

Essay 1 – Dennis Blaufuss

Prompt 2

Liao and Huebner respond to the objection that no material thing can be racist. In your own words, reconstruct the account of “oppressive things” they offer in response to that objection and illustrate what the account entails with a data science related example. Do you think that this account is plausible and attractive? Why or why not?

Answer

Oppressive things

Firstly, it is to be clarified what the mentioned concept of oppressive things described by Shen-yi Liao and Bryce Huebner (2020) defines. Furthermore, even before elaborating more on oppressive things it is to be elaborated on what oppression is: The authors state that there is no conclusive definition here. A concept by Iris Marion Young (1990) is used to explain. Only the outcome of oppression and not oppression itself is defined as following: All oppressed people suffer from a thing, human being, social construct etc. constraining their ability to freely express themselves in the way another not oppressed person could do. Furthermore, Liao and Huebner define racism as one kind of oppression (2020, p. 6 f.).

There are three points of views mentioned on which the proposed framework builds upon.

Externalist:

The classification of a thing / human being does not depend on the intrinsic properties of it but moreover depends on the extrinsic ones. This means that only the real impact on the world is accounted and not the intention behind its actions. This view seems good to define roles in oppressive systems but lacks in other parts of the definition (Liao & Huebner, 2020, p. 7).

Functionalist:

Oppressive things can be seen as being biased: Anything with a reliable output from variable inputs is accounted to be biased. Thus, the implementation of oppression is important in this point of view (Liao & Huebner, 2020, p. 7).

Pluralist:

The bias can have many oppressive outcomes: They may even be of statistical nature (Liao & Huebner, 2020, p. 7).

It is stated that not all definitions of oppressive things can be fulfilled at the same time. In the proposed framework an oppressive thing plays a congruent role in an underlying oppressive system. Furthermore, there are three main points defined in the framework for a thing to be oppressive:

1. The oppression of the thing must have the same direction of oppression in the underlying system.
2. The thing must be causally embedded in the underlying system.
3. The thing and the underlying system must have a bi-directional influence: The thing cannot be only a mere product of the system but must be working towards strengthening the oppressiveness of the system.

The third point is being elaborated more deeply: The oppressive thing can and mostly will work as material anchor, supporting the underlying oppressive system by shaping patterns of action and thought. Furthermore, this includes the intrapersonal (time independent) and interpersonal (person independent) manifestation of mentioned patterns (Liao & Huebner, 2020, p. 9 ff.).

Data science related example

As an example, the COMPAS algorithm (and similar ones) as discussed in a ProPublica article (Angwin, et al., 2016) is chosen. These algorithms try to estimate the likelihood of reoffending by taking various answers and backgrounds into account. In theory this sounds like a common risk assessment algorithm but in practice those algorithms tended to rate non-Whites significantly higher than Whites. Furthermore, a study proposed by the article showed that these ratings are not reflected in the actual reoffending rates. The reports are commonly given to judges as additional information to decide about the defendants' freedom.

Most of the algorithms claim that race or other equivalent factors do not play a direct role in assessing risk. Even then if this assessment is solely statistical based (without racial parameters) the algorithm is still to be considered as a racist thing when examined within the introduced framework: It plays a role in an oppressive/racist system and does indeed fulfill all three points of the framework. Even if the report is not used to directly base the judge's decision upon, it still works as a material anchor and influences the thought of the people it is presented to. Thus, it still would be considered an oppressive thing – in this certain case a racist one.

Furthermore, I propose following thought experiment: Suppose that the assessed risk scores turn out to have the same precision (and for the matter recall as well) for Whites as for non-Whites. In this case, it would be reasonable to think that the algorithm does everyone justice and thus is not racist. Applying the framework, you would, though, come to a different result since the underlying system is still being considered a racist one and the algorithm still influences the thought of people in the same direction. Thus, the algorithm would still be considered an oppressive thing.

Discussion of the proposed concept

Firstly, I would state that I find the concept appealing and plausible as it is. I think it combines many other concepts and refines them to work together in a good way. Still, as mentioned by Liao and Huebner themselves it will be impossible to combine everything within one concept. As seen with the proposed data science example it is straight forward to apply and gives good reasoning for its outcome. I think it is an important thought to classify things as oppressive as well. As mentioned by the Authors this field of study is historically neglected and the issue often blamed solely on technical constraints.

I would argue that it might lack in one dimension: It does not tackle the allocation of oppressive intent within one system. I personally think this is an important question and would agree with the in the ProPublica article cited Napa County Superior Court Judge Mark Boessenecker that the interpretation is mostly the issue. The algorithms get labeled and understood wrongly: For example, even Tim Brennan (founder of Northpointe, the company that created COMPAS) stated that he did not design the algorithm to be used in sentencing (Angwin, et al., 2016). Coming back to the point of allocation, in no way the racist intent can be allocated to the algorithm but rather to the creators that did not test it sufficiently. With including an idea like this, I think the framework would be even more appealing to people who strictly believe that things cannot be classified as being oppressive / racist.

Bibliography

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