanisms. It may often be helpful to take groups into

consideration as a guide for where to look, but, as I have argued, understanding oppression in terms of the experiences of social groups or as occurring on the basis of group membership leads to exactly the kinds of over-generalizations and exclusions that intersectionality scholars and activists have long warned against.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that we should reject the standard view that takes oppression to be group-based. The central commitment of this view seems to be that groups are the primary subjects of oppression. Accepting this claim, however, gives rise to a picture of oppression that is falsely universalizing, fails to capture ways in which individuals can be simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged with respect to how they are categorized, and unduly separates out different axes of oppression. Attempting to salvage the view by embracing a fine-grained view of social groups does not help, either. The view either overlooks important differences, or it overcorrects by ignoring important similarities. Further, I have argued that we should reject the idea that individuals are oppressed by virtue of their membership in certain groups. We should not take group membership to be the explanatory basis for oppression.

The significant, negative upshot is that we should rethink the long-held assumption that oppression is group-based. However, I also want to emphasize some of the positive upshots that begin to take focus through this argument.⁴⁴ First is the suggestion that we should shift from a group-based to a positional analysis of oppression. A positional analysis offers a holistic perspective that can be attentive to the ways in which race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other categories simultaneously shape individuals' experience of oppression and privilege in complex, context-dependent ways.⁴⁵ Rather than analyzing social positioning in terms of group membership, the analysis should be attentive to the various features of an individual and their circumstances that will help shape both how they are treated and the kinds of structural barriers they will face across different contexts. Further, we should shift our focus to the institutional and ideological mechanisms that systematically shape our individual and collective experiences, and consider how individuals' social positioning interfaces with these structural mechanisms to determine their overall experiences of oppression and privilege,

⁴⁴ Another implication, not directly touched on in my discussion, is that we do not need to resolve issues in the metaphysics of social groups in order to secure a stable metaphysical foundation for oppression, as many have worried. I explore this in more detail in another paper. See [Redacted].

⁴⁵ Taking to heart Gasdaglis and Madva's observation that one's level of ability, employment status, and so on will change over time (and that these factors shape one's experience of oppression and privilege), an account of social positioning should also be sensitive to these factors.

rather than focusing on group membership. While this view does not indicate that we should remove groups from our thinking about oppression altogether, it does suggest a much less central or foundational place for social groups in our theorizing about oppression than has long been assumed.

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