

On the Maintenance of Oppressive Structures

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Oppression is a big, complex issue, touching everyone's daily life in one way or another. From the people that you find worth talking to and vice versa, to the educational institutions that were willing and able to instruct as a child or the salary you receive as an adult, oppression pervades all of our lived experiences. Its applicability to daily life directly corresponds to the urgency with which it must be studied and combatted. However, due in part to its scope, few sources effectively synthesize the work of all the various disciplines involved in researching enduring hierarchies and the inequalities they necessitate.

In this paper, I focus on how oppression is maintained, as opposed to its initial causes or its effects on both the oppressors and the oppressed. The society in which we find ourselves, which will be the focus of my essay in terms of concrete examples, already contains numerous hierarchies of oppression; indeed, so does virtually every other society. There is therefore reduced urgency to account for the oppression's initial causes. While its effects are just as important as the means by which it is maintained, to present the former to a lay audience without the latter would likely leave some important points ill-understood. The reverse is also true, to some extent, as will be shown in my definition of oppression. As such, I will intersperse the effects of the various mechanisms of oppression on selected groups throughout my paper.

1. Definitions

1.1 Oppression

How one defines a term that takes on such a vague, nebulous set of meanings in daily life has major implications for any work that one does on that term. Frye conceives of oppression in terms of its effects on oppressed people. She claims that, for the oppressed, "the living of one's

life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction.”¹ I value her focus on the constraints that bind its victims as core to what oppression is; however, she ignores how dominant groups benefit from oppression, as well as the harms done by oppression to its victims outside of their confined options.

By contrast, hooks defines oppression by naming its specific form in our society. In particular, she identifies our society as oppressive by calling it a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”² She prefers this term because it captures the mesh of “interlocking systems of domination that define our reality,” using it as “a sort of short cut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives.”³ While I appreciate her elucidating the complex interwoven structures that constitute oppression as it actually exists, her term is too concrete to be a general definition of oppression. I do not know that she even intends it to be used this way, but it is worth mentioning either way because it directly addresses oppression as complex and interdisciplinary.

Young sees oppression as based in structures, like Frye, and our institutions, like hooks. What differentiates her from both is her explicit assertion that “oppression is a condition of groups” rather than individuals, as well as her enumeration of specific dynamics that she classifies as oppressive.⁴ In particular, Young divides oppression into five categories to avoid an

¹ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1983), 3, http://www.victorkumar.org/uploads/6/1/5/2/61526489/frye_-_oppression.pdf.

² bell hooks, bell hooks: Cultural Criticism & Transformation, Written transcript, 1997, 7, <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990), 40.

overly simplistic characterization of it: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.⁵ The first three of these categories all focus on the economic aspects of oppression, which, while important, does not warrant three-fifths of the word count. That being said, I find her last two categories very valuable. Young claims that cultural imperialism occurs when, “given the normality of its own cultural expressions and ideas, the dominant group constructs the differences which [sic] some groups exhibit as lack and negation. These groups become marked as Other.”⁶ This category I will call the cultural, ideological, or psychosocial category of oppression to highlight its psychological and ideological bases in addition to its foundation in culture. Finally, Young claims that violence becomes a facet of oppression when it occurs systemically “as a social practice... directed at members of a group simply because they belong to that group.”⁷ I agree with this definition, and use it as my final category of analysis.

Cudd enhances hook’s definition by unifying her concrete forces into one abstract concept, Frye’s by adding the notion of social groups as fundamental, and Young’s by removing its unnecessary specificity. In particular, she defines oppression as “the existence of unequal and unjust institutional constraints,” which “harm through direct and indirect material and psychological forces.”⁸ In constructing my own definition, I will modify Cudd’s by de-emphasizing individual psychology in favor of focusing on group-level forces like culture, ideology, and sociology. In particular, I define oppression as a phenomenon arising from unequal and unjust institutional constraints on social groups. It manifests as systematic harms done to

⁵ Ibid, 49-60.

⁶ Ibid, 59.

⁷ Ibid, 62.

⁸ Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52.

disadvantaged or subordinate groups and their members; these harms in turn benefit dominant or privileged groups and their members.

1.2 Social Groups

Social groups and institutional constraints are important concepts for my definition. Young defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way [sic] of life.”⁹ She claims that social groups “constitute individuals” rather than the other way around because “group categorization and norms are major constituents of individual identity.”¹⁰ Plus, people don’t choose the social groups they belong to; rather, an individual is thrown into a group, or “finds oneself [always already] as a member of a group.”¹¹ I appreciate that this definition includes the necessity of intergroup differentiation for groups to have meaning, and that it acknowledges the non-voluntary nature of the social groups relevant to a discussion of oppression; however, I believe that individuals constitute groups as well as vice versa.

By contrast, Cudd defines social groups in terms of social constraints and institutions. She claims that shared social constraints are constraints that “help to explain individual actions by revealing the incentives that individuals have by virtue of their membership in nonvoluntary social groups.”¹² She defines social institutions as “legal rights, obligations and burdens,... wealth, income, social status, conventions, norms, and practices,” that “[set social] constraints that specify behavior in specific recurrent situations, that are tacitly known by some nontrivial

⁹ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, 45.

¹¹ Ibid, 46.

¹² Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 42.

subset of society, and that are either self-policed or policed by some external authority.”¹³ In light of these concepts, Cudd defines social groups as “collections of individuals who face common constraints that are structured by social institutions.”¹⁴ I appreciate that her definition illuminates the non-voluntary nature of social groups in a different way from Young by precisely specifying the constraints that keep them in place and people within them. For this paper, I define social groups as nonvoluntary collections of individuals constrained by social institutions in Cudd’s senses of constraints and institutions and differentiated from other social groups by these constraints as well as norms and practices.

2. Central Argument

My fundamental claim in this paper is that oppression is perpetuated by psychosocial, economic, and violent forces. Dominant groups have among their powers disproportionate influence over culture, particularly over what is considered normal/natural and morally permissible for the society as a whole. They use this influence to benefit themselves by placing their practices and beliefs beyond criticism by the mere fact of association with them; in doing so, they harm other groups by casting their culture as wrong, weird, Other by the mere fact of association with them. Another aspect of dominant groups’ hegemony is the economic advantage that they maintain, on average, through policies of coercion and deprivation. These policies can be enacted directly and intentionally by members of dominant groups, or by members of oppressed groups themselves as they struggle to get by in a system designed to keep them out of wealth. Finally, dominant groups maintain their dominance through violent force, typically in the

¹³ Ibid, 50-51.

¹⁴ Ibid, 51.

form of systematic patterns of physical harms and threats that target oppressed groups. These harms often have government support because dominant groups tend to control government institutions as part of their advantage.

3. Psychosocial Forces of Oppression

Cultural, ideological, and psychological forces of oppression operate through various mechanisms like education and the fundamental tenets of political and moral philosophy. Dominant groups use the power their dominance lends them to set their own beliefs and practices/culture as normal and natural to give something relative the weight of objective truth, placing it beyond criticism. Cudd claims that all groups “manipulate their beliefs in order to maintain a positive self-image” to establish themselves as positively distinct so that their members may maintain a “positive social identity.”¹⁵ The power of dominant groups amplifies this tendency, enabling them to foist these beliefs on their whole society.

3.1 Consensual Ideology and Legitimizing Myths

Pratto and Sidanius call the effects of this foisting “consensual ideology,” which they define as “that variation in social attitudes that is not attributable to differences in group membership.”¹⁶ In other words, the agreement between a dominant and subordinate group about a belief is what the authors refer to as the consensual portion of variation in opinions on the ideology, or consensual ideology, as opposed to the dissensual or dissenting portion that results

¹⁵ Ibid, 71.

¹⁶ Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, “Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression” (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 107.

from group-based disagreement, or dissensual ideology. In their analysis, they discuss the effects of consensual ideology on legitimizing myths (LMs). They define LMs as “values, attitudes, beliefs, causal attributions, and ideologies that provide moral and intellectual justification for social practices that either increase, maintain, or decrease levels of social inequality among social groups.”¹⁷

First, they demonstrate that members of dominant and subordinate groups agree on the LM that marks them as such (ie racism for blacks and whites) more than they disagree. Using a survey of random Texans, they show that “the variance of consensual racism was found to be almost 6 times that of dissensual racism, while the variance of consensual sexism was almost 3 times that of dissensual sexism.”¹⁸ A similar result was shown in the Soviet Union with just racism.¹⁹

They go on to argue that “consensual LMs serve as conduits, or mediators, between the desire to assert and maintain group-based social hierarchy and opposition to redistributive social policies.”²⁰ They show that social dominance orientation (SDO), their measure for the degree to which people support or oppose intergroup dominance and hierarchy,²¹ is not only directly correlated with support for hierarchy enhancing (HE) policies and opposition to hierarchy attenuating (HA) policies, but also indirectly correlated through HE LMs. As evidence, they cite a UCLA sample showing that consensual SDO affects opposition for policies like “government aid to minorities” and “antidiscrimination efforts” both directly ($r=.18$ and $r=.22$, respectively),

¹⁷ Ibid, 104.

¹⁸ Ibid, 113.

¹⁹ Ibid, 113-114.

²⁰ Ibid, 118.

²¹ Ibid, 61-102.

and mediated through consensual belief in LMs like political conservatism, racism, and “that society was just and fair,” ($r=.20$ and $r=.12$ overall, respectively).²² r is a correlation coefficient; it indicates how closely two variables are related, with $r=1$ meaning that they are perfectly directly related, $r=-1$ meaning that they are perfectly inversely related, and $r=0$ meaning that they are completely unrelated. $p<0.01$ on all of the correlations in this paragraph, which indicates that they are highly significant results, much stronger than the value required for scientific publication, $p<0.05$. These findings were replicated in the general survey of LA county.²³ Overall, Pratto and Sidanius convincingly demonstrate that beliefs that reinforce social hierarchies by making dominant groups look good (or subordinate groups look bad) are shared by subordinate as well as dominant groups to a shockingly high degree, and that they serve to conduct desires for social hierarchy towards support for social policies that maintain this hierarchy.

3.2 Applications to Philosophy and Language

Young illustrates this process using as her LM a foundational tenet of American political philosophy, the idea of impartiality. In political philosophy, impartiality is the ability of a person to make “moral judgments without being influenced by the sort of contaminating biases or prejudices that tend to arise from the occupation of some particular point of view.”²⁴ Young rejects the implication that all rational agents can adopt a “universal, objective ‘moral point of view’” since one cannot abstract away from “the particular experiences and histories that

²² Ibid, 118-119.

²³ Ibid, 121-122.

²⁴ Troy Jollimore, “Impartiality,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 6, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/impartiality/>.

constitute a situation [,]... feelings, desired, interests, and commitments that he or she may have regarding the situation, or that others may have [, and]... the partiality of affiliation, of social or group perspective, that constitutes concrete subjects.”²⁵ She claims that what happens instead is that impartiality “allows the standpoint of the privileged to appear as universal” since members of privileged groups are more likely to occupy positions of legal or political authority and thus make the sorts of formal judgements for which impartiality is expected.²⁶ Dominant groups enforce their ideology or culture as normal and natural through the ostensibly neutral idea of impartiality.

Bourdieu examines the power of dominant groups to claim their manner of speech normal, legitimate, and correct to the exclusion of all others, a linguistic example of consensual ideology. He asserts that “to speak of *the* language, without further specification, ...is tacitly to accept ...the *official* language of a political unit.”²⁷ He calls this language the “legitimate language” of that political unit, which is the only correct way of speaking in formal circumstances.²⁸ He claims that it is formed and maintained by members of dominant groups; in particular, that legitimate language is “produced by authors who have the authority to write... [and] fixed and codified by grammarians and teachers who are... charged with the task of inculcating its mastery.”²⁹ Bourdieu argues that this standardized dialect is established with a nation-state, which he calls “an abstract group based on law,” to serve the newly unified

²⁵ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 100.

²⁶ Ibid, 116.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language,” in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 45. Emphasis in original.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

population.³⁰ While the U.S. has no legally official language like France, it seems fair to say that we consider English to be the standard language, if not for all government forms and documents than at least for street signs, strangers, and education. It stands to reason that this standard language is established by those with political power, who tend by definition to come from dominant groups; thus, because “the way individuals... group themselves” is “embedded in language,” dominant groups tend to be more familiar and closely linked with legitimate language, lending them its power.³¹ As such, legitimate language, like impartiality, is a tool that dominant groups use to maintain their dominance. Because these cultural forces benefit some groups and harm others, they must be considered oppressive under Cudd’s definition; therefore, these dominant groups, with the power to tell others how to think and speak, act as oppressors against those other groups that they act on.

4. Economic Forces of Oppression

Another aspect of oppression is the economic advantage that dominant groups maintain by depriving subordinate groups of necessary resources. Dominant groups accomplish this feat through policies that can be enacted directly and intentionally by members of dominant groups, or by members of oppressed groups themselves as they struggle to get by in a system designed to keep them out of wealth. Importantly, the wealthy themselves constitute one such dominant group, and the poor an oppressed group, because these groups are largely nonvoluntary, the rich benefit from their separation, and the poor are harmed by it. In keeping with the literature, I

³⁰ Ibid, 48.

³¹ Rosina Lippi-Green, “The Linguistic Facts of Life,” in *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1997), 31, <https://people.cas.sc.edu/dubinsk/LING240/readings/Lippi-Green.1997.Chapter1.English.with.an.accent.pdf>.

define the rich as the top portion of the social class spectrum, and the poor as the bottom portion, where social class is “a pervasive form of hierarchy rooted in a person’s wealth, education, and occupational prestige.”³²

4.1 The Oppression of the Poor by the Rich

Social classes are appropriate to study in the context of oppression because they are both relatively static and non-voluntary. They are static because their contours and the beliefs associated with them remain largely constant over time. A review by Piff, Kraus, and Keltner argues that “hierarchies, in particular those related to class...[are] remarkably resistant to change,” citing many studies that support this claim directly as well as sub-claims about wealth consolidation and racial disparities in wealth.³³ Specifically, they contend that “ideologies of merit legitimize economic inequality and bolster class division... [, and] social class group identities catalyze difficulties in cross-class affiliation... and class conflict, strengthening class division in society.”³⁴

4.1.1 The Static Nature of Social Classes

To show that social classes are relatively static, the authors first establish that “social class group identities create barriers to affiliation that constrain lower-class advancement.”³⁵ After noting in general that “cross-group interactions evoke more anxiety, threat, and stress” as

³² Paul K. Piff, Michael W. Kraus, and Dacher Keltner, “Unpacking the Inequality Paradox: The Psychological Roots of Inequality and Social Class,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 57 (Elsevier, 2018), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2017.10.002>.

³³ Ibid, 8.

³⁴ Ibid, 2.

³⁵ Ibid, 41.

opposed to within-group interactions, they show that people are more comfortable interacting with those of the same social class than with members of different or ambiguous (i.e. towards the middle of the spectrum) class.³⁶ This discomfort creates effective barriers to cross-group affiliation, further entrenching social class groups. They also show that “cross-class interactions heighten the likelihood of class conflict,” demonstrated by increased “hostile affect, intentions, and behaviors that are likely to exacerbate class conflict,” both in cities that have higher income inequality and between people of different classes when they are reminded of their differences before interacting.³⁷

4.1.2 The Non-Voluntary Nature of Social Class Membership

In addition to establishing the static nature of social classes, this review also illustrates how people’s membership in them is largely non-voluntary, meaning that it is difficult to move between them, except in Cudd’s case of “anyone who chooses poverty” being a member of the lower class, which is unrealistic enough to not bear serious consideration.³⁸ Piff et al. demonstrate this difficulty by showing that “class-differentiated experiences of threat, scarcity, and access to valued networks enhance economic inequality by compounding (dis)advantage in education, work, and relationships.”³⁹ Importantly, this argument for social class’ non-voluntary nature also demonstrates how the division harms lower-class individuals and benefits higher-class ones. The authors first contend that “class biases within social institutions activate threat-related processes among lower-class individuals, which are adaptive in the short run, but

³⁶ Ibid, 42.

³⁷ Ibid, 44-46.

³⁸ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 120.

³⁹ Piff, Kraus, and Keltner, “Unpacking the Inequality Paradox,” 2.

when chronic,... inhibit achievement and economic mobility for lower-class individuals.”⁴⁰ Using the example of higher education, they explain that, for lower-income students, threat-related processes include feeling out of place or Other due to their minority status among students, administrators, and faculty, and expecting rejection.⁴¹ They show that these perceived threats harm academic performance due to stereotype threat.⁴² Stereotype threat is the “fear that one will confirm the stereotypes that others have regarding some salient group of which one is a member,” and it can cause performance drops in a number of situations.⁴³ In this instance, the authors note that it can be triggered in a variety of surprisingly subtle ways, such as certain phrases in a university’s marketing or certain testing practices.⁴⁴ They further claim that the “separation, exclusion, devaluation, discounting, and treatment as ‘other’ among lower-class individuals that is endemic to education is widespread in a number of other valued institutional settings, such as housing, healthcare, politics, finance, and education,” implying that stereotype threat is an issue in these realms as well.⁴⁵ This threat is a clear harm of being in a lower social class.

Next, Piff et al. show that “lower-class environments create scarcity mindsets that impair social and economic aspirations.”⁴⁶ They first scarcity as “a perceived lack of money, time, status, or another desirable good,” which they claim is “disproportionately located in the lives of lower-class individuals.”⁴⁷ They further claim that it “is mentally taxing, consuming valuable

⁴⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁴¹ Ibid, 13.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Thomas Gilovich, Dacher Keltner, and Richard E. Nisbett, “Stereotype Threat,” in *Social Psychology*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 467–68.

⁴⁴ Piff, Kraus, and Keltner, “Unpacking the Inequality Paradox,” 13–14.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 15-16.

cognitive resources that would otherwise be devoted to planning ahead and problem solving. These effects of scarcity, in turn, increase people's tendencies to make bad decisions and engage in self-defeating actions.”⁴⁸ These harms to lower-class individuals clearly also keep them from moving up socio-economically. They also note that “the capacity to delay immediate rewards in the service of planning for more favorable long-term outcomes yields many benefits, including improved academic and economic achievement,” a clear benefit gained by upper-class people by comparison.⁴⁹

Lastly, Piff et al. show that “upper-class environments produce cumulative (dis)advantage through access to valued social networks of opportunity and influence,” highlighting how the benefits that upper-class folks gain correspond directly to harms that lower-class folks suffer.⁵⁰ They first point out that “Resource- and opportunity-rich social networks, as found in neighborhood spaces, schools, clubs, social gatherings, internships, and gateway career opportunities, are concentrated among people from upper-class backgrounds,” citing numerous studies.⁵¹ In particular, they note that “geographic separation by class in neighborhoods and cities ensures that educational institutions with adequate funding are disproportionately clustered around upper-class students.”⁵² This educational segregation clearly benefits upper-class children, who attend better-funded schools, and harms lower-class children, who attend correspondingly worse ones, helping to keep them poor. They also show that “managers and CEOs, who are disproportionately from upper-class backgrounds, prefer hiring

⁴⁸ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

people who are culturally similar to themselves,” which cuts along class lines due to the strength with which people associate social class with cultural signals, as noted above.⁵³ This creation of high-paying job networks bounded by class benefits the upper-class people with access to them and harms lower-class people who are kept out of well-paying jobs by them.

4.1.3 The Political Suppression of the Poor

Finally, Piff et al. illustrate how the upper class has a disproportionate influence in determining policy. They cite a study showing that “upper-class individuals use their increased financial resources and social connections to gain more power and sway over their local, state, and federal officials, and more influence over policy,” as well as several studying that demonstrate that federal government policy and legislation are “increasingly aligned with the policy preferences of wealthy Americans compared to the preferences of lower-class citizens.”⁵⁴ That lower-class individuals are not being heard (or listened to) in government certainly harms them because the policy preferences of the upper class benefit themselves at the expense of the poor. For instance, a couple of studies show that “individuals in the top quintile of the wealth distribution were less supportive of providing help to the poor in the form of healthcare and a higher minimum wage; less willing to fund minority serving or public schools; less supportive of universal health coverage; and, by a factor of close to four, more likely to oppose heavy taxes on the rich to distribute wealth.”⁵⁵ Clearly, lower-class individuals face a variety of harms and challenges that upper-class people do not, which in turn makes it difficult for them to move up in

⁵³ Ibid, 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 33.

the socio-economic scale. This rigidity benefits upper-class people, who are easily able to retain their wealth and status.

4.2 The Intersection of Class with Race and Gender

The class divisions detailed above also intersect with other groups salient to a discussion of oppression, such as racial and gender groups. This sort of economic oppression, which acts between groups already considered dominant and subordinate, is what Cudd refers to as her economic forces of oppression. Other than this minor distinction, her view of economic oppression is in line with what has already been discussed so far.

Cudd distinguishes between direct and indirect economic forces of oppression. Direct forces are intentional deprivations of subordinate groups by dominant groups to maintain their power/privilege, while indirect forces support inequalities through the decisions of oppressed people themselves as they “try to live in the face of other inequalities and injustices.”⁵⁶

4.2.1 Direct Forces of Economic Oppression

For direct forces, Cudd names group-based harassment, (job- or industry-level) segregation, employment discrimination, and opportunity inequality.⁵⁷ Cudd defines group-based harassment as “group-based harassment as the singling out of a minority group member for disrespectful, degrading, or humiliating behavior,” which she claims maintains oppression by bullying subordinate groups out of the “better paid jobs or... better housing” that they wish to

⁵⁶ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 135.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 137-45.

keep exclusive access to.⁵⁸ A common example of such behavior is sexual harassment, including unwanted sexual attention. In a survey of female employees in both the private sector and at universities, Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald found that roughly two thirds of the women were sexually harassed in each sample.⁵⁹ They also showed that sexual harassment correlated strongly with a number of negative work outcomes, such as decreased satisfaction with co-workers ($r=.32,.25$, respectively) and supervision ($r=.18,.34$, respectively), as well as decreased mental health ($r=.18,.15$, respectively) and signs of PTSD ($r=.18,.17$, respectively), even after controlling for job stress in both samples and disposition in the university sample.⁶⁰ $p<0.01$ for all correlations in this paragraph. All of these outcomes seem like they would increase the likelihood of these women leaving their jobs.

Job or industry segregation is the separation of people down job or industry lines based on (unrelated) social group membership. Cudd claims that such segregation “is harmful to women and to racial minorities and that it benefits men and whites” because it entails members of dominant groups excluding members of subordinate groups from certain industries or jobs.⁶¹ Cudd further explains that “the supply of workers will be higher in those jobs that are available to all than in jobs and occupations from which they are excluded, the wage rate will be lower for the jobs that the excluded class may compete for.”⁶² Blau and Kahn argue that the gender wage gap is largely due to such segregation. In 2010, fully 50% of the gender wage gap could be

⁵⁸ Ibid, 142.

⁵⁹ Kimberly T. Schneider, Suzanne Swan, and Louise F. Fitzgerald, “Job-Related and Psychological Effects of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Empirical Evidence from Two Organizations.,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 82, no. 3 (1997): 409.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 412.

⁶¹ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 138.

⁶² Ibid.

accounted for by industry and occupation differences.⁶³ This wage gap clearly harms women and benefits men.

Cudd divides employment discrimination into job discrimination, which occurs when “individuals are not offered jobs,” and wage discrimination, when people are paid less than others for the same job, in both cases “because of their social group status, which is irrelevant to their qualifications for the job.”⁶⁴ Job discrimination harms “by enforcing segregation,” and wage discrimination harms by denying people equal compensation for equal work based on unrelated factors.⁶⁵ Blau and Kahn argue that much of the gender wage gap that is not explained in terms of human capital (i.e. education and full-time job experience), demographic variables (i.e region and race), unionization, or the segregation variables mentioned above, which totals 38% of the wage gap, is probably due to wage discrimination.⁶⁶ They support their theory with some lab experiments on so-called “labor-market discrimination”⁶⁷ as well as motherhood discrimination in particular.⁶⁸

Cudd defines opportunity inequality as “differential access to schooling, healthcare, nutrition, and other necessary investments required for a successful working life.”⁶⁹ Cudd classifies opportunity inequality as oppression because it tends to favor members of dominant groups at the expense of subordinate groups and because it makes “victims less able to compete for economic and social goods.”⁷⁰ As a striking example, roughly 70% of Indigenous Australians

⁶³ Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, “The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 3 (September 2017): 799, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20160995>.

⁶⁴ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 140.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 138.

⁶⁶ Blau and Kahn, “The Gender Wage Gap,” 799.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 831–36.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 823–25.

⁶⁹ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 142.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 143.

die while they are of working age (ages 20-65) versus roughly 23% of non-Indigenous Australians.⁷¹ Additionally, roughly 5% of Indigenous Australians die before the age of 4, as opposed to <1% of non-Indigenous Australians.⁷² High working-age mortality rates make it hard for Indigenous Australians to save as much money for their families, and high child mortality rates place a less direct but still significant strain on families.

4.2.2 Indirect Forces of Economic Oppression

Next, Cudd addresses the indirect forces of economic inequality, illustrating how initial inequalities can be maintained through the rational choices of oppressed groups because the most feasible options in the short-term are often the ones that keep the (unequal) status quo in the long-term. She gives an extended example of a straight couple who, because of the gender wage gap, decide that the man should work for wages while the woman works domestically. This ‘rational’ choice reinforces gender inequality because it puts the woman in a weaker position in the relationship because she stands to lose more in the case of a break-up because her wage-working skills are atrophying as she spends more time doing domestic work. Even if she were to work with the man, she would still be in a worse position because of the wage gap. The only non-oppressive option would be for the man to do the domestic work and the woman the wage work, which people do only rarely.⁷³

⁷¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Trends in Indigenous Mortality and Life Expectancy 2001-2015: Evidence from the Enhanced Mortality Database.*, 2017, 20, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/186938/2/aihw-ihw-174.pdf>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 148–52.

Piff et al.'s work concerning the increased threat of poverty constitute indirect forces of economic oppression when applied to intersecting social groups. Specifically, their hypotheses that the threat of poverty leads to stress and bad decision-making and that scarcity can lead to self-defeating behavior are probably activated in poor racial groups like blacks and Latinos. For instance, in 2016, Kochhar and Cilluffo found that, "among lower- and middle-income households, white families have four times as much wealth as black families and three times as much as Hispanic families."⁷⁴ Furthermore, increases in income affect different races differently: "At the respective wealth medians, every dollar increase in average income over the 25-year study period [1984-2009] added \$5.19 wealth for white households..., while the same income gain only added 69 cents of wealth for African American households."⁷⁵ White homes also grow in value more than black-owned homes.⁷⁶ All of these relative increases in scarcity and poverty for blacks as opposed to whites surely activate the scarcity and threat mindsets that Piff et al. note above.

Overall, economic forces of oppression harm the poor and other intersecting social groups by reducing their opportunities and increasing their incentives for self-defeating behavior, stress, and health outcomes. In turn, they benefit both the rich and related groups by giving them increased access to policymakers, longer lives with opportunities to pass their advantages on to their children.

⁷⁴ Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo, "How Wealth Inequality Has Changed in the U.S. since the Great Recession, by Race, Ethnicity and Income," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, November 1, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/>.

⁷⁵ Thomas Shapiro, Tatjana Meschede, and Sam Osoro, "The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap: Explaining the Black-White Economic Divide" (Institute on Assets and Social Policy, February 2013), 4, <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/24590/racialwealthgapbrief.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 3.

5. Violent Forces of Oppression

Finally, privileged groups maintain their privilege through the use of violent force, typically via patterns of physical harm or threat that target oppressed groups. These harms are often perpetrated with government support because dominant groups tend to control government institutions as part of their advantage. Cudd gives a thorough theory of violence as a force of oppression, so I will use it in my analysis. She begins by defining violence as “the intentional, forceful infliction of physical harm or abuse on one or more persons or their material or animal possessions.”⁷⁷ She intentionally includes harm done to people’s property despite the fact that the legal term “violent crime” excludes these because such shows of force “portend or threaten forceful abuse of one’s person,” sustaining oppression along with the abuses themselves.⁷⁸ These threats are an important part of her analysis of violence as a tool of oppression. She also excludes the economic and psychological dimensions of broader definitions of violence to distinguish those mechanisms of oppression from the physical ones to be analyzed in this section.

Cudd also distinguishes between random and systematic violence. Violence is considered systematic “when its victims are a social group,” regardless of whether or not the perpetrators of individual acts of violence intentionally commit those acts against that social group.⁷⁹ For our study of oppression, we are only interested in systematic violence. An important point about determining if a given harm represents systemic violence is that the perpetrator’s intentions

⁷⁷ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 87.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 88.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

matter when determining if a harm done is violence or not, but not when deciding if the violence is systematic or random.

Cudd also claims that systemic violence has the power to oppress because it harms some groups and can benefit others. Specifically, she contends that victims of systemic violence are “victimized thrice: once by the violence, then again by the loss of self-worth that one feels when one has been dominated, humiliated, and violated, and then again by the loss of social ties and the ability to cope that these psychological states often bring about.”⁸⁰ When the violence targets property, Cudd notes that systematic violence causes additional harms because it results in “systematic losses [that] accumulate disadvantage to the social group over long periods of time,” such as a decline in inter-generational wealth, potentially due to the racial factors described in the previous section.⁸¹ Systematic violence can also benefit others in a variety of ways based on the specific instance of violence.

Cudd enumerates a long list of examples of oppressive violence, which she divides into two categories, one with government support and one without it. In the first category, she names war, colonialism, rape, genocide and ethnic cleansing, the violent enforcement of oppressive laws, legal slavery, police brutality, political imprisonment, and torture.⁸² For non-state-sponsored oppressive violence, she lists lynching, hate crimes, illegal slavery, and strikebreaking.⁸³ Rather than analyzing each item in this exhaustive list, I will focus on two of the ones that are most relevant to our society, namely police brutality and hate crimes, the former of which is government sponsored while the latter is not.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 92.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, 99-110.

⁸³ Ibid, 111-115.

5.1 Police Brutality

Emesowum defines the larger category of police violence as containing “any unjustified or intentional harassment, verbal assault, physical/mental injury, property damage, or death suffered because of interaction with the police or the intentional inaction of the police.”⁸⁴ While this whole category could be considered in an analysis of oppression, I will focus on police brutality, which I will define as the physical injury and death components of police violence. While many have attempted to discern whether or not black people are disproportionately killed by police officers as opposed to whites, with varying results, most have been confounded by the relatively higher rates of arrest of blacks versus whites in this country. Scott, Ma, Sadler, and Correll, however, seek to determine whether or not “police [are] significantly more likely to shoot Black suspects than White suspects after controlling for racial differences in criminal activity.”⁸⁵ Using data from a variety of Metropolitan Statistical Areas from 1980-2000, they model how many people were shot and killed by police officers as a function of the racial difference in arrest rates, which they take to be equivalent to difference in criminal activity. They find that, if there were no racial difference between arrest rates, “police are more likely to shoot a Black suspect than a White suspect, even in the absence of racial differences in criminal activity” with p<0.001.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Benedict Emesowum, “Identifying Cities or Countries at Risk for Police Violence,” *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 2 (June 2017): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-016-9335-3>.

⁸⁵ Kendra Scott et al., “A Social Scientific Approach toward Understanding Racial Disparities in Police Shooting: Data from the Department of Justice (1980-2000): A Social Scientific Approach toward Understanding Racial Disparities,” *Journal of Social Issues* 73, no. 4 (December 2017): 715, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12243>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

In a review of the literature on how police brutality relates to trauma in its (largely) black victims, Bryant-Davis, Adams, Alejandre, and Gray uncover the extent of the harm done by this violence to its victims. In particular, they cite a study claiming that “When communities witness or experience chronic police brutality, they may deal with a variety of challenges after these events, such as depression, anxiety, anger, fear, trust, and other psychosocial problems,” and another furthering this claim to argue that “Mistrust and fear instilled as a consequence of institutionalized police brutality may prevent racially marginalized communities from seeking assistance, which can increase a sense of isolation and dehumanization.”⁸⁷ Clearly, police brutality harms its victims psychologically, both as individuals and communities. This practice also benefits whites because it threatens black communities, forcing them to submit to the existing racial hierarchy in which whites are dominant.

5.2 Hate Crimes

The FBI defines hate crimes as “criminal offenses that were motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias against the victim’s race/ethnicity/ancestry, gender, gender identity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation, and were committed against persons, property, or society.”⁸⁸ This definition, while helpful for attempting to measure their frequency through law enforcement data, does not capture the full extent of hate crimes because an act of violence by a civilian against a social group can intimidate or threaten that group without technically being illegal. For instance, a vigilante can kill an unarmed black boy, striking fear into the hearts of the

⁸⁷ Thema Bryant-Davis et al., “The Trauma Lens of Police Violence against Racial and Ethnic Minorities: Trauma Lens of Police Violence against Ethnic Minorities,” *Journal of Social Issues* 73, no. 4 (December 2017): 855–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12251>.

⁸⁸ “Methodology,” FBI, n.d., <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/resource-pages/methodology>.

black community, and be acquitted of any wrongdoing.⁸⁹ It also explicitly names the groups that the victim can belong to for a harm to be considered a hate crime, which again makes sense for data collection but is inflexible in the face of future changes to the list of oppressed groups in this country.

As a response to these criticisms, Perry gives a more expansive definition of the term:

Hate crime... involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed toward already stigmatized and marginalized groups. ...It attempts to re-create simultaneously the threatened (real or imagined) hegemony of the perpetrator's group and the 'appropriate' subordinate identity of the victim's group. It is a means of marking both the Self and the Other in such a way as to reestablish their 'proper' relative positions, as given and reproduced by broader ideologies and patterns of social and political inequality.⁹⁰

This definition ties back to Cudd's definition of violence as a force of oppression as well as our definition of oppression itself. It does so by including threats or intimidation in its sense of violence, and by tying that violence to the maintenance of an intergroup hierarchy.

According to the FBI, there were 7,100 hate crimes involving 8,800 victims in 2017 and 2018.^{91,92} In both years, roughly 60% of the victims were targeted due to racial or ethnic bias, 19-21% due to religious bias, 16-17% due to sexual-orientation bias, and 2% because of disability and gender-identity bias.^{93,94} I will focus on the most-cited group in each of the top two categories, race or ethnicity and religion. Of the 5,100 victims of race-or-ethnicity-motivated hate crimes, 47-49% were victimized due to anti-black bias, 2-3 times that of anti-white bias, the

⁸⁹ Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, "Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2013, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html>.

⁹⁰ Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 10.

⁹¹ "Hate Crime Summary," FBI, November 13, 2018, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017/resource-pages/hate-crime-summary>.

⁹² "Hate Crime Summary," FBI, November 12, 2019, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/resource-pages/hate-crime-summary>.

⁹³ "Victims," FBI, November 13, 2018, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017/topic-pages/victims>.

⁹⁴ "Victims," FBI, November 12, 2019, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/victims>.

next-highest category.^{95,96} Of the 1,600-1,700 victims of religiously-motivated hate crimes, 57-58% were victimized due to anti-Jewish bias, 3-4 times that of anti-Muslim bias, the next-highest category.^{97,98} For her purposes, Perry considers Jews to constitute a race, so she explains this violence against both blacks and Jews simultaneously. She begins by establishing how white Americans see themselves. She argues that, “culturally, white Americans construct themselves in negative relational terms. Their normative whiteness is created on the backs of the Other. The American is not raced, is not black or Asian, is not even ethnic.”⁹⁹ Within this context, she claims, “ethnoviolence becomes understandable... as an arena in which the primacy of whiteness can be re-created, and in which the boundaries between what is and is not American can be reaffirmed.”¹⁰⁰ I make a similar case in a presentation I gave a couple years ago.¹⁰¹ She further argues that negative stereotypes about each and every non-white group further drive racial or ethnic violence because such violences serves as “an effort to prove one’s whiteness—racial solidarity—relative to the defiled Other.”¹⁰² Cudd supports this argument when she claims that Cudd concludes that “stereotyping cannot be seen as an unbiased information-processing phenomenon, but one that is creatively manipulated by persons to serve their interest in a coherent rationalization of the social roles [in their environment] and the social groups [in their society] that perform them.”¹⁰³ Perry’s rationale for hate crimes explains both the

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Victims,” November 13, 2018.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ “Victims,” November 12, 2019.

⁹⁹ Perry, *In the Name of Hate*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Sam Kagan, June 9, 2018. “White Supremacy Still Thrives: On the Ubiquity of Modern Racism.” YouTube. YouTube.

¹⁰² Ibid, 64.

¹⁰³ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 72.

harm they do to their victims by keeping them in a hierarchy in which they must suffer demeaning stereotypes, in addition to more direct harms, and the benefit they provide their perpetrators by ensuring their groups' continued dominance in that hierarchy.

In sum, violence can serve as an effective tool of oppression when it is systematic in nature and benefits a group in addition to harming one. Such oppressive violence can take a variety of forms, both with and without the explicit support of the government, ranging from threats to individual acts to group-wide acts like lynching. In whatever form they appear, they serve to maintain existing social hierarchies by scaring and traumatizing subordinate groups, reducing their willingness to challenge the hierarchies that bind them as such.

6. Conclusion

Oppression is a fundamental problem with our society. The manifold ways in which some social groups hold onto their power and advantage over other groups must be curbed if we are to live more equitably and fairly. In addition to upholding these abstract moral principles, we should destroy the oppressive beliefs and practices all around us to liberate members of subordinate groups from further harm and disadvantage, no matter the costs to members of dominant groups. Further research on this topic would explore concrete pathways for accomplishing this destruction by fostering more equitable mindsets and behaviors in individuals and less skewed norms and practices in institutions.

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