CHAPTER 2

Feminist Perspectives on Sexism and Oppression

Daniel Silvermint
Assistant Professor, Philosophy & Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
University of Connecticut, Storrs

Words like sexism and oppression do a lot of work. They’re meant to single out patterns of mistreatment—ways that lives shouldn’t go, ways that people shouldn’t act, ways that society shouldn’t be. These words tell us who the victims are, what they’re experiencing, and who or what’s responsible for their suffering. These words call on us to resist, and explain why it’s so important that we do. These words raise the moral stakes.

But not every slight or setback in a woman’s life is sexism. Not every disadvantage or barrier is an instance of oppression. How do we distinguish the harms that count, and how do we know when a person is actually a victim of something else? We don’t want words this important losing their meaning through overuse, but we also don’t want to draw the boundaries so tightly that real cases of sexism and oppression get excluded. And that’s always a risk: any attempt to give an exact description of what it’s like to experience sexism or oppression is going to leave some people out, because identities and circumstances differ so widely. So how do we make a definition specific enough to inform and motivate action, but flexible enough to respond to new challenges, as well as new demands for inclusion? And even if we could get the categories just right, how do we prevent that flexibility from being exploited by those acting in bad faith, by those who appropriate the rhetoric of discrimination or oppression to block progress, and by those who genuinely think that a loss of unearned privilege is a form of victimization? The high stakes make these words controversial to use, but also tempting to misuse.

It’s impossible to adequately cover all the feminist perspectives on sexism and oppression in a single chapter, or to even get all that close. So I want to take a step back and explore what—from a feminist perspective—is at stake in our various understandings of sexism, and especially of oppression. What does each model of sexist oppression do well, where does each model struggle, and what, ultimately, do we need a model to do for us? I’ll highlight some of the key agreements and disagreements in the contemporary literature on analytic feminism, and while you probably won’t walk away from this chapter convinced by any one definition, my hope is that you’ll at least have a sense of why these definitions are so hard to get right, and why it’s so vital that we keep trying anyway.

I’ll start by using a recent film, Ex Machina (2015), to illustrate several examples of sexist phenomena, including sexual reduction, misogyny, and the expectations of “nice guys.” From there I’ll outline two different approaches to defining sexism. The first
Chapter 2: Feminist Perspectives on Sexism and Oppression

understands sexism as a set of beliefs about women that motivate the unequal treatment of women. The second approach emphasizes the subordinating harms that women experience daily, including psychological internalization, body-image norms, sexual objectification, and sexual harassment. From there I’ll turn to a discussion of three different models of oppression, one emphasizing oppressive actions, one emphasizing oppressive group relationships, and one emphasizing the effects of oppression on individual victims. Intersectionality—the idea that differences in identity and personal circumstances result in unique manifestations of oppression—will be central to this discussion. I’ll end the chapter by showing how we can build an account of oppression from scratch, to illustrate the kinds of considerations an account has to keep track of, and what kinds of trade-offs are involved in the concepts feminists use.

TRAPPED BEHIND GLASS

Judith Lorber (1994, 13) warns that talking about gender is a lot like fish talking about water. When something is everywhere, integrated into our everyday interactions, and so pervasive that we assume it’s both totally natural and impossible to live without, then it’s pretty hard to distinguish its effects from “just the way things are,” let alone convince people that it’s something we all create and maintain together, much to our mutual detriment. You’re not going to get very far if you start the conversation by immediately throwing around words like patriarchy, or the systematic subordination of women to men. So perhaps the best way to approach a topic as charged as sexism is to look at a clearly fantastical example, and then bring what we learn back with us to the real world. Okay, so let’s talk about a robot. Specifically, Ava—the embodied artificial intelligence at the center of Alex Garland’s 2015 film Ex Machina.

A “MODIFIED” TURING TEST

At least at first, Ava is presented as CEO Nathan Bateman’s secret attempt to create a conscious machine that can pass the Turing test, or in other words, convince a human behind a wall that he’s talking to a real person. Caleb Smith, a shy young programmer who works for Nathan’s Google-esque company, is flown to Nathan’s secluded estate under false pretenses to evaluate Ava. Nathan is immediately portrayed as brutish and self-absorbed, while Caleb is cerebral and kind, setting up the familiar “sexist versus nice guy” dynamic that the film will later subvert. The only other character present is Kyoko, an obedient woman drifting in and out of the background who’s never properly introduced to Caleb, apparently doesn’t speak any English, and is variously portrayed as Nathan’s assistant, domestic servant, and lover.

From Caleb’s first session with Ava, we know something’s off. Instead of evaluating conversational responses behind a wall, Caleb is brought to the edge of a glass, habitat-like enclosure. His (and our) first glimpse of Ava is in silhouette, revealing an “exotic” woman in a shapely metallic two-piece, with a transparent abdomen and limbs that give her an impossible thinness by highlighting the glowing skeleton underneath, but with the realistic face and hands of a young woman. She is, in a sense, naked, as the details of her body cannot be hidden from Caleb’s scrutiny, and both the glass cage and abundant security cameras confirm that the male gaze is omnipresent. In fact, unable to sleep later that night, Caleb discovers that one of the TV channels in his room offers a live stream of Ava, and from that moment onward, his TV is always on, always tuned to her channel. Anywhere she
goes in her enclosure, she’s being looked at, her beauty and her prospects as a sexual partner evaluated, and given the rules of the scenario, it’s Caleb’s right—no, his solemn responsibility!—to keep looking.

Ava’s fishbowl existence is an allusion to experiences such as catcalling, where the simple act of walking down the street can expose a woman to sexual inspection and lewd remarks by men who feel that her body is theirs to remark upon. The same can happen to a woman who blogs, or does sketch comedy on YouTube, or represents us in government. It doesn’t matter where she goes, or what her own plans for her day were, or even if she wanted to interact with anyone at all—whether at a café, a gym, her school, or at work, her mere presence in public puts her on display. And objects on display exist to be looked at, evaluated, and discussed. Linda LeMoncheck argues that women are sexually objectified when they’re “regarded as inanimate objects, bodies, or animals, where their status as the moral equals of persons has been demeaned or degraded” (1994, 202). Seeing yourself as someone with special or preferred access to a stranger’s body means treating them like they’re subject to your whims, rather than acknowledging their own desires as authoritative. And if that’s your attitude toward another person, then you’re not really seeing them as a person at all. That has consequences. As Carol Hay observes, sexual harassment is “the outward behavior that arises from this objectification” (2005, 96).

Reduction to Sexual Availability. I’ll say more about objectification and harassment below, but for now, what matters is that being kindly and well-intentioned like Caleb doesn’t mean that objectification and harassment aren’t going on. In fact, Ex Machina’s subversive arc involves combining a “sexbot” fantasy with the damsel-in-distress trope, and then slowly revealing the disturbing implications of fantasizing about women who exist to love you without any of the complications of autonomy or a choice in the matter, and who offer...
sexual companionship as a reward to the “nice guys” that rescue them from the clutches of “undeserving jerks.” Bonnie Mann offers a distinction between creepers and heroes that’s relevant here. While a creeper is an overtly entitled narcissist who attempts to acquire and control women, a hero is every bit the narcissist, nourished by sexism into seeking out victims to rescue so that he can fulfill the hero narrative tells himself, even if doing so undermines the autonomy of the very women he sets out to save (Mann 2012, 27, 29). If an ally is a man who genuinely works hard to understand and overcome his own, unwitting participation in sexist social arrangements, then a hero is someone whose sexism manifests as an ally fantasy, complete with an expected reward of female adoration for his services (2012, 30).

Caleb isn’t an ally. He’s a hero. So, narratively speaking, it’s no surprise that the movie depicts Ava showing an immediate interest in our shy and lonely protagonist. Within seconds of meeting, Ava and Caleb are chatting about how best to break the ice between them. It’s portrayed like a first date, complete with stolen glances and halting awkwardness. It’s almost compelling, until you remember that one of them is in a cage, powerless, her creator Nathan watching intently on a screen in the next room. After this brief encounter, Caleb is already referring to Ava as a “her” instead of an “it,” but if he’s thinking he just met someone special, then he’s brushing aside the incredible inequality that exists between them.

When Caleb reports his initial impressions the following morning, Nathan grows visibly frustrated that he’s so focused on Ava’s extraordinary facility with language. He doesn’t want Caleb to think like a programmer or a philosopher—he wants Caleb to think like a heterosexual man being presented with a willing woman. And for those purposes, it doesn’t really matter how impressive her mind is. So Nathan interrupts Caleb’s reflections: “How do you feel about her? Nothing analytical. Just, how do you feel?” Later, as Caleb discusses the difference between a simulated personality and actual consciousness, Nathan again cuts in: “Yesterday I asked you how you felt about her. Now the question is, how does she feel about you?” And later still, Nathan responds to Caleb’s point about a sense of humor requiring an awareness of other minds with a winking “Oh, she’s aware of you, all right.” It might seem like he’s encouraging Caleb to think of Ava as a woman rather than a machine, but if so, Nathan’s conception of “a woman” is somewhere between “a potential companion for you” and “a body available for your use.” He’s encouraging Caleb to reduce Ava down to a single trait or facet, to ignore everything about her except her sexuality and presumed availability.

Adopting a fragmented view of a person has implications for how you can permissibly treat them. While people are usually considered intrinsically valuable, or valuable above and beyond their potential use by others, this reduction casts Ava as merely instrumentally valuable to Caleb—as an avenue for his sexual gratification, and nothing more. This, too, has real-world analogues. Sandra Lee Bartky (1935–2016) writes that “sexual objectification occurs when a woman’s sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (1990, 35). Reduction is another way of treating a person like a thing, and things are ultimately disposable, existing to be used and discarded as their current holder sees fit. You can’t really mistreat a thing. Some feminists worry that men are encouraged or even trained to regard women in precisely this fashion, contributing to the everyday sexism that women experience, and to more diffuse phenomena like “boys will be boys” and “locker room talk” apologism, forms of masculinity that equate status with sexual conquest, and rape culture. For example, Catharine MacKinnon argues that “pornography defines women
by how we look according to how we can be sexually used … creating an accessible sexual object, the possession and consumption of which is male sexuality, as socially constructed” (1987, 173, 176, emphasis in the original). Near the very end of *Ex Machina*, we learn that Nathan went so far as to base Ava’s face on Caleb’s Internet search history, using his pornographic preferences to create Caleb’s perfect woman. Ava literally exists to satisfy Caleb’s desires, and if that’s how you think of a person, how often will their own preferences register to you, really?

**A Sexbot Fantasy.** Why did Nathan arrange all this? It turns out that Ava wasn’t his first creation. Before his final confrontation with Nathan, Caleb gains access to Nathan’s computer system, and there finds security logs of earlier prototypes, each one female, each one fully encased in realistic-looking skin and left completely naked as Nathan interviews them, each one a fetishized woman of color that Nathan’s auditioning for his own use. In one security log, a robot repeatedly asks why Nathan won’t let her go. The camera then cuts to her pounding her fists against the glass cage with such fury that her arms fly to pieces. There can be no doubt that Nathan has created conscious beings. And then we understand Kyoko, the woman that Nathan built for himself. A woman designed to obediently cook and dance and have sex on demand. A woman who never challenges him, and is literally incapable of making any demands of him. Her perpetual silence isn’t a language barrier—it’s a design choice. After finishing with the security logs, Caleb finds the deactivated prototypes hanging naked in Nathan’s closet, halfway between old discards and the spare parts necessary to sustain a sexbot fantasy. Caleb sees the full extent of Nathan’s dehumanizing treatment of women, and what awaits Ava if she fails Nathan’s experiment. He begins to realize that Ava, who looks and acts very differently from the women in Nathan’s logs, was designed to specifically appeal to him. And he resolves to free her.

Which is exactly what Nathan was hoping Caleb would try. It turns out that Nathan’s modified Turing test was to see if he could create a robot capable of manipulating a talented programmer like Caleb into desiring her, and desiring her strongly enough to risk everything in an attempt to free her—even though she was transparently robotic in her appearance and origin. According to Nathan, in order to manipulate a man that completely, Ava would have to use self-awareness, imagination, empathy, and sexuality, and if she could do all that, then surely she would be sophisticated enough to be considered conscious. Just think about that notion for a moment. In Nathan’s reckoning, the definitive proof that he’d created a real woman was that she was seductive enough to make even an intelligent and inhibited young man willing to throw away his promising future for her. We’ll talk about *misogyny* in a moment…

**Conforming to Sexual Objectification.** With that context in mind, let’s reconsider the beginning of the film. Over the first few interview sessions, Ava makes her interest in Caleb increasingly explicit. She asks Caleb if he’s single. She hints that they could go on a date together one day, out in the real world. He awkwardly laughs off the suggestion, thinking it impossible given her appearance and status as Nathan’s property. So Ava tells him to close his eyes (which he shortly reopen) and then moves to her closet, where the film lingers on long shots of her putting on a dress, rolling a stocking up her leg, fitting herself with a realistic wig. When she returns to Caleb, she looks like the innocent “girl next door,” his fantasy. In hindsight, we understand why Nathan furnished her with those garments in particular. With a slow twirl, Ava shows off her ability to pass for human when fully clothed, then announces “This is what I’d wear on our date.” It escalates from there. Bluntly, she
asks Caleb “Are you attracted to me?” And then: “Do you think about me when we aren’t
together? Sometimes at night, I’m wondering if you’re watching me on the cameras, and I
hope you are.” Remember, Ava’s freedom and very survival depend on Caleb finding her
sufficiently attractive. Bartky can explain this sort of seduction: “We can understand the
interest women have in conforming to the requirements of sexual objectification, given our
powerlessness and dependency” (1990, 37, original emphasis removed). It’s an idea that
traces back to Mary Wollstonecraft ([1792] 1995, chap. 9), who in the late eighteenth
century argued that women’s absolute dependence on their husbands for survival warped
their natures, training them to think and behave in ways that men preferred.

After his third session with Ava, a flustered Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava
sexuality. As he puts it, “An AI doesn’t need a gender. She could have been a gray box.”
He worries that Nathan gave her sexuality as a diversion tactic, like “a stage magician with
a hot assistant.” But on a deeper level, he’s desperate for confirmation that Ava’s stated
feelings for him could be real, rather than scripted. Nathan brushes the indirect question
aside, matter-of-factly declaring, “In answer to your real question—you bet she can fuck.
In between her legs, there’s an opening, with a concentration of sensors. You engage them
in the right way, it creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her,
mechanically-speaking, you could, and she’d enjoy it.” Ava is quite literally being reduced
to an object that can be used for sex, all to confirm that Caleb’s growing attraction to her
isn’t as impossible as he’d originally feared. This relationship could actually work! Again,
there are strong echoes in Bartky’s description of women being alienated from their own
sexuality and bodies: “To be dealt with in this way is to have one’s entire being identified
with the body, a thing which … has been regarded as less intrinsically valuable, indeed, as
less inherently human, than the mind or personality” (1990, 35).

THE “NICE GUY” MISOGYNY OF EX MACHINA

Despite Caleb’s affronted sensibilities, Nathan’s blunt confirmation is exactly what he wants
to hear. Not because he’s as crude as Nathan, but because he’s already primed to believe that
Ava could fall in love with him after spending just a few minutes in conversation with him.
Why? Because he’s a sensitive and caring alternative to the vulgar and abusive Nathan, and
he’s going to rescue her. And that’s sufficient for reciprocated love. He never even considers
that Ava is a prisoner using her sexuality to manipulate her naive new security guard. Caleb
(and the audience) think that he’s in a drastically different film than that, one where the
only two options are that she’s a programmed machine just simulating emotions or that
she’s a genuine damsel who really does want to be with her daring rescuer. This is the “nice
guy” version of male entitlement, which views sex and companionship as the expected,
almost contractual reward for good behavior. An attitude that can quickly turn into anger,
bitterness, and resentment when women don’t conform to their side of the script.

Kate Manne explains that on the naive view of misogyny, a misogynist is an isolated
individual who hates all women universally, simply because they’re women (Manne, MS, 1,
8). But this understanding can’t be right, because as Manne argues, all a person would have
to do in order to block the charge of misogyny is demonstrate that they respect some subset
of women that, coincidentally, don’t happen to offend them—the “But I love my mother!”
defense (MS, 5–6, 18). Instead, Manne offers an amended, feminist conception of
misogyny, where “misogyny is primarily a property of social systems or environments as a
whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are women in
a man’s world (i.e., a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to men’s standards
(i.e., tenets of patriarchal ideology which have some purchase in this environment)” (MS, 2, emphasis in the original). This means that misogynist hostilities will often target women selectively rather than universally, policing, punishing, dominating, and condemning women who threaten the patriarchal order, or are deemed the enemy by it (MS, 2).

Put another way, misogyny manifests as approval when women conform to the feminine roles and behaviors expected of them, and as a desire to put women “back in their place” if they begin to violate expectations or intrude on what has traditionally been seen as the province of men (Manne, MS, 33). Misogyny makes respect for a woman conditional on her acting “as a woman should,” and in a patriarchal society, that means complying with their own *subordination*: serving the interests of men, because they occupy an inferior social position to men.

Nathan is an obvious misogynist, but he’s not the only one. Understanding misogyny in this way can also explain the two modes that a “nice guy” exhibits: full of kindness while women are cooperating with expectations of sexual and romantic access, but then lashing out when those expectations aren’t fulfilled, or accusing women of exploiting their kindness if the friendship doesn’t quickly progress into the relationship he felt he was earning. When you hear complaints about being put in the “friend zone,” what you’re hearing is this second type of misogyny. The man is essentially claiming that a woman he was investing in preyed on his kindness, benefiting from his attentions without ever having any intention of providing him with sex. This is the expectation *Ex Machina* subverts in its shock ending, when Caleb’s reward for outwitting Nathan and helping Ava actually escape isn’t a romantic future with her on the outside, but rather an unreadable glance as she abandons him in a locked room, there to die a slow death by dehydration. Nathan might have been a threat to Ava’s survival, and someone shown to be grossly abusive to Kyoko and the earlier prototypes, but that contrast doesn’t let Caleb off the hook. Someone isn’t noble just because they think of a prisoner as a potential girlfriend instead of thinking of her as a sex slave.

**Woman as Reward.** After Ava kills Nathan with the ever-obedient Kyoko’s help, she tells Caleb to wait in his room, and then goes to the closet where the broken prototypes are hanging. She begins to peel off their realistic skin, using the strips to complete her own, unfinished appearance. She’s preparing herself to venture into the outside world, and it’s almost as if she’s gestating, then being born. Even the music is delicate, evoking a mobile playing above a crib. But as the mesmerized Caleb watches from his room, it’s not hard to imagine what he’s thinking—that she’s becoming fully female and sexually viable for him. That she’s literally giftwrapping herself in skin for him.

Both Nathan and Caleb only cared about Ava because of her potential to satisfy their desires: achievement and fame for Nathan and companionship for Caleb. Both used their power to keep or put Ava in a position to satisfy their desires. Both thought of Ava as belonging to them, as being theirs by right. They watched her on their respective monitors, they schemed to possess her, and eventually they came to blows over her. Tellingly, the film follows this contest between men so closely that it never bothers to show Ava’s perspective on events until the very end. She’s just the prize. What she might want, or think, or feel is incidental to the drama of whether Caleb will find a way to rescue his damsel from Nathan’s glass cage. When she ultimately chooses a life without either man, it’s a surprise precisely because Caleb was our protagonist, and we were rooting for him to “get the girl” when we should have been rooting for the girl’s freedom, for her own sake. While the film doesn’t
settle whether Ava’s escape by seduction was an act of programming or free will, on my first viewing one man in the back of the movie theater poignantly settled the machine versus woman debate by shouting “Oh, that bitch!” as Ava left Caleb behind.

WHAT ACCOUNTS OF SEXISM EMPHASIZE

So far, we’ve been gesturing at the idea of sexism by pointing to a variety of harmful and diminishing attitudes about women, women’s proper role and place, and men’s sense of entitlement to women, their labor, and their services. But now we’re ready to be more specific. Manne sees both misogyny and sexism as stemming from patriarchal ideology, or a gender-sorting system comprised by “a certain vision of how social reality ought to be” and the “norms and expectations designed to bring it about” (MS, 11). These norms and expectations can only maintain their grip on people if they’re continuously justified and enforced. For Manne, misogyny is the set of attitudes and practices that enforce patriarchal norms and expectations—for example, by policing women’s behavior, upholding their subordination, and so on. Sexism, meanwhile, is what justifies all those norms and expectations in the first place.

SEXISM AS PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

According to Manne’s definition, “Sexism is the species of patriarchal ideology which functions to theoretically justify patriarchal social relations by, e.g., naturalizing and idealizing women’s subordination and men’s dominance” (MS, 12, emphasis in the original). An example is how the belief that men and women have different talents and preferences leads to a sexual division of labor, where women are encouraged to pursue work that involves nurturing while men pursue work that rewards ambition or physical prowess. Manne continues:

If this is right, then sexist ideology will often consist in assumptions, beliefs, theories, stereotypes, and broader cultural narratives, which represent men and women as importantly different in ways that, if accepted, will make rational people more likely to support and participate in patriarchal social arrangements. Sexist ideology will also encompass … valorizing depictions of patriarchal social arrangements as more desirable and less fraught than they are in reality. (Manne, MS, 12, emphasis in the original)

Another example that illuminates Manne’s distinction? While sexism is an attempt to justify women having less political power than men, misogyny “attacks the women who have acquired such power already,” with the secondary effect of “discouraging other women who might seek it out” (Manne, MS, 14). Thus “sexist ideology often discriminates between men and women by identifying sex differences; whereas misogyny often discriminates between good and bad women, by treating the bad ones as deviant” (MS, 14, emphasis in the original).

SEXISM AS EVERYDAY SUBORDINATION

Manne’s approach emphasizes one aspect of sexism, namely a widely shared network of beliefs and attitudes that together recast gender inequality as “just the way things are,” an unremarkable and even preferable status quo. Most feminists agree that justifying patriarchy is a part of sexism, but many place the emphasis elsewhere, focusing on the physical, psychological, material, and social consequences of sexism—in other words, on the systematic harms done to people because they’re women, or because they’re identified as
women. This includes sexual objectification and the mistreatment that stems from it, the diverging expectations embedded in social constructions of femininity, structural vulnerability and powerlessness, harassment and violence, wage gaps and glass ceilings, and so on, and so on. On this kind of approach, the emphasis isn’t on revealing the background stereotypes that facilitate subordination, but rather on describing and documenting the everyday nature of that subordination. As Anita Superson observes, “Sexism harms women; it makes them victims” (1993, 41).

**Internalization.** This emphasis can be found in writings about *internalization*, or when women accept limiting ideas about their own worth or role, either as a result of socialization or a gradual adaptation of their preferences to match external expectations. Superson discusses women who “accept—even endorse wholeheartedly—the roles men impose on them, and by doing so cause group harm to all women” (1993, 41). Counted among these women are those “living out traditional family roles, by staying with men who abuse them, by acting in ‘feminine’ ways such as being demure and submissive, and so on, because they think they *ought* to do these things” (1993, 42, emphasis in the original). Despite the harm they do, Superson (1993, 43–44) thinks we shouldn’t blame women who endorse patriarchal attitudes, because their beliefs are likely the result of the patriarchal limitations they’ve faced. If she’s right, then phenomena such as internalization and adaptive preferences don’t just show how far sexist attitudes about women can spread. They also reveal some of the direct, harmful consequences of sexism; sexism can be felt in the ongoing pressure to adopt and prefer inferior roles to men.

**Body-Image Norms.** Another example can be seen in the many *body-image norms* that govern women’s appearance and behavior. Sexism doesn’t just manifest in the idle belief that women have a duty to display themselves well. It’s the lived experience of constant evaluation, of shame whenever one hasn’t made “an appropriate effort” in one’s looks or dress, and of praise and reward when external expectations have been met. Sexism is felt when the appearance of women is policed more vigilantly than men, and when the treatment they receive depends in part on how well they embody feminine ideals—even in contexts where their appearance shouldn’t be relevant, such as their career prospects. Bartky describes how sexist expectations can create an array of obligations:

> I must cream my body with a thousand creams, each designed to act against a different deficiency, oil it, pumice it, powder it, shave it, pluck it, depilate it, deodorize it, ooze it into just the right foundation, reduce it overall through spartan dieting or else pump it up with silicon. I must try to resculpture it on the ideal through dozens of punishing exercises. If home measures fail, I must take it to the figure salon, or inevitably, for those who can afford it, the plastic surgeon. There is no “dead time” in my day during which I do not stand under the imperative to improve myself. While waiting for the bus, I am to suck the muscles of my abdomen in and up to lend them “tone”; while talking on the telephone I am bidden to describe circles in the air with my feet to slim down my ankles. All of these things must be done prior to the application of make-up, an art which aims, once again, to hide a myriad of deficiencies. (Bartky 1990, 40)

Bartky captures the idea of a beauty norm when she writes that “every aspect of my bodily being requires either alteration or else heroic measures merely to conserve it” (1990, 40). And there are consequences for not measuring up.

But it’s not just how women look. Body-image norms can also shape how women talk and laugh, how often they smile, the strength they’re willing to display, what actions they’ll
perform, and how competently they’ll perform them. Iris Marion Young (1949–2006) describes some of this cultivated hyperawareness in her 1980 essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” where she catalogs the many differences that can be observed in how men and women do and don’t move, and women’s failure to make full use of the body’s spatial possibilities:

Even in the most simple body orientations of men and women as they sit, stand, and walk, one can observe a typical difference in body style and extension. Women generally are not as open with their bodies as are men in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man’s body than is the feminine stride to a woman’s. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm in his step. Though we now wear pants more than we used to and consequently do not have to restrict our sitting postures because of dress, women still tend to sit with their legs relatively close together and their arms across their bodies. When simply standing or leaning, men tend to keep their feet farther apart than do women, and we also tend more to keep our hands and arms touching or shielding our bodies. (Young 2005, 32)

When coupled with the effects of constant observation, these differences can be explained by the belief that it’s “unladylike” for women to take up too much space or display too much physical prowess. Many of Young’s examples involve sports, where differences between men and women “are due not so much to brute muscular strength as to the way each sex uses the body in approaching tasks” (2005, 21).

But these differences also manifest themselves in everyday activities. Young writes that women often approach physical engagement with “timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy,” experiencing their bodies “as a fragile encumbrance,” lacking “trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims,” deciding beforehand that a task is beyond them and thus giving it “less than our full effort,” and then feeling “incapacity, frustration, and self-consciousness” as a result (2005, 34). Sexist expectations about behavior are internalized or cultivated to avoid scrutiny, stereotype, and shame, which contributes to observable differences, which in turn reinforce our understanding of what appropriately feminine behavior looks like, thus incentivizing the very performances we thought were natural.

**Forms of Objectification.** When trying to understand sexism, attitudes can be hard to disentangle from their consequences. We saw that problem in cases of internalization, but we can also see it in how attitudes are externalized. In her analysis of objectification, Martha Nussbaum is careful to say that objectification isn’t always morally problematic. In fact, depending on the context and the circumstances, some features of objectification may be “necessary or even wonderful features of sexual life” (1995, 251). When feminists raise concerns about objectification, they usually aren’t saying that noticing a person’s body makes you sexist, or that sexual attraction and sexual preferences are inherently wrong. The issue, as Nussbaum puts it, is “treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (1995, 257, emphasis in the original). She lists seven appropriate ways of interacting with an object, any one of which can prove sufficiently harmful if they characterize your interactions with a person or group of people. When imagining people being treated in each of these seven ways, notice how hard it is to separate our problematic attitudes from the actions they warrant; systematic mistreatment always includes both elements:

1. **Instrumentality:** The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. **Denial of autonomy:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. **Inertness**: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency and perhaps also in activity.

4. **Fungibility**: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.

5. **Violability**: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into.

6. **Ownership**: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.

7. **Denial of subjectivity**: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

(Nussbaum 1995, 257)

Nussbaum (1995, 265) observes that there’s something especially problematic about the first type of objectification, as instrumentalizing human beings denies their independent natures, thereby encouraging every other type of mistreatment on the list. But even with instrumentality, whether a particular action counts as mistreatment depends in part on the attitudes of the objectifier. Nussbaum gives the example of lying in bed with one’s lover and using his stomach as a pillow. Under basic assumptions about his preferences and the nature of the relationship, there’s simply nothing worrisome here. Why? Using your lover as a pillow doesn’t necessarily mean treating him like a pillow; it’s compatible with still treating him like a person, or seeing him as someone with value beyond his uses as a comfortable surface. “This suggests that what is problematic is not instrumentalization per se, but treating someone primarily or merely as an instrument. The overall context of the relationship thus becomes fundamental” (Nussbaum 1995, 265, emphasis in the original). Even when there’s a loss of autonomy in sex, context matters, as the encounter might be part of a relationship where dominance is a mutually desirable feature of sex, and where, “on the whole, autonomy is respected and promoted” (1995, 275).

When considering the context, how well the individuals know each other, their respective psychologies, and what’s at stake in the situation are just a start. Nussbaum (1995, 271–272) discusses the case of a woman about to leave for a job interview, and a man commenting that she doesn’t really need to go through with the interview—if she wants the job, all she has to do is send the employers some pictures of herself. There’s certainly a blatant reduction here, as her appearance is being treated as more fundamental than her professional qualifications. But Nussbaum still has questions. Is it a modeling job, or a professorship? Are the man and woman casual acquaintances? Is he a close friend that she, perhaps, wishes would notice her body more often? Are they lovers, lying in bed? Even if it’s the latter, we need to know whether he has a history of belittling her accomplishments, because if he does, then this particular instance of objectification could be more damaging than hearing a similar remark from a stranger. And there’s at least one more piece of context that’s crucial, one that authors such as MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (1946–2005) emphasize: Is this encounter occurring against the backdrop of female subordination, where objectification and sexual exploitation are normalized? Do women generally have fewer opportunities for professional advancement? Are they subject to microaggressions, stereotype threat, and other phenomena that can erode a woman’s ability to compete or perform?

Nussbaum argues that objectification will only count as truly benign “in the complete absence of instrumentalization,” where the objectification “is symmetrical and mutual” and “undertaken in the context of mutual respect and rough social equality” (1995, 275). How
often do all those conditions really obtain? If anything, subsequent authors have only added to the list of objectifying mistreatments. Rae Langton, for instance, notes three additional types of objectification that contribute to the subordination of women, all of which have already played a role in our discussion:

8. Reduction to body: one treats [the object] as identified with its body, or body parts.
9. Reduction to appearance: one treats [the object] primarily in terms of how it looks, or how it appears to the senses.
10. Silencing: one treats [the object] as silent, lacking the capacity to speak.

(Langton 2009, 228–229)

The Generalization of Sexist Harms. The more we list the everyday experiences that get described as sexist, the likelier it seems that we’re not just talking about beliefs that justify the misogynistic enforcement of gender roles. We’re also talking about systematic discrimination and mistreatment—a pattern of harms that keep happening, that aren’t coincidental, and importantly, that generalize beyond any given episode of sexism. Whatever an individual perpetrator might intend by their action, sexism is never an isolated harm, because sexism affects all women. As Superson puts it, “sexist behavior may be directed at a particular woman, but its message is meant for all women” (1993, 41). On this kind of view, sexism is meant to explain how the systematic subordination of women actually manifests.

We can see this generalization in how feminists talk about the harm of objectification. Reflecting on a Playboy image of a tennis player with her underwear showing, Nussbaum asks, “Who is objectified in Playboy? In the immediate context, it is the represented woman who is being objectified, and, derivately, the actress whose photograph appears” (1995, 284). But the real answer? Any woman that the imagination can cast in that role, which is precisely what the fantasy of the photograph invites viewers to do: to see past the representation of a woman playing tennis, or discharging her duties as a nurse, or simply going about her day, and to see the sexual possibilities these women represent. “For what Playboy repeatedly says to its reader is, Whoever this woman is and whatever she has achieved, for you she is cunt” (Nussbaum 1995, 285). And women as a group are harmed by the fantasy of sexual access that’s being sold by the photograph, regardless of whether the model herself feels objectified by the photograph.

Generalization factors into many accounts of sexist harms. Recall Hay’s description of sexual harassment as the outward behavior that arises from sexual objectification. She doesn’t think that sexual harassment affects just one person, like the pedestrian being catcalled as she walks down the street or the employee being pressured into a date by her supervisor. For Hay, when “a particular woman is sexually harassed, all women are in fact harmed” because sexual harassment “draws on and reinforces certain oppressive social norms” that affect all women (2005, 97). If Hay is right, then enforcement mechanisms like sexual harassment are an integral part of what sexism is. Let’s look at Hay’s step-by-step explanation:

When a woman is sexually harassed, or sexually objectified more generally, she has not been treated as a moral equal. This means that she has not been accorded the respect of an autonomous agent. But sexual harassment is not merely evidence of a lack of respect for women’s autonomy; it also undermines their autonomy. It makes them less autonomous. How? Sexual harassment does not just occur within the context of women’s oppression under patriarchy. It also simultaneously entrenches
this oppression by participating in, and thereby reinforcing and legitimating, certain sexist attitudes about women’s inferiority to men and about the sex roles that it is appropriate for women to occupy. That is, sexual harassment is not just a manifestation of the sexist attitudes of patriarchal society; it also contributes to, entrenches, and legitimates these attitudes. These attitudes, in turn, reinforce patriarchal oppression. Because oppression limits the autonomy of those who are oppressed, insofar as these sexist attitudes contribute to patriarchal oppression, they constrain, limit, and undermine women’s autonomy. (Hay 2005, 97, emphasis in the original)

In a patriarchal society, actions such as objectifying mistreatment, sexual harassment, and the like don’t take place in a vacuum—they happen in tandem, aggregating and combining in ways that perpetrators may not intend and victims may not realize.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF DEFINING SEXISM

So after all of that, what is sexism, exactly? What links hierarchical assumptions, internalization, body-image norms, the construction of femininity, the enforcement of gender roles, objectification, male entitlement, sexual harassment, denials of autonomy, discriminatory practices, the sexual division of labor, and the countless other harms we didn’t even cover? On this second, more common approach, the concept “sexism” emphasizes an entire cluster of harms that both issue from subordinating beliefs about women and contribute to that subordination. “Sexism” seeks to unite all the diffuse harms that disparate women experience because they’re seen as women.

Unlike Manne’s distinction between sexist ideology and misogyny, with its emphasis on how people manage to justify patriarchal arrangements to themselves, this second approach strives to capture the full range of attitudes, behaviors, actions, and outcomes that tend to get described as sexist. It helps us understand what’s wrong about isolated episodes, and why behaviors might not be as natural or as innocent as they seem. But the approach has shortcomings, too. Most critically, the reason why it’s able to capture everything is because it counts anything that can play this functional role in women’s subordination. And that makes it difficult to actually explain what sexism is, at its core. Sexism isn’t just one thing. It’s a lot of things. In fact, almost anything can be sexist, and for different reasons, too. Sometimes an action is sexist because of who’s being targeted, and sometimes an action is sexist because of how its effects generalize beyond the target. Sometimes an action is sexist because of what it reveals about the actor, and sometimes an action is sexist regardless of what the actor might believe deep down. And sometimes an action is sexist because of how it contributes to background structures, even though those structures are beyond any one person’s control. Like a lot of cluster-based definitions, this approach to sexism can quickly grow disjointed and unwieldy, leaving us hesitating to predict whether a given action will count as sexist, and stumbling in our attempt to explain sexism to a skeptical audience. Even if it’s true, the approach is difficult to use.

What should we emphasize as we try to understand sexism, then? A set of beliefs about women that motivate unequal treatment, or the set of generalizing harms that women experience daily? What work do we want the concept of sexism to do for us? One reason that’s a tricky question to answer is because it’s not clear how much of women’s subordination the term sexism is actually meant to cover. After all, there’s a nearby concept that’s been in the background of every topic we’ve discussed so far: oppression. And “the oppression of women” is also meant to explain women’s subordination. So what’s the
relationship between these two terms? Do they each capture a separate piece of the puzzle, or do they overlap? Does one help to explain the other, or are they conceptually distinct? Does one contain the other, or refer more widely than the other? What, if anything, is “sexism” meant to convey that “sexist oppression” can’t? Alternatively, are there any oppressive harms that don’t already feature in a fully structural understanding of sexism?

Complicating matters further, it’s difficult to converge on an explanation of sexism when we also disagree about how to explain the oppression of women, and as we’re about to see, feminist perspectives diverge on that as well. Unfortunately, there are no straightforward answers, here. Only high-stakes questions.

MODELS OF OPPRESSION

There are three different models for explaining what makes a wrong oppressive. The classical strategy identifies oppression with certain perpetrated evils, or with ways of harming people that can make a life go terribly wrong. We can call this the action model of oppression, because it explains oppression in terms of the actions that tend to oppress individuals. A second strategy identifies oppression with relationships of subordination—specifically, hierarchical group relationships that are wrongful in their own right, and that facilitate further harms against the members of vulnerable groups. This group relationship model is the prevailing view of oppression in the feminist literature, and much of the discussion in the second half of this chapter will focus on its strengths and weaknesses. That said, a few feminists are increasingly trying to understand oppression by asking what it’s like to be a victim, or in other words, by treating the effects of oppression as fundamental. Examples include theorists who analyze oppression in terms of dehumanization (e.g., Clatterbaugh 1996; Mikkola 2011), and my own account of oppression as a systematic, wrongful burdening of well-being. I’ll end this chapter by showing how we can build an account of oppression from scratch, to illustrate the kinds of considerations an account has to keep track of, and what kinds of trade-offs are involved in the concepts we use.

THE ACTION-CENTERED MODEL

We should start with actions and relationships. Although it doesn’t map onto the first two models exactly, Sally Haslanger’s distinction between agent oppression and structural oppression can help us see the difference between focusing on the wrongs people do and focusing on the wrongful hierarchies between people. Haslanger writes that “the most familiar notion of oppression is one that implies an agent or agents are misusing their power to harm another” (2004, 98)—a notion that corresponds to what we’re calling the action-centered model of oppression. But according to Haslanger (2004, 99), oppression can actually have two distinct sources: people with power or authority can directly cause others to suffer, or that suffering can be the result of a background social hierarchy. In the former sorts of cases, oppression is an act of wrongdoing by a single person or group working together, while in the latter sorts “oppression is not an individual wrong but a social/political wrong; that is, it is a problem lying in our collective arrangements, an injustice in our practices or institutions” (2004, 100). Haslanger argues that “oppression is something that both agents and structures ‘do,’ but in different ways. Structures cause injustice through the misallocation of power; agents cause wrongful harm through the abuse of power (sometimes the abuse of misallocated power)” (2004, 106, emphasis in the original). When the source of
oppression is structural, it’s possible to have cases where no one is directly responsible for the oppression that victims suffer, though such cases will still involve individuals or groups benefiting from the fact that power is misallocated in society (2004, 102–103). This possibility of benefiting from oppression without causing it invokes the idea of privilege, a category that will prove central to the group relationship model (see McIntosh 1989).

To my knowledge, there aren’t any contemporary proponents of an action-centered approach in the feminist literature. But to appreciate why the group relationship model has the focus it does, it helps to understand the shortcomings of analyzing oppression in terms of actions. Early liberal thinkers, who were primarily worried about bad rule by governments (Cudd 2006, 6–7), implicitly adopted an action-centered model. For example, John Locke (1632–1704) conceived of oppression as tyrannical, arbitrary power, arising when governments exceeded or subverted the law; he famously described trust in absolutist governments as akin to finding safety in the mouth of a lion (Locke [1689] 2003, 93, 107, 202, 205, 230). Disenfranchisement, state-sponsored violence or intimidation, politically motivated arrests, crackdowns on individual liberties, impoverishing overtaxation, and even the social coercion of meddlesome public opinion that so worried John Stuart Mill ([1859] 1978, 219)—all are recognizable abuses of power, and thus recognizably oppressive acts.

Although the abuses identified by the action-centered model are highly intuitive examples of oppression, the model has a hard time explaining in a principled way why some actions, but not others, count as oppressive. It works by pointing to a set of cases where agents act in ways we all think they shouldn’t, but because each is such a clear, textbook example of power being abused, there’s no further theory to help us identify less obvious cases, or to settle controversial ones. Not only does that provide us with little guidance when previously unconsidered actions come under philosophical scrutiny, but it makes it difficult to distinguish oppression from other forms of injustice, such as domination and simple cruelty.

More importantly, an action-centered model is unable to accommodate the diffuse and cumulative nature of oppressive burdens, which oftentimes result from comparatively benign actions and inactions. As Young explains, oppression can be the consequence of the “unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life” (1990, 41). Many of the harms feminists talk about, such as telling a sexist joke at work or repeating a female student’s idea in class as if it were your own, are certainly wrong, but don’t seem harmful or vicious enough to count as oppression all by themselves. Instead, such acts contribute to oppression that’s already underway, by complementing or compounding other harmful actions that are happening within a particular structure of norms and practices. Even victims can contribute to their own oppression when their individually rational (but constrained) choices aggregate in harmful ways (Cudd 1994, 35ff.). And as Young contends, we can’t eliminate this kind of structural oppression “by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions” (1990, 41).

In fact, aside from recognizable horrors, very few actions are oppressive in a context-independent way. So how would an action-centered model of oppression go about identifying them? There’s little clarity to be gained by analyzing oppression as an incredibly wide and unconnected range of actions that may or may not actually oppress anyone,
depending on factors that are typically external to the actions in question. We’d end up with an account of oppression that just lists every action as being potentially—but only potentially—oppressive. If we want to identify possible contributions to oppression, then a much more promising approach would be to investigate the structural features that facilitate oppression and lead actions to aggregate in oppressive ways. And that’s precisely what the group relationship model does.

THE GROUP RELATIONSHIP MODEL

The group relationship model has its roots in Marxist theorizing about exploitative class conflict. For Karl Marx (1818–1883), modes of economic activity determine political relationships, and exclusive ownership over the means of production along with a fixed division of labor is inherently exploitative (Marx and Engels [1846] 1988, 43–46). So long as economic classes exist, political classes will be organized “for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited class in the condition of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage-labour)” (Engels [1880] 1978, 713). Thus, the condition of oppression just is membership in a structurally exploited class. The concept “oppression” doesn’t have an independent meaning beyond that relationship. Oppression is the ongoing exploitation of one class by another, with “class” and “exploitation” doing all the conceptual work of explaining the harms involved.

Though oppression wasn’t an important concept for Marx or Engels, feminists drew on their analysis of exploitative social positions to characterize oppressive institutions and social arrangements more generally. The framework has expanded beyond its focus on class alone, attempting to capture morally problematic relationships between different cultures and communities, racialized groups, indigenous and nonindigenous populations, cisgendered homosexuals and LGBTQ persons, able-bodied individuals and people with disabilities, and, of course, men and women. While class relations have become just one kind of difference instead of the core relationship that explains what’s wrong on a social level, the model still fundamentally understands oppression as the exploitation of subordinated groups. Oppression is taken to occur whenever the members of one social group confront structural harms that benefit or privilege the members of a different social group.

Explaining Commonalities. According to Young (1990, 41), this contemporary, more inclusive version of the relationship-centered approach—what feminists call the group relationship model—was developed as an attempt to explain the commonalities in a particular data set, namely those cases of oppression made salient by the New Left social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This means the starting point of reflection was the various experiences reported by, among others, “women, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking Americans, American Indians, Jews, lesbians, gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working class people, and the physically and mentally disabled” (Young 1990, 40). These people all claimed to be oppressed, and the group relationship model wanted to explain what such diverging cases could possibly have in common.

This is an example of what Haslanger terms the descriptive approach to a concept or model. If one wants to understand a particular phenomenon, one considers “the full range of what has counted as such to determine whether there is an underlying (possibly social) kind that explains the temptation to group these cases together” (Haslanger 2000, 33). Drawing on the Marxist framework, the common element identified across these 1960s and 1970s cases was that people suffered disadvantage and injustice “not because a tyrannical
power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.... Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young 1990, 41). These people weren't being oppressed by the same actions or actors, and they weren't suffering the same kinds of harms. What they had in common was matching a particular kind of social pattern: they were oppressed in virtue of being members of groups caught up in relationships of privilege and subordination. Analyzing oppression in terms of social patterns is what allows the group relationship model to identify and explain oppressive societies so well, but as we'll see, relying on patterns is also the source of the model's troubles.

**Being Oppressed Means More Than Being Disadvantaged.** Marilyn Frye's account of oppression is an influential example of the group relationship model. She understands oppression as "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people" (1983, 11). Frye's metaphor for structural oppression is a birdcage. No single bar of a cage, working alone, can prevent a bird from flying away. A cage traps its bird because there are a lot of different bars, each of them working in tandem, even when they're not connected to one another. Similarly, we can't explain structural oppression by pointing out a single harm or disadvantage, like the existence of a wage gap or the frequency with which women are sexually objectified. Those are like the bars of a cage. Each one, alone, can unfairly disadvantage a person by forcing that person to contend with it, to spend time and energy and resources working around it, but they can't trap a person. They can't dominate groups completely enough to guarantee their marginalization, or the reliable extraction of benefits that subordination is meant to facilitate.

For feminist philosophers who favor this model, that's a key distinction. Being oppressed has to mean something more than simply being disadvantaged. After all, everyone faces at least a few unfair setbacks in life, including privileged oppressors! That's why Frye argues that "if one wants to determine whether a particular suffering, harm or limitation is part of someone's being oppressed, one has to look at it in context in order to tell whether it is an element in an oppressive structure: one has to see if it is part of an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people" (1983, 10–11, emphasis in the original).

One of the most influential implications of Frye's analysis is that being faced with a harm or barrier doesn't settle whether you're oppressed. In order to be oppressed, your experience has to be part of a larger pattern. Frye gives the example of the sexual division of labor, and how women are steered into roles that involve nurturing and service. She then asks us to imagine a man who might enjoy such work, but confronting barriers that effectively reserve that labor for women instead, declares himself to be oppressed by gender roles. Now, at least according to Frye, he's not oppressed—no matter how much that barrier constrains him, or how much he wanted the job. Why? "The boundary that sets apart women's sphere is maintained and promoted by men generally for the benefit of men generally, and men generally do benefit from its existence, even the man who bumps into it and complains of the inconvenience. The barrier is protecting his classification and status as a male, as superior" (Frye 1983, 13). A man feeling limited by the sexual division of labor doesn't outweigh the fact that the division of labor is there to provide men like him with women disposed to serve them, and to preserve his own access to better-paying, higher-
status work. For the purpose of understanding oppression, it matters what side of the barrier a person’s on. Yes, birdcages also keep people out, but that’s not what they’re for. Birdcages are constructed because people like to look at birds, and hear them sing. Recall *Ex Machina’s* Ava and the glass enclosure Nathan built to display her.

For Frye, social patterns aren’t just relevant because oppression tends to arise out of structures. Patterns are literally how we identify cases of oppression, and what sets certain burdens and double binds apart as properly oppressive:

If a person’s life or activity is affected by some force or barrier that person encounters, one may not conclude that the person is oppressed simply because the person encounters that barrier or force; nor simply because the encounter is unpleasant, frustrating or painful to that person at that time; nor simply because the existence of the barrier or force, or the processes which maintain or apply it, serve to deprive that person of something of value. One must look at the barrier or force and answer certain questions about it. Who constructs and maintains it? Whose interests are served by its existence? Is it part of a structure which tends to confine, reduce and immobilize some group? Is the individual a member of the confined group? (Frye 1983, 13–14)

An experience, alone, doesn’t make a person a victim of oppression. No harm, no matter how wrong, is sufficient. In order to count as oppressed, other people need to be affected in particular ways as well. Those who share an identity with the purported victim need to encounter similar burdens as she does, and at least some of those who don’t share that identity need to be privileged by the existence of such burdens. It all comes back to group membership, and the relation those groups stand in to one another. Victims of oppression are members of subordinated groups, whose subordination serves the interests of those who belong to dominant groups. For the purpose of identifying potential victims, we might call the harmful effects of a structure on the purported victim *internal effects*, and the effects of that structure on others—fellow victims, privileged group members, oppressors, and so forth—*external effects*. The group relationship model identifies a case as oppression only when it matches a particular pattern of both internal and external effects.

The Importance of Group Dynamics. This conceptual commitment is shared among other proponents of the group relationship model. Alison Jaggar, for example, notes that oppression is a dynamic imposition rather than a static social phenomenon that harms. Talk of oppression “suggests that the problem is not the result of bad luck, ignorance or prejudice but is caused rather by one group actively subordinating another group to its own interest. Thus, to talk of oppression seems to commit feminists to a world view that includes at least two groups with conflicting interests: the oppressors and the oppressed” (Jaggar 1983, 6). bell hooks also understands oppression as a particular kind of group dynamic, one that incorporates elements of domination and exploitation almost interchangeably. She argues that sexist oppression is of primary importance because it’s “the practice of domination most people experience, whether their role be that of discriminator or discriminated against, exploiter or exploited” (hooks 1984, 36). And this pattern isn’t limited to sexist oppression, either: “As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo” (hooks 1984, 43).

In some ways, Young’s account seem to stretch the pattern. She argues that oppression has five different faces—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism,
and violence—and that confronting any of these structural harms is sufficient for oppression to obtain. But while this allows the specific nature of a group’s oppression to vary, the overall relationship between groups is the same. Young (1990, 40) understands oppression in terms of differentially advantaged groups. And though Young argues that oppressors don’t always intend to contribute to oppression, she does believe that social groups nonetheless gain from the existence of oppressive norms and institutions. She writes: “I also do not mean to deny that specific groups are beneficiaries of the oppression of other groups, and thus have an interest in their continued oppression. Indeed, for every oppressed group there is a group that is privileged in relation to that group” (1990, 42, emphasis in the original).

Ann Cudd builds on the structural analysis of oppression advanced by Frye, Young, and others. On her account, oppression involves four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, meaning that if a given case of harm fails to meet any one of those conditions, it isn’t a real case of oppression. They are the harm condition, the social group condition, the privilege condition, and the coercion condition. Our familiar pattern is most evident in the social group and privilege conditions. The social group condition holds that “the harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm,” and the privilege condition holds that “there is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice” (Cudd 2006, 25). Hay’s definition of oppression also involves necessary and sufficient conditions, among which are group membership and group privilege: “an individual is oppressed if and only if (i) she is unjustly harmed in a group-specific way, where this sort of harm has occurred if and only if (a) she is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, G; and … (c) on balance, members of another group, G*, benefit from her being harmed” (Hay 2011, 41, n. 3).

According to Haslanger (2004, 118), the structural oppression of groups involves the members of a group being unjustly disadvantaged either primarily, because being a member of that group is unjustly disadvantaging in some institutional context, or secondarily, because there exists a disadvantaging social position (for example, poverty) and being a member of a given group is nonaccidentally correlated with being in that position due to a prior injustice. And for Haslanger, understanding how group membership is disadvantaging is explicitly about understanding one’s standing in an unjust relation. She writes that “injustice is relational: it concerns relative distributions of goods and power, and relationships that define the expectations, entitlements, and obligations of the different parties. In oppressive circumstances there will be, then, a background framework of relationships that disadvantages some and privileges others” (2004, 113, 114).

Although Cheshire Calhoun emphasizes lesbian and gay displacement, her account of oppression also treats patterned effects as necessary conditions, and does so in order to highlight the role the background framework plays. On her view, oppression results from the systematic organization of social life and social relations based on a cultural articulation of social identities. In particular, “an interlocking set of practices based on the assumption that one social type is deficient in relation to its polar Other produces a pervasive reduction of one group’s political status, self-determination, life chances, resources, physical safety, and control over cultural products. These interlocking practices also produce pervasive and important benefits, privileges, and liberties for the other social group” (Calhoun 2000, 5). As she confirms, what distinguishes “oppression or subordination from merely unequal treatment in a particular sphere is by now fairly well articulated” (2000, 5).
Locating Oppression in Social Patterns. In account after account, we see the same social pattern. Oppression is understood as a certain kind of relationship between advantaged and disadvantaged social groups. And intriguingly, that means suffering a harm or setback isn’t enough to make one a victim of oppression—even if an individual suffers that burden in a systematic and wrongful way, and even if it parallels the harms and setbacks that victims suffer in more canonical cases. On the group relationship model, it’s simply not the harms that matter. The job of the model is to explain a pattern that we keep seeing over and over: entire groups of people being kept in positions of subordination, and other people benefiting as a result. And the model does that job well. It tells us what’s wrong with our society on a macro level. It tells us which groups endure injustice, and which structures are responsible for that injustice. It tells us what we should be fighting to change, and where we all stand in that fight.

COMPROMISING THE GROUP RELATIONSHIP MODEL

Patterns may help us understand when isolated wrongs aren’t actually so isolated, but seeing oppression as one, big repeating pattern has a drawback too: being counted as a victim depends on resembling other cases of oppression sufficiently. And analyzing oppression in terms of what cases have in common is in tension with one of the most important tenets of contemporary feminist theory, namely intersectionality.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality is the idea that differences in identity and personal circumstances result in unique manifestations of oppression and privilege. We’re bound to stray into error if we try to characterize “the oppression of women,” as if all women had interchangeable lives. The experience of being a white woman isn’t the same as being a woman of color, or a lesbian, or an economically vulnerable woman, or a woman with a disability, or a woman who’s part of a religious minority—or, for that matter, a woman who’s all of the above. And there are differences that matter within each of those categories as well. A “woman of color” isn’t one single identity. Sexuality isn’t uniform. Disabilities don’t all have the same social effect. Religious communities aren’t all on a par. Being a woman doesn’t just mean one thing. If anything, understanding the oppression people face can involve paying attention to an incredible variety of minute differences in one’s history, current situation, values, life plans, relationships, commitments, and so on. There are distinctive barriers and burdens involved in, say, being a Hmong trans man born in Laos in the 1970s, who emigrated to the American Midwest in 1980, is a single father currently working in the service industry, and who dreams of returning to school to pursue a legal career. General claims like “men are privileged” and “women are oppressed” are hard to assess, because “men” and “women” aren’t monolithic categories.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, though problems with generalizing from white, married, middle-class experiences to “women’s oppression” were highlighted earlier, most notably by hooks.8 As hooks explains, the point isn’t just that black experience can differ from Chicana experience—there’s also no single experience that we can identify as either “black experience” or “Chicana experience.” “A Chicana growing up in a rural environment in a Spanish-speaking home has a life experience that differs from that of a Chicana raised in an English-speaking family in a bourgeois, predominately white New...
Jersey suburb” (hooks 1984, 59). So innocent-seeming assertions like “all women are oppressed” actually imply that “women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women” (1984, 5). As hooks later elaborates: “the idea of common oppression was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices” (1984, 43–44).

Similarly, Crenshaw argues that conceptual and practical problems can arise when we fail to account for the diverging experiences of the oppressed. Identity politics, understood here as feminist or antiracist practices, “frequently conflates or ignores intergroup differences,” which can actually make things worse for people who find themselves at the margins (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). She gives the example of violence against women, and how erasing difference from the conversation prevents us from seeing that “the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (1991, 1242). And where “systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles” (1991, 1246).

But it’s not just a matter of getting our philosophical explanations wrong, and misallocating resources and resistant energies as a result. The political priorities of both feminists and antiracism activists can actually work against the interests of women of color. Crenshaw gives the example of minority communities in Los Angeles opposing the release of domestic violence statistics. They were concerned that the data “would unfairly represent Black and Brown communities as unusually violent, potentially reinforcing stereotypes that might be used in attempts to justify oppressive police tactics and other discriminatory practices” (Crenshaw 1991, 1253). Coming from the other direction, some feminists opposed the release because they worried the statistics would “permit opponents to dismiss domestic violence as a minority problem,” thus preventing the kind of aggressive legal reform those feminists wanted to see (1991, 1253). This well-meaning activism burdened women of color, who fell between the cracks.

If women face diverging harms and obstacles, can we really expect relationships of subordination and exploitation to account for the experiences of all women, let alone all victims of oppression? This is especially unlikely if Patricia Hill Collins is right about there being “few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives” (1993, 26). Individual differences clearly matter. But individual differences upset patterns.

FAILURE TO MATCH THE PATTERN

There’s a second, related complication facing the group relationship model. Recall the idea of external effects, or how people apart from the victim are affected by the oppressive structure. Emphasizing external effects in the model can lead us to entangle oppression with potentially distinct forms of injustice like exploitation, domination, and discrimination. With the group relationship model, we can’t tell if a person is suffering oppression until we first identify the group members that have power over her, and how they’re using that power to their own benefit, and how she and others like her are limited by unfair barriers and
constraints. Characterizing oppressive burdens becomes a matter of locating those burdens in the wider constellation of wrongs that we’re always expecting to see. But if it turns out those wrongs can be experienced independently of one another—if, for example, a person can suffer an oppressive burden without anyone else benefiting from it—then the model is overdescribing and overgeneralizing the experience of oppression. In other words, when we assume that every victim of oppression will find themselves in the middle of the same kind of subordinating, exploitative relationship, we’re at risk of missing the cases that don’t quite match the wider pattern, and mischaracterizing some of the cases that do.

To be clear, we can raise worries about a patterned analysis of oppression without denying that some forms of victimization really do match the whole pattern. For instance, we probably can’t understand the entire wrong of patriarchy just by listing the individual burdens that women experience. To understand patriarchy, we need to appreciate that these burdens are widespread and nonaccidental, that many men enjoy positional advantages and unreciprocated benefits, that social practices and institutions facilitate the exploitation of women, and that social norms often reflect inappropriate male entitlement, as well as demeaning, dismissive, and displacing attitudes about women. Women, as women, are the victims of many injustices, not just one. And this reality is so embedded in the private, productive, and political domains of life that, on some accounts, being a woman just is being the victim of those structural wrongs, and being a man just is being privileged by those structural wrongs (see Beauvoir [1949] 1989, 14ff.; Haslanger 2000, 42–43). It makes sense to describe patriarchy as a social pattern, because the term refers to more than just oppression. “Patriarchy” refers to a sweeping and subtle system that generally arranges social life to benefit men, and in particular those men privileged along other dimensions as well. But that observation about patriarchy doesn’t mean that we should define every case of oppression as a relationship of subordination and exploitation, or ground our explanation of what oppressive burdens are like in a macro-level description of how societies sometimes go wrong. Again, differences matter.

If we want to characterize oppression as a pattern of wrongful relationships, we face a choice. We can sacrifice descriptive accuracy about real-world cases for the sake of having a general theory of who counts as oppressed and what their oppression consists in. Or we can stretch the pattern to try to fit as many cases as we can, no matter how different they are from one another, and in so doing lose conceptual clarity about the kind of wrong the pattern is meant to capture. Either option is costly.

Now, does that doom the group relationship model? Of course not! It’s the prevailing model of oppression among analytic feminists for a reason: it does many of the things that feminists want a model of oppression to do. It helps us assess our norms, practices, and institutions, and it uncovers commonalities across group experiences that we otherwise might have explained away as “just the way things are.” Those are important aims. Remember, the point of this chapter isn’t to convince you that a particular model of oppression is right, and that all the other candidates are obviously wrong. Every model or concept or definition we could possibly come up with will involve trade-offs. They will all explain and emphasize some aspects of oppression well, while struggling to capture other aspects. The group relationship model identifies a pattern that keeps reappearing, and that’s helpful, but patterns have a hard time being flexible enough to account for the many differences in lived experience, and that’s less helpful.

Philosophical progress isn’t about knocking down views until one is left standing. It’s about trying to make sense of important empirical and moral considerations, even though
we know we won’t be able to track everything that matters. It’s about comparing trade-offs, even though we know the perspectives we adopt won’t allow us to see everything that counts.

Given that, I think it would be illuminating to close out this chapter with an exercise. I want to try to build a feminist account of oppression from scratch, step by step, so that you can appreciate the kinds of considerations that oppression theorists are trying to address, and the kinds of tough decisions they’re forced to make about what’s worth emphasizing. I’ll telegraph in advance that the account I’m going to build won’t explain everything. I think it does a good job of characterizing oppressive experiences in a suitably flexible way, because that’s what effects-centered accounts of oppression like mine are designed to do. But it’s going to struggle to offer the same kind of social indictments that accounts belonging to the group relationship model can pull off with ease, because that’s what group relationship accounts are designed to do. Every feminist perspective has trade-offs. Let’s look at some of them.

BUILDING AN ACCOUNT OF OPPRESSION

We call a lot of different experiences oppressive. If a summer day grows hot enough, we might even call the weather oppressive. Feminist philosophers obviously aren’t concerned with that kind of oppression, but the ordinary usage does capture something central to the condition of being oppressed. At the highest level of generality, to be oppressed is to be weighed down and wearied by some burden. According to Michael Freeman, oppression exists “when A constitutes, or places a heavy burden on B” (1992, 921). As Judith Farr Tormey observes, “the metaphorical notion of being ‘down’ is central to oppression whether it is relative merely to one’s moods or one’s social status;” a victim of oppression “is put ‘down’ and kept ‘down’” (1976, 216). And as part of her discussion of double binds, or situations where people are only left with a few, costly options, Frye writes that “the root of the word ‘oppression’ is the element ‘press’.…. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility” (1983, 2). This feature of oppression is why the same word can be used to describe the relatively benign burden of a hot day and the overwhelming burden of unjust institutions and social arrangements—a similarity not lost on those trying to articulate the latter experience. In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (1963), the line immediately preceding the famous “content of their character” sentiment is evocative in precisely this way: “I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”

Given this overlap in effects, why are philosophers unconcerned about oppressively hot days? In other words, what, aside from being burdensome, makes a particular circumstance oppressive in the morally relevant sense of the term? What subset of oppressive burdens should we seek to understand and resist, and what additional features pick out that subset?

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

The first step away from the ordinary usage of “oppression” is straightforward. While the summer heat can be oppressive, temperature is a naturally occurring phenomenon, and the same goes for the fact that human physiology is maladapted to temperatures above a certain
range. Oppressive burdens of the morally significant sort, on the other hand, are always the result of human activities and beliefs. As Freeman puts it, oppression is not an ethical concept unless the burdening A and the burdened B are human agents (1992, 921). Jaggar mirrors this starting point:

The etymological origin of the word “oppression” lies in the Latin for “press down” or “press against.” This root suggests that people who are oppressed suffer some kind of restriction on their freedom. Not all restrictions on people’s freedom, however, are oppressive. People are not oppressed by simple natural phenomena, such as gravitational forces, blizzards, or droughts. Instead, oppression is the result of human agency, humanly imposed restrictions on people’s freedom. (Jaggar 1983, 5)

The social element of oppression isn’t one of its effects, but rather serves to pick out the condition that interests us.

While the morally salient kind of oppression always has a social dimension, it’s important to remember that an individual or group doesn’t have to deliberately aim to oppress anyone in order to succeed in doing so. The burdensomeness of a victim’s circumstances doesn’t depend on individuals being aware that they’re contributing to that burden, let alone on their contribution following some malicious design. Such details bear on whether and to what extent the perpetrators of oppression are morally blameworthy for oppression, and this is a question we need to be able to answer, but the core of oppression is still victimization, not ill intent. If anything, the ignorance and insensitivity of oppressors is often what facilitates oppression. As Young contends, the “conscious actions of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but those people are usually simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and do not understand themselves as agents of oppression” (1990, 41–42).

NEITHER OBJECTIVE NOR SUBJECTIVE SEVERITY

That said, not every social burden is oppressive. Suppose a woman’s car breaks down, and her mechanic estimates that repairs will take three weeks. Further suppose that the delay can be explained by the mechanic playing favorites with the repair order. During those three weeks, she has to rely on public transit, and given the infrequent stops and indirect routes, getting around by bus proves to be quite a nuisance. Is she a victim of oppression? Surely not. But we need to be careful when explaining why she isn’t oppressed by this burden. In particular, we want to avoid identifying oppressive burdens based on either their objective severity or their subjective severity.

By objective severity, I have in mind explanations that tell us to arrange all possible social burdens on a continuum from least harmful to most harmful, and then stipulate that oppression refers to whatever is on the “most harmful” end of the continuum. For a number of reasons, this wouldn’t yield a very plausible analysis of oppression, including the fact that you’d have to draw an arbitrary threshold somewhere. But the principal problem is that we can easily imagine extremely damaging interpersonal harms that we normally wouldn’t consider oppressive, such as being injured by a reckless driver, as well as comparatively mild harms that feminists are quick to include on the list of oppressive burdens, such as being a wealthy attorney who’s passed over for a promotion to partner because the other partners at the firm don’t think a woman can handle the job.9 If oppression were just about ranking the severity of burdens, then the still-wealthy, still-influential attorney would seem to be in better shape than the pedestrian recovering in the hospital. In an effects-centered approach, cases of oppression are instead identified when lives are affected in particular ways, but not necessarily in the worst ways.
What about the more plausible claim that being a victim of oppression is tied to subjective severity, or the degree to which individuals feel burdened by their circumstances? This interpretation has at least three drawbacks. First, different people have different tolerance levels. Some people find it torturous to be apart from their smartphones, while others are able to withstand literal torture, such as resilient servicewomen and servicemen. It’s possible that neither of these cases qualifies as oppression, but it would be strange if accounts deemed the smartphone case a likelier candidate than the torture case. Second, and relatedly, analyzing oppression in terms of subjective severity would place a disproportionate amount of blame on the victims. The unintended implication of subjective accounts is that only weak individuals experience oppression, which means that being oppressed is at least in part a personal failing. That’s *victim-blaming* of the morally repugnant sort.

The problem of adaptive preferences reveals the third, and I think most important, reason for not explaining oppressive burdens in terms of subjective severity. It’s a consideration that also came up when we looked at the internalization of sexist norms. Consider a woman that comes to share the oppressive attitudes of her society, including the belief that individuals such as her have an inferior moral status, and so are properly subordinated to the interests of men. Internalizing that worldview would immediately lessen the subjective severity of her situation. After all, the frustration of enduring unjust burdens depends in part on recognizing the injustice of those burdens, and according to this woman’s new outlook, the world is exactly as it should be. An analysis of oppression that tracks subjective severity would take this internalization as evidence that her circumstances have become at least somewhat less oppressive, but a better reading of internalization is that the circumstances in question are especially dangerous and are, if anything, even more oppressive now.

Bartky argues that this psychological dimension is precisely what makes oppression so pernicious, in that it “allows those who benefit from the established order of things to maintain their ascendancy with more appearance of legitimacy and with less recourse to overt acts of violence than they might otherwise require” (1990, 23). Similarly, Tormey advances the idea of an oppressive device, “which works by making the person believe that [irrelevant social] distinctions are legitimate or that the differences are not irrelevant” (1976, 216). Much like individuals can contribute to oppression without realizing that what they’re doing counts as a contribution, the nature of internalization demonstrates that individuals can be oppressed without realizing that their situation is an oppressive one.

Beyond the mistaken implication that victims who internalize oppressive attitudes are less oppressed than their counterparts, the problem of adaptive preferences has a rather perverse implication. If we analyze oppression in terms of subjective severity, then it might make sense to recommend that victims internalize oppressive attitudes in order to spare themselves the pain of recognizing just how demeaning their treatment is, or to shield themselves from the frustration and anger that might result from realizing the full injustice of their situation. Compared to embarking down the more difficult and uncertain road of resisting oppression, internalization provides a relatively straightforward and immediate way to minimize oppressive burdens. Yet even if internalization really could minimize oppression, recommending that victims suppress the urge to understand and pursue what they truly deserve would fail to take the agency of victims seriously. And feminist perspectives are united by the desire to be exceedingly careful about how we talk about the agency of victims, because it’s so easy to further marginalize victims by mischaracterizing what they’re like, what they face, or what they ought to do.
WHAT MAKES SOCIAL BURDENS OPPRESSIVE?

So if oppression isn’t a matter of either objective or subjective severity, then what makes a social burden oppressive? In other words, what kind of effect on a life makes someone a victim of oppression? I think there are four features that we should keep track of.

A Comprehensive Scope. First, it’s not the severity of the burden that matters, but rather its scope. In the public transit case, the social burden only complicates the satisfaction of a preference or two, whereas oppressive burdens are comprehensive, potentially impacting entire domains of a victim’s life: private, productive, public, and even the spaces in between. Oppressive burdens hit their victims from many sides at once, saturating a range of everyday experiences. That’s why comparatively mild harms such as sexist jokes can contribute to oppression—they’re one experience among many that, taken together, have the effect of burdening a life. Group relationship theorists are right when they argue that oppression can be a diffuse and cumulative phenomenon. A person becomes oppressively burdened, in part, when enough contributions are made to have a particular type of effect on their life overall. And whether it’s one domain or several, that effect is measured on the scale of domains.

An Ongoing State of Affairs. Though a necessary element, the comprehensiveness of a social burden isn’t enough to make it oppressive. It’s possible to describe the public transit case in such a way that every aspect of a person’s day-to-day life is impacted by their lack of a car, especially if the person is below the poverty line, is trying to hold down multiple jobs while caring for vulnerable dependents, and so on. This brings us to the second feature of oppressive social burdens: they’re ongoing. Being confronted with a temporary setback might disadvantage a person, but it’s not enough to make them a victim of oppression. A person who claims to have been “super oppressed last Thursday” is either exaggerating or mistaken about what counts as oppressive. Recalling Tormey’s observation, oppression involves not only being put down, but being kept down as well. Oppression is a state of affairs, one that affects lives continually rather than occasionally.

What does it mean for an oppressive burden to be ongoing? It means that a life continues to be affected by the kinds of harmful contributions that burden in tandem, not that any one harm or contribution necessarily persists. In that sense, a lingering harm isn’t automatic evidence of oppression. Yes, physical and emotional trauma stemming from a one-time harm can affect a life for years or even decades to come, generating new harms in the wake of the old one. It’s important that feminist accounts of victimhood are able to accommodate that reality. But damage lingering after some original harm, though possibly burdensome and certainly regrettable, is a different kind of effect than a continuous, even stable state of affairs, and oppression affects lives in this second way. This is the difference between, say, the lingering harms of sexual assault and the ongoing harms of rape culture.

Systematic Burdens. Thus far we can say that social burdens are oppressive when they’re comprehensive and ongoing. We can simplify that a little by grouping the comprehensive and ongoing aspects together. A burden that impacts entire domains of a person’s life, and does so stably over time, is a systematic burden. In other words, however it is that victims of oppression are burdened, we know that they’re burdened systematically: their oppression is a defining feature of their circumstances. That tells us something important about the nature of oppressive burdens. They aren’t easily avoidable complications. They aren’t the
sorts of barriers that leave a person with equally valuable alternatives, and they aren’t the kinds of limitations that can be overcome with a little creativity and determination. Everybody faces burdens in life. But not everyone’s life is burdened by oppression.

**Burdening the Constituents of Well-Being.** Emphasizing the systematic nature of burdens helps, but it still doesn’t explain the effect that those burdens have on a life, or why that effect should be considered oppressive. It doesn’t explain what oppression does.

There are many distinct ways in which oppression can diminish a person’s overall life prospects or interfere with the basic components of a good life. A life can be burdened when a person systematically experiences or is threatened with material, physical, or psychological suffering at the hands of others. A life can be burdened when valuable opportunities or life plans are systematically blocked or made more costly to pursue than they otherwise would have been. A life can be burdened when an individual is systematically prevented from choosing the kind of life they will lead. A life can be burdened when a person’s sense of self-worth is systematically undermined, or when they’re systematically denied the social bases of self-respect. And these are just a few examples. We can imagine cases of oppression that involve two or more of these harms, and we can also imagine cases that are characterized by other harms entirely.

What harms of the relevant sort have in common, besides being social and systematic, is that they burden the enjoyment or pursuit of worthwhile lives. Being oppressed burdens a person’s well-being. Put more formally, oppression burdens an individual by systematically diminishing or interfering with one or more constituent of their objective well-being. What does that mean? In moral philosophy, objective well-being refers to a very general list of factors that tend to make a life go well for people. These are factors such as having self-respect, making progress in your plans and projects, being happy, experiencing connection, having and exercising autonomy, being secure, being healthy, and possessing at least some items of material value or other valuable external goods. Throughout this chapter, we’ve seen examples of women being burdened in each of these eight ways, and the account makes those categories explicit.

Oppression can manifest by burdening any one of these constituents of well-being alone, or by burdening some combination of them. There isn’t just one way that oppression can manifest, because even the exact same structural force or background pressure or direct harm can burden victims in unique ways, depending on how differences in their identity and personal circumstances shape their well-being, or leave aspects of their well-being particularly vulnerable to pressures or harms like those. An effects-centered approach doesn’t claim that every victim has the same experience, or is oppressed in the same way. A barrage of sexist jokes might contribute to one woman’s oppression, while a second woman comes across too few of them for her life to be impacted much at all. What victims have in common is that the individual harms or barriers they confront aggregate over time, ultimately leaving their well-being burdened in at least one respect. That’s the effect that oppression has on a life: it systematically lessens a person’s well-being, or makes it harder for them to enjoy or make use of the goods that tend to make a life go well. The account I’m building identifies a case of oppression once this overall effect materializes, but victims can find themselves affected for very different reasons, and as the result of an entirely unique combination of social forces.

**The Flexibility of a Well-Being Analysis.** It’s important to note that one can disagree with the contents of the objective list without fundamentally altering the account of oppression it
yields. For example, if we decide that possessing valuable external goods such as wealth probably shouldn’t have been considered a constituent of well-being after all, then that means individuals can’t be considered oppressed just because their pursuit of such goods is being systematically burdened. Likewise, if something else should have been included on the list but wasn’t, such as having high social status, then adding it to the objective list means that an individual’s oppression can consist entirely in systematic burdens on achieving or wielding a high social status. The constituents we add or subtract from the list will change our characterization of what combinations of oppressive burdens are possible, as well as our description of what it’s like for specific individuals to be oppressed, but the overall logic of the account will stay the same: the effect that oppression has is systematically burdening one or more constituent of a victim’s well-being. All you need for the account to work is the conviction that some factors tend to make a life go well, and that those factors can be burdened in systematic ways. Oppression is that effect happening.

Remember, the objective well-being list is a generalization. You can stipulate a list of factors that tend to make a life go well, such as enjoying connection, and still acknowledge that a particular person’s life wouldn’t actually be improved by, say, adding more connections to it. A hermit isn’t necessarily wrong about what matters in life if human connection fails to make her life more worthwhile. It may simply be that other forms of connection do that for her instead, such as a connection with nature that solitude affords, or a personal connection to some cause or ideal. If no form of connection contributes to her well-being, then the theory works by insisting that some other constituent on the list will explain why. Perhaps her life plans or projects are inconsistent with cultivating deep ties to anyone or anything. Perhaps connection threatens her happiness due to certain past events, and happiness is ultimately more central to her well-being. Even if it’s truly the case that connection plays absolutely no role in explaining her well-being, that’s okay, too. She’s an exception to the list, but not an exception to this way of analyzing oppression. Something will make her life go objectively well. And systematically interfering with whatever that something is, is oppression.

This account of oppression is flexible, because it allows us to zoom in on constituents of well-being that may be relevant to a particular individual’s experience of oppression, without implying that every victim of oppression will find their life burdened in the exact same way. That doesn’t mean that the account treats every victim like an isolated individual, however. Because people who share similar identities and personal circumstances are likely to find themselves burdened in similar ways, patterns can emerge organically within social groups. Patterns can also emerge across social groups, as people who don’t have much else in common discover that their well-being is nevertheless being affected in similar ways, opening up the possibility of new political alliances and relationships of solidarity. But while this effects-centered account can re-create some of the social patterns that the group relationship model considers fundamental, it can’t explain the oppression people face in terms of those patterns. The account thinks those commonalities are important and largely nonaccidental, sure, but because its focus is elsewhere, it lacks the group relationship model’s ability to observe and condemn the wrongs of society with as much clarity.

**Oppression as a Moralized Concept.** That said, there’s still one more element of social burdens to consider, and it’s going to be relevant for any account of oppression. My account, as it’s currently formulated, holds that a person is oppressed when their objective well-being is burdened in social and systematic ways. But sometimes it can be appropriate to impact a person’s well-being in that way. Compare a political prisoner and a serial killer,
each enduring the exact same prison sentence. Part of what makes the political prisoner case so intuitively oppressive is the commonly held conviction that it’s wrong to incarcerate people for matters of conscience, especially if their beliefs don’t entail harming anyone else. But a violent, unrepentant criminal? Incarceration is fitting. When a serial killer is imprisoned, they experience a social and systematic burdening of their objective well-being, but we tend not to think that their imprisonment is oppressive (see Hay 2013). So if the dissident and the killer are housed in nearby cells, and suffer precisely the same burdens as a result of being in those cells, then either we have a counterexample to the social burdens account, or oppression is an inherently moralized concept.

Claiming that oppression is a moralized concept means you think that systematic burdens are only oppressive when it’s in some sense wrong that a person is experiencing those burdens. Is that a worrisome or ad hoc restriction? I don’t believe so. And neither, for that matter, do proponents of the equally moralized group relationship model. For instance, Jaggar writes that “Not all humanly imposed limitations on people’s freedom are oppressive, however. Oppression must also be unjust” (1983, 6). And in Hay’s account of oppression, one of the necessary conditions is that “an oppressive harm or restriction must be unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some way” (2013, 6). Understanding oppression in moralized terms appears to reliably track common intuitions about cases, as well as our social practices of criticism and activism.

For example, the claim that guilty convicts are victims of oppression becomes more plausible the more excessive the punishment grows, relative to the crime committed. Why? Not because oppression pays attention to severity as such, but because we tend to think that disproportionate punishment is wrong. If a person faces lifelong incarceration for an isolated instance of petty theft, it’s precisely the wrongfulness of the sentence that leads us to consider the thief oppressed, but not the similarly sentenced serial killer two cells down. If the thief stole to feed her family, then we have even more reason to be concerned about the ways in which her life is being burdened. And these burdens are most troubling of all when a person did nothing to deserve their imprisonment. Extending the metaphor of gendered oppression, Ava’s situation in *Ex Machina* is striking because she was essentially born into a prison of constant sexualization, a prison she spent the whole film trying to escape.

But note that even a serial killer can be oppressed by their imprisonment if their racialized identity played a role in their conviction, or if they’re subject to systematic extralegal abuse while serving their sentence. It’s not wrong to remove them from the rest of society for a time, but it is wrong to do so on the basis of racial stereotypes, or to expose them to the kinds of institutionalized harms that no crime can ever warrant. The reason why it isn’t ad hoc to analyze oppression in moralized terms goes all the way back to what we want an account of oppression to do for us: explain wrongs. Theories of oppression track burdens that people never deserve to experience—the kinds of burdens that we always have reason to resist. We can’t really imagine a case of “good oppression,” or an example where it’s appropriate to oppressively burden a person. That’s because oppression is a moralized concept.

**A Conversation about Wrongs.** This final consideration is the trickiest one for accounts of oppression to track. After all, what counts as wrongful is an open, controversial, and highly politicized question. So in some ways, agreeing that a case is oppressive will depend on your prior assumptions about which burdens (or relationships) are inappropriate. This is why we disagree about oppression all the time. It isn’t hard to spot systematic burdens on well-
being, or structural relationships between groups. But it can be incredibly difficult to convince people that those burdens shouldn’t be happening, or that those relationships shouldn’t be the way they are. This is where feminist perspectives on oppression come into play. Oppression theorists are engaged in a sustained debate about the basic norms of human treatment, and feminists have unique perspectives on what those norms should be, and when our norms aren’t as innocent as we take them to be. Understanding when a certain burden is wrongful and when it isn’t requires that we put our values, commitments, assumptions, and even biases on the table, at which point the debate about oppression becomes a conversation about what we should believe. And that’s the right discussion for a society to have. The question of oppression is ultimately a question of when a life goes wrong, of what kinds of experiences we should consider objectionable, and why. We may never settle those questions, or finish having that conversation. But we owe it to each other to keep trying.

AN EFFECTS-CENTERED ACCOUNT

The effects-centered account I’ve spent the last part of this chapter building claims that an individual is oppressed when their objective well-being is burdened in social, systematic, and wrongful ways. And since wrongful burdens are inherently social, we can simplify the account a final time: an individual is oppressed when their objective well-being is systematically and wrongfully burdened. This account identifies oppressive experiences by analyzing the ways that lives are affected, instead of analyzing wrongs in terms of the wider social patterns a person might find themself in. This approach helps us accommodate differences in identity and personal circumstances, without giving up on the idea that there’s something that it’s like to be oppressed. But if you want to know what’s wrong with society, or why burdens of that sort keep happening to groups without power, then you’re best served by turning to the group relationship model. The same model that looks for patterns among experiences that sometimes just aren’t there, and gets itself into trouble as a result.

There are no easy answers. Every concept has trade-offs. Which one do you think we should use, and why?

Summary

As we’ve seen, the disagreement between analytic feminists isn’t so much about the nature of sexism and oppression. Most theorists are going to agree about which attitudes and practices are sexist, and that the oppression of women usually involves some manner of subordination. The reason feminist accounts diverge is because it’s impossible for a single definition or concept to explain every kind of wrong that women experience in virtue of being women—women aren’t all the same, and even when they do face the same wrongs, those wrongs can easily impact their lives in completely different ways. No model, no matter how sophisticated or detailed, can capture the incredible diversity that is lived human experience.

That means feminists have to make choices about what they emphasize. When explaining sexism, some theorists concentrate on the attitudes and beliefs that allow people to justify the ongoing existence of patriarchal norms and institutions, while others try to unify the various forms of gendered mistreatment that women cite as examples of sexism. And as they try to identify cases of oppression, some feminists focus on the hierarchical
relationships of advantage and disadvantage that keep reappearing throughout society, and some focus on the range of effects that being oppressed can have on a life—on the wrong that oppression does. Theorists have to decide how flexible to make their accounts, how to draw meaningful distinctions without leaving anyone out, and how to generalize about experiences without erasing differences. They have to articulate burdens that can be highly personal, and they have to explain harms that many people refuse to even acknowledge. And they have to take stands on some of the most high-stakes questions a society can ask itself, and risk being wrong in the process.

There are no easy answers when it comes to sexism and oppression, but we have to keep at it, because sexism and oppression both thrive in the absence of scrutiny. So how do you think we should explain these phenomena? What do you think is worth emphasizing, or emphasizing differently? What have theorists missed so far, and if you had to try, how would you describe the experiences they’re missing?

Endnotes

1. Formulated by Alan Turing (1912–1954) in 1950, the test measures artificial intelligence by evaluating a machine’s ability to exhibit behavior that’s indistinguishable from human behavior. In Turing’s case, that meant carrying on a written conversation so realistic that a person couldn’t tell they were interacting with a machine rather than with another person. It’s controversial whether such a procedure can actually detect artificial intelligence, as even the most effective simulation of behavior doesn’t guarantee that the simulation is the product of conscious thought. A machine can fool you without being aware that it’s fooling you, or without having any awareness at all.

2. Note: a “nice guy” is a specific phenomenon, and doesn’t mean the same thing as “a guy who happens to be nice.” For an early rundown of the distinction, see Heartless Bitches International’s blog post “Why ‘Nice Guys’ Are Often Such LOSERS” (http://www.heartless-bitches.com/rants/niceguys/niceguys.shtml).

3. Somehow, the female body parts Ava finds are all perfectly interchangeable, even though the deactivated prototypes have different heights and skin tones. It doesn’t matter; when Ava steps back from the mirror, her appearance is consistent and completely human. This is an example of fungibility, which is one form of objectification.

4. Contemporary readers may recognize some of these differences in the term manspreading, or when men occupy as much space as possible in settings such as overcrowded trains and buses. There are entire blogs devoted to documenting it. Have fun Googling.

5. Briefly, a microaggression is an offhand comment that has the effect of making a person’s marginalized status salient, even if the comment was meant as a way to bond. An excellent example comes in Jordan Peele’s 2017 film Get Out, where a white man tells a black man he’s just met that he would have voted for President Obama a third time if he’d had the chance. There’s nothing oppressive about voicing your electoral preference for President Obama. But if it’s the first thing you say to a person of color, then you’re effectively introducing yourself by announcing that You’re Totally Not Racist, Promise! Why would you feel the need to signal that, unless the race of the person you’re talking with is highly salient to you? Meanwhile, a stereotype threat is when reminding a person of salient stereotypes can measurably undermine that person’s performance on a task. For example, one common stereotype is that women are naturally bad at math. That stereotype will linger in the back of one’s mind, and can erode the confidence of even brilliant mathematicians when it’s brought to the fore—for example, by Scantron sheets that inexplicably ask test takers to identify their gender before they start their midterms.

6. While Haslanger’s account accommodates both approaches, the cases she’s most interested in addressing are cases of structural oppression, and specifically group-based structural oppression.

7. The other two conditions are the harm condition (there is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice) and the coercion condition (there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm).

8. For an intellectual history and schematization of intersectional analyses, see McCall 2005.

9. As a note of caution, we should be careful about relying too much on our intuitions about what is and isn’t oppressive. The fact that feminist philosophers care about one kind of case but not another is at least some kind of evidence, but since our intuitions can be
shaped by the very oppression we’re trying to describe, our intuitions can’t definitively settle whether something is oppressive. For an elaboration of this worry, see Mills 2005, 172ff.

10. Unlike Bartky, Tormey considers the internalization of oppressive attitudes a necessary feature of oppression.

11. For an interesting account where impairments of autonomy are meant to explain every case of oppression, see Zutlevics 2002.

12. “Assuming that a prisoner’s incarceration is just, he or she has earned the restrictions on his or her agency and so he or she deserves this harm” (Hay 2013, 6).

### Bibliography


**FILM**

*Ex Machina*. Dir. Alex Garland. 2015.