

**Privileged Groups and Obligation:
Engineering Oppressive Concepts**

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ABSTRACT Assuming that there is an obligation to combat structural injustice, what does it look like? I suggest that discerning what this obligation is, and on whom it falls, first requires being sensitive to facts about social structure. Importantly, we need to know how social structure is constituted, and the ways in which it can be disrupted. I argue that since social structure is constituted, in part, by concepts that undergird social practices, then our critical attention should be focused on those concepts that undergird oppressive social practices. In the end, I suggest that the obligation to combat structural injustice falls on privileged social groups to significantly aid in the processes that give rise to conceptual change.

1. Introduction

Social justice requires achieving a state of affairs in which oppression is absent. This is clearly some distance from what presently obtains. Hence, it's important to discern whether there is an obligation to get us from our present state of affairs to a world in which oppression no longer exists, and on whom such an obligation would fall.

What is meant by oppression? Following Marilyn Frye, I take oppression to be a group-level phenomenon:

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One is marked for application of oppressive pressures by one's membership in some group or category. Much of one's suffering and frustration befalls one partly or largely because one is a member of that category.¹

According to Frye, oppression is a function of the 'enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people.'² For instance, women are oppressed in virtue of cultural representations as sex objects that undergirds a system of practices contributing to constraining their agency, leading to an unjust deficiency in social, political, and economic power.

It seems reasonable to think that *if* there is an obligation to combat structural injustice, discerning what this obligation is, and on whom this obligation would fall, requires being sensitive to facts about the structures that Frye is calling attention to. Importantly, we need to know how social structure is constituted, and the ways that it can be disrupted.

In this paper, I will assume that there is an obligation to combat structural injustice.³ The strength of this obligation must be made explicit: It is an obligation to make substantive change to oppressive social relations. Given this, the aim of the paper is to discern the content of such an obligation, and on whom it falls. To this end, I will argue for three interrelated claims. (1) The best way to disrupt unjust social structure is to revise the concepts that undergird oppressive social practices; (2) the obligation to combat structural injustice involves revising such concepts; and (3) this obligation falls on privileged social groups.

The lay of the paper is as follows. In §2, following Sally Haslanger, I explicate the notion of oppressive social structure as constituted, in part, by concepts (and resources). In §3, I address (1) and (2). With respect to (1), I suggest that in virtue of how oppressive social structures are formed, an important location to disrupt social structure is to be found in undermining and revising the shared set of concepts that undergird oppressive practices. From this, I argue that the obligation to combat structural injustice is an obligation related to revising the concepts responsible for such practices. This addresses (2). And, since the set of concepts that constitutes social structure is a group-level phenomenon, revising the concepts that undergird oppressive social practices is a group-level issue. Thus, the obligation to combat structural injustice – the obligation to revise concepts, or else to significantly aid in their revision – falls on groups. In §4, I discuss (3). I offer three reasons for why we should think that this obligation falls on *privileged social groups*. In §5, I conclude.

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2. What is Social Structure?

My interest is in the obligation to combat *structural* injustice. So, to begin, we should get clear on two things: What is social structure? And how can we make sense of social structure as oppressive?

Following Sally Haslanger, I will understand social structure as a network of interdependent practices.⁴ It is a general category that includes ‘social institutions, ...conventions, social roles, social hierarchies, social locations or geographies, and the like.’⁵ Social structures are the matrixes in which social activity takes place. Let’s unpack this.

Practices, which constitute social structure, consist of behavior undergirded by cultural *schemas*. Schemas are:

...intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behavior. They are embodied in individuals as a shared cluster of *open-ended dispositions to see things in a certain way or to respond habitually in particular circumstances*. Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts for interaction with each other and our environment.⁶

In short: Schemas are public patterns internalized by social agents, and used to mediate between experience and reality; schemas *interpret* and *organize* information, creating a frame for socially meaningful interaction by shaping the way we respond to our surroundings and coordinate with others.⁷ In this sense, schemas are just like *concepts*.⁸ Though, the notion of ‘concept’ used here is *not* how philosophers of mind and cognition have understood it. Schemas are not discrete, cross-contextually stable mental entities that follow strict rules of composition.⁹ Instead, ‘concept’ is to be understood in a way that is typical of psychologists, or what Elisabeth Camp calls ‘psychological concepts’ or ‘characterizations’.¹⁰ Such concepts are associative cognitive and affective networks that are contextually malleable, intuitive, and holistic. Understood in this sense, concepts are interpretive devices that renders intelligible experience, enabling one to engage with their social and material environment, making possible coordinated interaction with others in response to the world. Without psychological concepts, individuals would be inert. Henceforth, I will use the term ‘concept’ instead of ‘schema’.

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Concepts are used for interpreting and responding to aspects of the world as a *resource*. A resource is anything that is considered to have value i.e., moral, practical, political, religious, epistemic, etc.¹¹ For example, through the use of different concepts, semi-precious metals can be interpreted either as jewellery or currency. Individuals are disposed to interact with the world, and coordinate with others, given this shared interpretation (e.g., if semi-precious metal is interpreted as currency, then it can be traded for goods and services). Recurring dispositional behavior in response to a resource is a practice, and when such practices become entrenched, this constitutes a social relation. Systems of interdependent practices/relations are social structures.

For Haslanger, agency is constrained by the position one occupies in social structure. Such constraints are a function of the concepts and resources that one has access to, delimiting the range of social activity one can, or is permitted to, undertake. Social structures are oppressive when the concepts and resources that constitute it undergird practices that *enables* some, but *subordinates* others. To see this, consider the following:

Larry and Lisa are employed at the same company in comparable positions and make the same salary. They have a child, Lulu. They desire to be equal co-parents of the child; however, Lisa is eligible for paid maternity leave and Larry is not eligible for any paid parental leave. They cannot afford to have Larry take unpaid leave. Lisa takes parental leave and because of her experience in the first three months, she becomes the primary caregiver; when she returns to work chooses a more flexible schedule. Ten years later, Larry's salary is significantly higher than Lisa's, which gives him more power at home and in the workplace.¹²

The actions available to Larry and Lisa differ in virtue of the interpretive practices of the community of thinkers and speakers in which they are situated. Because men are 'breadwinners', they are expected to participate in structures (conventions, norms) that confer them power and status. Larry can work, accrue wealth, gain status, and thereby amass power. This is not available to women, like Lisa, who are expected to be 'caretakers'. This interpretation means that working is less of a possibility, and so is wealth, status, and therefore power.¹³ Thus, concepts and resources play a substantive role in creating and sustaining a social structure in which some (men) are privileged, and others (women) are subordinated.

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What needs emphasising at this point is the *causal* and *constitutive* relationship between thought and social reality. The interplay of concepts and resources constitutes a social practice. And while '[s]tructures shape people's practices... it is also people's practices that constitute (and reproduce) structure.'¹⁴ Because concepts and resources constitute practices, and practices constitute structure, it follows from the transitivity of constitution that *concepts and resources constitute structure*. This constitutive relation has a causal entailment: 'a change of meaning can transform the social world'.¹⁵

For example, imagine a world in which dogs are interpreted only as food, undergirding the practice of eating dogs. This practice, after becoming entrenched, then partly constitutes a structure in which dogs figure centrally in cuisine, and contributes to broader culinary practices. Now, imagine that after the outcry of some particularly influential activists, people start interpreting dogs as companion animals, not as food. Implication for practice follows: Instead of eating dogs, people begin to care for them. After this practice becomes entrenched, it contributes to constituting a structure in which dogs are treated as part of the family unit – there are shops that sell comfortable dog beds, specialized food, and toys for entertainment.

This example shows that: if we change the concepts that we use to interpret the world (e.g., 'companion animal'), then this will result in a change to the resources that we coordinate around (e.g., companion animal); and a change to the resources that we coordinate around will result in a change to our practices (e.g., caring for dogs); and a change to our practices will result in a change to social structure (e.g., shops that sell products to care for dogs).¹⁶ The takeaway is this: We use concepts to interact with the world and 'this changes the world to conform to the [concepts] we bring to it'.¹⁷

3. Disrupting Oppressive Structures

Now that I have offered an account of how social structures are formed and how they can be oppressive, in this section I consider how oppressive structures can be disrupted.

Oppression involves not only the language, thought, and narratives that we use to represent and interpret the world, but also concrete social phenomena, such as practices, goods, and resources.¹⁸ Hence, a curiosity emerges:

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...if inequality is ‘structural’, that is, linked to the distribution of goods and resources and embedded in everyday rules and interactions, but is also continually reactivated through agency, then neither ‘structural’ changes nor changes in ‘consciousness’ will on their own disrupt the mutually reinforcing facets of domination: We can neither ‘think ourselves’ out of oppression nor will freedom result automatically from a redistribution of goods and resources, although both are important contributors to freedom.¹⁹

In response, we can say the following. Given the causal and constitutive relationship between thought and social reality discussed in §2, we have grounds for directing our critical attention to the *concepts involved in structuring our social relationships*.²⁰ Not only will this result in a change in consciousness, but also a change to the goods and resources that we are able coordinate around, and thus a change to concrete social practices. Hence, it is our tools for thought and talk that must be undermined in order to construct just social relations. We need the world to conform to the (just) concepts we bring to it.

For example, consider the concepts we use to interpret aspects of our world as food. We interpret pigs as ‘pork’, cows as ‘beef’, and chickens as ‘poultry’. Yet recently there has been widespread call to revise what should be understood as ‘food’ by making explicit the morally relevant features of nonhuman animals that have been masked by objectifying concepts.²¹ Efforts have been made to subvert our cultural eating practices by revising the concepts that are used to interpret the lives of nonhuman animals.

This same conceptual masking can be seen elsewhere. With respect to gender, the concepts responsible for sexual violence against women are objectifying interpretations of women as sex objects. With respect to race, the concepts responsible for the mass incarceration of Black Americans are dehumanizing interpretations of Black Americans as dangerous. Other examples abound.²²

If oppressive structures are a product of the culturally shared concepts that we use to interpret the world, then we can disrupt these structures by *engineering concepts*: revising, removing, or replacing concepts for the sake of improving social relations.²³ After all, as stated above, a change in meaning can transform the social world. Conceptual engineering, in this sense, is a kind of social engineering. This gives us strong reason to think that engineering oppressive concepts can play a substantive role in combatting structural injustice. Thus, assuming that there is an obligation to combat structural injustice, we can shed partial light on

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what it is: There is an obligation to participate in the engineering of concepts responsible for forming oppressive social practices. As it stands, this is vague. I will offer more precise details of the content of this obligation, and on whom it falls, in §4. For now, I'll run through a couple of concerns.

3.1. Concerns

An immediate worry that one might have with my proposal is that I've focused too heavily on concepts: Surely there are other ways to create positive structural change? Of course, there are. For example, we can change oppressive practices by changing the resources that are available for people to coordinate around. If one thinks that eating meat is wrong, we don't need to change the concepts we use to interpret the lives of nonhuman animals for people to stop eating meat – we just need to restrict access to this 'resource' (e.g., through adopting certain prohibitive laws), or make certain advancements that make the 'resource' less significant (e.g., creating synthetic meat so that we no longer have the 'need' to slaughter non-human animals). And as a causal consequence, concepts may undergo changes too (e.g., over a period of restricted access to meat, or the availability of synthetic meat, people might come to revise their understanding of 'food'). Practice change may sometimes precede conceptual change.

I agree that this is possible. However, there are (at least) two things to say in response. First, restricting access to a resource often requires conceptual revision – especially in cases of structural injustice. For example, given that women are interpreted as resources for caretaking, and that this is partly responsible for their subordination, we can't just restrict men's access to women – it's not even clear how this would be possible. What we can do is open up the possibility for men to take on caretaking roles with the aim of reducing the significance of women as resources for caretaking (e.g., changing the law to be such that there is paternity leave instead of *only* maternity leave). However, this possibility is only meaningful if men recognize that women aren't better caretakers by nature, or that caretaking is a legitimate form of labor, or that women are able to get good enough jobs that make it 'rational' for men to stay home, etc. Thus, in a great deal of very important cases of structural injustice, conceptual change must precede practice change.

Second, if we are interested in *stable* structural change, conceptual revision that leads to changes in practices seems to be a better way to achieve this. Why? Restricting access to a

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resource, or reducing its significance, doesn't *entail* conceptual change – it's just a *possible* causal consequence. Given this, interpreting the world using an unjust concept still remains a genuine possibility. Thus, it is plausible that a community of thinkers and speakers could revert back to oppressive practices. For example, though laws may be created to restrict access to meat, which might stop meat consumption for a while, there's no reason why people wouldn't campaign for the removal such legal restrictions if they found them unwarranted – it might strike people that restricting access to a 'food' source is just downright unfair. However, if members of a community of thinkers and speakers come to stop eating meat *because* they come to realise that nonhuman animals aren't food (i.e., conceptual revision), then it is much less plausible that this community will revert back to oppressive practices.²⁴ After all, why would anyone want to eat something that isn't food?

Prioritizing conceptual revision as a way of creating substantive changes to entrenched social behavior (i.e., norms), and therefore structural change, is also endorsed by Cristina Bicchieri and Peter McNally. They argue that concepts, the same kind of mental structures that Haslanger has in mind, trigger norms, and that if we don't target the cognitive underpinnings of norms, the effectiveness of behavioral interventions can be hampered.²⁵ According to Bicchieri and McNally,

To create or abandon a norm, it would be necessary to induce a shared, collective change to the trigger cue, the script, or to shared alternative schemata or scripts to process the situation (in the case of schemata) or guide one's behavior (in the case of scripts)... Providing an adequate model of norm change cannot avoid the scripts and schemata story.²⁶

The social expectations that undergird norms are framed by concepts that help people interpret the world around them.²⁷ Effective norm change then requires substantive change to the way we see our surroundings: Changing 'schematic lenses can alter which specific norm is activated'.²⁸

Sally Haslanger advocates for something similar. She suggests that we take control of social meanings given its influence over the character of our social relations:

The idea is not that all we need to do in order to change the world is change our minds. Of course not. *But the tools that culture provides us... provide the frame for coordination and*

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shape our interaction. Contestation over language and meaning is not always “mere semantics” for it shapes our agency and our lives together.²⁹

Given the relationship between thought and practice, changes to the way we interpret our surroundings offers an alternative and better means of engaging with the world, and coordinating with others. Thus, the best way to disrupt unjust social structure is to revise the concepts that undergird oppressive social practices.

3.2. Disrupting Social Structure as a Group-Level Issue

There is one more concern that I will discuss: Engineering concepts is no easy task. Part of the reason for this owes to the sociality of concepts.

According to Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., feminist epistemology has taught us that ‘knowers are *interdependent* insofar as the [concepts] and tools *with which* we know operate collectively, not individually.’³⁰ Given this, understanding of the world is possible through the use of concepts that are shared; a stock of concepts that Miranda Fricker calls a ‘collective hermeneutical resource’.³¹ Hence, according to Pohlhaus Jr., ‘a concept that in principle can be followed by only one person is not really a concept.’³²

In addition to this, members of a community of thinkers and speakers shared a set of concepts, and for each member such concepts form an interconnected web with varying degrees of interrelations. This provides a framework in which social agents are connected. In the cognitive sciences, this is called a *semantic network*. Semantic networks undergird conceptual understanding, and they allow agents to draw inferences about how others are expected to behave, and how one should respond to such behavior.³³ Activating a concept in a semantic network primes highly related concepts for activation, thus determining the way we interpret our surroundings, and decide on our actions.³⁴

Taking these two thoughts together, the general lesson is that patterned social activity between members of a community relies on intersubjective access to a stock of related concepts. And this interconnectedness between thought and reality is also stressed by conceptual engineers who advocate for the revision of concepts to serve better social, moral, and political functions. Burgess and Plunkett write,

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Arguably, our conceptual repertoire determines not only what beliefs we can have but also what hypotheses we can entertain, what desires we can form, what plans we can make on the basis of such mental states, and accordingly constrain what we can hope to accomplish in the world. Representation enables action, from the most sophisticated scientific research, to the most mundane household task. It influences our options within social/political institutions and even helps determine which institutions are so much as thinkable. *Our social roles, in turn, help determine what kinds of people we can be, what sorts of lives we can live.*³⁵

A community of thinkers and speakers share a stock of concepts, and that serves as the basis of coordinated social activity. Thus, for social concepts are to be *truly* social, they can't be private. Hence, social concepts operate at the group-level.

Herein lies the difficulty with engineering concepts: Revision is not something available to individuals alone. An individual might decide not to use certain concepts (e.g., refrain from using 'pork'), but nevertheless this will have very little influence on how social relations are organized. It is only when a group as a whole changes its set of concepts that we will see substantive changes to social practices, and therefore to social structure. Hence, if disrupting oppressive structure is a matter of engineering shared concepts, then the attribution of an obligation to engineer concepts cannot be made at the individual level. *If there is any obligation at all, it will fall on groups.*

4. Privileged Groups and Obligation

I have said that if there is an obligation to engineer oppressive concepts, it will fall on groups. But which groups? Stephanie Collins (2019) offers a useful taxonomy: *collectives, coalitions, and combinations.*³⁶

Collectives are groups that consist of highly organized agents under a group-level decision-making procedure.³⁷ Coalitions are groups that are less organized than collectives, consisting of agents who share the same goal that is out in the open for other members to recognize, and where such agents are disposed to act responsively to one another in order to realize their shared goal, but lack group-level procedures. Combinations are neither collectives, nor coalitions; they are less organized than both. Examples of this are *men, humanity*, and any sundry collection of things taken as a whole.

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A further distinction can be made within combinations. Following material feminist approaches,³⁸ I suggest that there are combinations that track groupings of individuals along some dimension of *privilege/subordination* within a background ideological system. There are combinations that are individuated by the position that members occupy in a hierarchical social structure. We can call such groups *structural combinations*.

A proponent of this account of social groups is Sally Haslanger. For example, Haslanger takes attention away from the psychological features that typically play into our understanding of gender and instead explicates gender as a function of social, cultural, and material forces. Namely, 'how one is viewed, how one is treated, how one's life is structured socially, legally, and economically.'³⁹ From this, Haslanger defines *man/woman* as follows:

S is a man/woman iff

- i. *S* is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's/female's biological role in reproduction;
- ii. that *S* has these features marks *S* within the dominant ideology of *S*'s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact privileged/subordinated (and so motivates and justifies *S*'s occupying such a position); and
- iii. the fact that *S* satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in *S*'s systematic privilege/subordination, i.e., *along some dimension*, *S*'s social position is privileged/oppresed, and *S*'s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of privilege/subordination.⁴⁰

The membership conditions for *man* requires, in part, occupying a privileged position in social structure; and for *woman* it requires occupying a position of subordination. And it is in virtue of this system of privilege and subordination that I believe that groups, like *men*, bear the duty of combating structural injustice against groups, like *women*. I will outline three reasons why I

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believe this, though none of which are compelling just on their own. Nevertheless, all three reasons taken together carves out a plausible duty-bearing group.

First, privileged groups are implicated (more so than others) in the processes that maintain and sustain structural injustice. For example, men are the typical offenders of sexual assault against women, and in virtue of this, unsafe environments are created across a variety of social spaces (e.g., universities, parks, homes, etc.). However, there is a sense in which *not all men*⁴¹ are involved in unjust practices. Nevertheless, this offers some reason to think that the obligation to combat structural injustice falls on privileged groups, like *men*.

Second, privileged groups have greater capacity to change oppressive practices. We can supplement Frye's definition mentioned above with a condition that states that oppression is not something from which an oppressed group can easily extricate themselves.⁴² Members of oppressed groups face substantially higher costs than privileged group members when they want to challenge and change the oppressive structures that disadvantage them. For example, women are systematically deprived of credibility and so they're not taken seriously when they testify to their oppression.⁴³ Following Titus Stahl, we can say that 'a practice is only oppressive if it constrains some participants by creating obstacles that make it disproportionately costly for them to change or leave the practice (compared to other groups).'⁴⁴ Hence, the power to revise existing practices offers additional reason to think that the obligation to combat structural injustice falls on privileged groups.⁴⁵

Third, privileged groups are the beneficiaries of injustice. Marilyn Frye argues that the structural constraints on women are maintained and promoted for the benefit of men generally.⁴⁶ As a specific example, Larry May and Robert Stirkwerda suggest that men are the beneficiaries of woman-directed rape culture.⁴⁷ Men can bond due to highly sexualized concepts of women; men feel that they are depended on by women to protect them from rapists; men can force women into sex because women are scared to say 'no'; men can avoid punishment for rape owing to blame being placed on women (e.g., wearing provocative clothing), etc. Provided that one accepts that benefitting from (structural) injustice entails obligation, this offers even more reason to think that the obligation to combat structural justice falls on privileged groups.⁴⁸

Taking these reasons together, I suggest that, assuming that there is an obligation to combat structural injustice, it falls on *privileged social groups*.⁴⁹ And, connecting back to the discussion

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above, this means that privileged groups have an obligation related to revising concepts responsible for undergirding oppressive social practices. But what does this mean?

4.1. Obligation and Engineering

So far, I have only vaguely gestured at what the relevant obligation would be with respect to combating structural injustice: An obligation related, in some way, to engineering concepts. There are many questions that need answering: (1) What does ‘related’ mean? (2) Which concepts need engineering? (3) What can privileged groups do to engineer concepts? Let’s start with (1).

We can interpret the notion of ‘related’ with varying degrees of strength. For instance, we can say that ‘related’ means that privileged groups have an obligation to directly engineer concepts responsible for oppressive practices. This strikes me as too strong. Given that we have accepted that concepts are shared by members of a community of thinkers and speakers, it’s unclear whether a sub-set of this community has sufficient power to revise a concept, or set of concepts, all on their own. We might question: Do *men*, as a group, *really* have the power to engineer the concept ‘man’ so as to exclude content that causally contributes to oppressive behavior (e.g., ‘boys don’t cry’)? Even if men are largely responsible for reproducing the concepts responsible for oppressive practices, such concepts are operative within a community because *all* or *most* people within the community use them. Thus, changing a concept seems to take the effort of an entire community, not just a sub-set of the community. Since an entity cannot bear an obligation over actions of which they are unable to perform, then it seems that *men* do not have the obligation to engineer concepts *directly*.

So, perhaps ‘related’ means not that privileged groups engineer concepts themselves, but instead that they significantly aid in the processes that give rise to conceptual change. This sounds promising. The idea is that privileged groups, like *men*, must actively involve themselves (more so than others) in efforts to undermine the concepts responsible for oppressive practices. For instance, *men* must challenge the use of oppressive concepts, and actively seek to use better concepts to interpret their social environment. More than this, we might even expect that privileged groups work with, and be deferent to, marginalized groups in order to develop better conceptual resources. This is because it is plausible that members of marginalized groups are in a better epistemic position, given their standpoint, to understand the nature of their

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oppression, and are better placed to know what concepts are best suited for disrupting the social practices that oppress them.⁵⁰ The lesson here is that while privileged groups, like men, don't have the power to engineer concepts, they do have significant influence over the concepts that are operative within a community of thinkers and speakers. Because of this, we can say that the obligation to combat structural injustice falls on privileged groups who must exercise their power to shape the direction of conceptual development.

Onto (2): Which concepts need engineering? Generally, it's those concepts responsible for undergirding oppressive social practices. However, unsatisfied by this answer, one might ask: Which concepts *in particular*? This is a question for conceptual ethicists – those who are in the business of evaluating concepts, and determining whether they should be removed, revised, or replaced. While I have a lot of time for conceptual ethics, there isn't enough space in this paper to offer an analysis of all of the socially, morally, and politically problematic concepts that dictate the character of our lives. Suffice it to say that there is a lot of them. Here are just a few examples of social concepts that theorists have ameliorated for the purposes of realizing social justice: 'gender',⁵¹ 'man',⁵² 'woman',⁵³ 'race',⁵⁴ 'sexism',⁵⁵ 'misogyny',⁵⁶ 'disability',⁵⁷ 'sexual orientation',⁵⁸ and 'gender identity'.⁵⁹ Each of these projects is an attempt to offer a revision of an incumbent concept in the hope that it will shed light on injustice, and therefore serve to re-structure social relations.

Though I can't offer a particular set of concepts that need amelioration, I will suggest a general attitude that we should have towards the concepts that are currently operative within our social milieu: be skeptical, be ambitious. Skeptical in the sense that we should not think that any of our concepts are immune from conceptual ethical examination; ambitious in the sense that we should make changes to any concept so long as there is all-things-considered reason to do so.⁶⁰

Onto (3): What can privileged groups do to engineer concepts? At this point, I want to preempt an objection. It is widely thought that an entity bears an obligation only if they are able to do whatever is demanded by the content of that obligation. This claim is often used by theorists to support the further claim that ability implies agency. Since social groups aren't (collective) agents, it is suggested that they can't be bearers of obligation.⁶¹ Agents are the only kind of entity on which collective obligations fall because they have internal structure capable of producing collective *action*. Thus, to the question of what privileged groups *can* do to engineer concepts, one might respond: Nothing, such groups are incapable of action.

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So, we seem to be presented with a dilemma. If it isn't possible for non-agent groups to engineer concepts, due to their inability to act, then we can't attribute the obligation to combat structural injustice to privileged groups. And, given the sociality of concepts, such an obligation can't fall on individuals either. Does no-one bear the obligation to combat structural injustice? Taking advantage of the work of Bill Wringe,⁶² I suggest that social groups *do* have the ability to influence conceptual change, thus undermining the first horn of the dilemma. From this, I will then propose ways that privileged groups can contribute to conceptual change.

Wringe addresses the following challenge: Agents appear to be the only possible subject of moral obligation because obligations are only intelligible if they have some kind of 'addressee'.⁶³ For an obligation to be meaningfully attributed, the target of the attribution must be 'some individual or entity whose behaviour or attitudes might be affected if they came to accept the [obligation] in question.'⁶⁴ Wringe calls this the 'Addressability Requirement'. By accepting it, we seem to be committed to the idea that only agents can be the subjects of obligation.⁶⁵ Hence, it will rule out the possibility of privileged groups as duty-bearers.

In response, Wringe argues that we needn't think that intelligible claims about obligation to addressees must entail that the addressee be identical with the subject of the obligation. Instead, Wringe suggests:

'In the case of claims about collective obligations which fall on collectives which are not agents, we should take the addressee of the claims to be the individuals who make up the collective rather than the collective itself.'⁶⁶

This is not to suggest that each individual member takes on the obligation attributed to the group. Instead, 'the suggestion is that where there is a collective obligation but no collective agent the individuals who are the addressees of the obligation acquire obligations to do things which are appropriately related to the carrying out of the action whose performance would constitute fulfilment of the collective obligation.'⁶⁷ That is, individual group members acquire obligations that are non-identical to, but grounded in, a group-level obligation; and fulfilment of the individual-level obligations constitutes fulfilment of the group-level obligation.

Wringe's solution to the Addressability Requirement is convincing, and I will assume that it is successful.⁶⁸ Given this, it offers a solution to our concerns about ability. Suppose that a social group bears an obligation. Individual members acquire obligations in the service of

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fulfilling the obligation that falls on the social group. If the members meet their individual-level obligations, then this constitutes fulfilment of the group-level obligation. Hence, the group as a whole has nonaccidentally realized a possible state of affairs. The group has *acted as a group* through the individual actions of its members.

Let's consider this in the context of the discussion above. In virtue of being implicated in the creation and maintenance of unjust social structure, having greater power to change oppressive practices, and being the beneficiary of injustice, let's say that the obligation to combat the subordination of women falls on *men*. Specifically, *men* bear an obligation to influence the processes involved in conceptual change.

Which concepts? Those that undergird oppressive practices. For example, if men are oppressive in virtue of concepts that interpret certain qualities of women as natural or biologically essential, when such qualities are in fact not (e.g., naturally less rational, over-sensitive, incapable of leadership, etc.), then the requirement on *men* is to contribute to revising 'woman' so as to 'destroy the illusion that gender is a dictate from nature.'⁶⁹ One way that this can occur is by *men* coming to an understanding that women are oppressed in virtue of patterns of behavior that conforms to gender scripts, and when one does not conform, there are punishments for not doing gender right.⁷⁰

How does this translate to practice? If engineering is successful, then members of *men* will possess a concept of 'woman' that does not contain content about biological essence. Instead, women will be represented as oppressed in virtue of occupying a position in social structure. Implications for action follow. After all, with the revised concept, men will be interacting with women *qua* oppressed. Hence, the actions of men will be normatively constrained by this interpretation. There are right and wrong ways of interacting with someone who is oppressed that is substantively different from the ways that one would act with someone who has qualities by nature. For example, in determining how much credibility to assign a woman, a man who believes that women are intellectually inferior by nature will think that it's epistemically incorrect to take her testimony too seriously. However, a man who recognizes that women are oppressed in virtue of prejudicial and systematic credibility deflation will make efforts to treat women's testimony seriously.⁷¹ In short, a revision of the concept 'women' has important implications for practice; and with practice revision comes structural change.

If the obligation to contribute to conceptual change falls on *men*, then fulfilment of this group-level duty depends on the fulfilment of duties of individual members. So, what duties do

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individual men have? Put bluntly, individual men acquire duties to change their thinking about women; to develop what Larry May calls a ‘progressive male standpoint’.⁷² This is a critical reflection upon one’s experiences as a man, while being attentive to the experiences of women as they report them. Of course, given that thinking is only under partial voluntary control,⁷³ individual men cannot take on duties to *stop* oppressive thinking. However, men can actively involve themselves in the thinking that reveals the injustices suffered by women, and can recognize themselves *qua* group as (partly) responsible for this. Hence, the obligations that individual men acquire are thus: Men should listen to women, to engage with them sincerely, and acquire understanding of the nature of women’s oppression.⁷⁴ Men should question their own position in social structure, and acquire understanding of their unjust dominance. More specifically, obligations of this kind requires that individual men come to acquire other concepts needed to make sense of women’s oppression; we might call these ‘conceptual acquisition duties’. These are concepts such as ‘sexual harassment’,⁷⁵ ‘sexism’,⁷⁶ ‘misogyny’,⁷⁷ ‘intersectionality’,⁷⁸ and even suggested ameliorations of ‘woman’,⁷⁹ and ‘gender identity’.⁸⁰ Fulfilment of these obligations contributes to a conceptual revolution: A revision in the way that men interpret the existence of women.⁸¹

From thought comes practice. Individual men will come to realize further obligations that they must meet. Men should not demean women, ignore their testimony, make sexist jokes, control shared money, or monitor movements. Men should advocate for women’s rights, attend rallies, and engage with feminist work. Men should call out offenders of sexism, harassment, and assault; and to sanction those who enforce gender roles, and who advance pernicious stereotypes. These obligation are borne out of a recognition of women’s oppression, and the possibility for change.

What needs emphasising is that no individual thought or act by men will be sufficient to revise the concepts responsible for oppressive practices against women. Nevertheless, if each man fulfils their individual-level obligations to engage in the thinking that reveals the injustices suffered by women, then *men* will have fulfilled its obligation to contribute to the processes of conceptual change, and, in turn, *men* will have made a meaningful contribution to structural change.

5. Conclusion

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Let me summarize the thoughts presented. I have assumed that there is an obligation to combat structural injustice. And I have argued that it is an obligation that falls on privileged social groups such that: (i) the obligation in question is to influence the processes that give rise to conceptual change (and therefore social change), (ii) with respect to those concepts that undergird oppressive practices, (iii) and that this requires individual members of privileged groups to engage in alternative thinking, leading to a change in individual practices. When individual members change their thinking and behavior, then the privileged group as a whole will have met its obligation to combat structural injustice.

NOTES

¹ Marilyn Frye, 'Oppression', in A. Minas (ed.) *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Men and Women* (Wadsworth 2000), p. 16.

² Frye 2000, op. cit., p. 14.

³ There is reason for thinking that such an obligation exists. The moral phenomenology of the situation is such that it really does seem like privileged groups, like *men*, have an obligation to do something about the oppression of groups, like *women*. Bill Wringe suggests that the fact that obligations of this kind accounts for the phenomenology of the situation provides us with reason for thinking that such obligations exist. See Bill Wringe, 'Collective obligations: Their existence, their explanatory power, and their supervenience on the obligations of individuals', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24, 2, (2014).

⁴ Sally Haslanger, 'Social structure, narrative, and explanation', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, 1 (2015): p. 4.

⁵ Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 413.

⁶ Haslanger 2012, op. cit. p. 415, my emphasis.

⁷ Haslanger 2015, op. cit., p. 4, my emphasis.

⁸ For discussion on the relationship between concepts and schemas, see Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky, 'What defines a conceptual resource?', *Ergo* 6 (2019).

⁹ See Fodor's *Language of Thought Hypothesis*. J. Fodor, *The Language of Thought*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

¹⁰ Elisabeth Camp, 'Logical Concepts and Associative Characterizations', in E. Margolis and S. Laurence (eds.) *The Conceptual Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2015).

¹¹ Sally Haslanger, 'What is a social structural explanation?', *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016), p. 126. This can include a change in material reality, or a change to the way we interpret existing materials.

¹² Haslanger 2015, op. cit., p. 4.

¹³ For more, see A. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ William Sewell, 'A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation', *American Journal of Sociology* 98, 1 (1992), p. 4.

¹⁵ Haslanger 2012, op. cit., p. 407. This quote is Haslanger explaining Catherine MacKinnon's view, though she positively endorses this claim.

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¹⁶ For more, see Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of State* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Rae Langton, 'Speaker's freedom and maker's knowledge' in *Sexual Solipsism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Haslanger 2012, op. cit., p. 224.

¹⁸ For more, see Iris-Marion Young, 'Socialist feminism and the limits of dual systems theory', *Socialist Review* 10, 2/3 (1980), pp. 169 – 88.

¹⁹ Jennifer Einspahr, 'Structural domination and structural freedom: A feminist perspective', *Feminist Review* 94 (2010), p. 17.

²⁰ For others who suggest that the concepts and language of practical thought that should be targeted, see Hacking, op. cit., and Judith Butler, 'Gendering the body: Beauvoir's philosophical contribution', in A. Garry and M. Pearsell (eds.) *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* (Boston, MA: Unwin and Hyman, 1989).

²¹ For more, see Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, (Continuum, 1990); Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky, 'Hermeneutical injustice and animal ethics: Can nonhuman animals suffer from hermeneutical injustice?', 8, 2 (2018), pp. 226 – 238.

²² Ability, class, sexual orientation, etc.

²³ This is called *conceptual ethics* or *conceptual engineering*. It is both a philosophical methodology, and a means of discussing the intentional revision of concepts. For a detail overview, see Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett, 'A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering', in H. Cappelen, D. Plunkett, and A. Burgess (eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁴ I am not saying that a community won't ever revert back to oppressive practices, but only that it is less likely than if conceptual change does not occur.

²⁵ Cristina Bicchieri and Peter McNally, 'Shrieking Sirens: Schemata, Scripts, and Social Norms. How Change Occurs', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 35, 1, (2018), p. 23.

²⁶ Bicchieri and McNally 2018, op. cit. p. 53.

²⁷ Ibid., op. cit. p. 26.

²⁸ Ibid., op. cit. p. 27.

²⁹ Sally Haslanger, 'Going on, not the same way', in H. Cappelen, D. Plunkett, and A. Burgess (eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). My emphasis.

³⁰ Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., 'Relational knowing and epistemic injustice: Toward a theory of willful hermeneutical ignorance', *Hypatia*, 27, 4 (2011), p. 718.

³¹ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 7.

³² Pohlhaus Jr., op. cit., p. 718.

³³ Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 134.

³⁴ Bicchieri, op. cit., p. 133.

³⁵ Burgess and Plunkett, op. cit., p. 1097. My emphasis.

³⁶ Stephanie Collins, *Group Duties: Their Possibility and Their Implications for Individuals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁷ Others theorists have different, but similar, stories of collective agents. For a comprehensive overview of competing theories of groups and their duties, see Collins 2019, op. cit.

³⁸ Rosemary Hennesy and Chrys Ingraham (eds.), *Material Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

³⁹ Haslanger 2000, op. cit., p. 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid., op. cit., p. 42.

⁴¹ It pains me to say this phrase.

⁴² This point has been made by Marilyn Frye and Titus Stahl. See Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality, Freedom*, (CA: Crossing Press, 1983); Marilyn Frye, 'The necessity of differences: constructing a positive category of women', *Signs*, 21, 4 (1996), pp. 991 - 1010; Titus Stahl, 'Collective responsibility for oppression', *Social Theory and Practice*, 43, 3 (2017), pp. 473 - 501.

⁴³ Fricker, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Stahl, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Members of dominant groups may find it difficult to change oppressive relations owing to sanctions. Just imagine a locker room talk scenario in which a man faces penalties for not taking part. However, oppressive relations are *especially* disempowering for oppressed groups.

⁴⁶ Larry May, and Robert Stirkwerda, 'Men in groups: Collective responsibility for rape', *Hyppatia*, 9, 2 (1994), pp. 134 - 151.

⁴⁷ Frye 2000, op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁸ Holly Lawford-Smith and RJ Leland suggest that there is reason to doubt that duties can be borne out of benefitting of this kind. See Holly Lawford-Smith and R.J. Leland, 'Benefitting from structural injustice', manuscript.

⁴⁹ It is plausible that a privilege group can bear an obligation to revise concepts *unrelated* to why they are privilege. For example, *men* might have an obligation to revise concepts responsible for environmental harms if they are implicated in the process that gives rise to this harm, they have the capacity to do something about this harm, and they benefit from this harm.

⁵⁰ Take the development of 'sexual harassment'. Women knew what concept was needed to make sense of this form of oppression since they were continually subject to it. Men were not in the same position, and would pass it off as harmless 'flirting'. For more on standpoint theory, see Nancy Hartstock, 'The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism', in S. Harding (ed.), *Feminism and Methodology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Haslanger 2000, op. cit.

⁵² Haslanger 2000, op. cit.

⁵³ Haslanger 2000, op. cit.; Katherine Jenkins, 'Amelioration and inclusion: Gender identity and the concept of woman', *Ethics*, 126, 2 (2016), pp. 394 - 421.

⁵⁴ Haslanger 2000, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Manne, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Manne, op. cit.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵⁸ Robin Dembroff, 'What is sexual orientation?', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 16 (2016).

⁵⁹ Katherine Jenkins, 'Toward an account of gender identity', *Ergo*, 27, 5 (2018) pp. 713 - 744.

⁶⁰ See Mona Simion, 'The 'should' in conceptual engineering', *Inquiry* (2017).

⁶¹ See T. Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Stephanie Collins, 'Collectives' duties and collectivisation duties', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 91, 2 (2013), pp. 231 - 248; Holly Lawford-Smith, 'The feasibility of collectives' actions', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 90, 3 (2012), pp. 453 - 467.

⁶² Bill Wringe, 'Global obligations and the agency objection', *Ratio*, 23, 2 (2010), pp. 217 - 231; Bill Wringe, 'From global collective obligations to institutional obligations', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 38, 1 (2014), pp. 171 - 186.

⁶³ Wringe 2010, op. cit., p. 224.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 224

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 224

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 227.

⁶⁸ Wringe's argument is not without its dissenters. See Lawford-Smith op. cit. and Collins 2019, op. cit. Engaging with such theorists goes beyond what I can achieve in this paper. I don't aim to settle the debate between Wringe and his critics. Further, Gunnar Björnsson also offers an account of how non-agent groups can bear obligation. This could fit my agenda, however I do not have time to discuss it in this paper. See Gunnar Björnsson, 'Collective Responsibility and Collective Obligations with Collective Moral Agents', in Saba Bazargan-Forward and Deborah Tollefson (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Collective Responsibility* (Abingdon: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁶⁹ Butler, op. cit., p. 261.

⁷⁰ Two things. First, plausibly, not *all* features that are construed as natural contributes to women's oppression. Second, men might believe that women ought to be subordinated. The relevant schema change needed for such men is that this subordination is unjustified.

⁷¹ Fricker, op. cit.

⁷² Larry May, *Masculinity and Morality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 135.

⁷³ See Elisabeth Camp 2015, op. cit.

⁷⁴ See Fricker, op. cit.

⁷⁵ Fricker, op., cit.

⁷⁶ Manne, op., cit.

⁷⁷ Manne, op., cit.

⁷⁸ K. Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color,' *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), pp. 1241 - 1299

⁷⁹ Haslanger 2000, op. cit.; Jenkins 2016, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Jenkins 2018, op. cit.

⁸¹ In short, we might say that men have an obligation to engage in *radical* or *feminist consciousness*: Men must take steps to find 'certain features of social reality as intolerable [for women], as to be rejected in behalf of a transforming project for the future' (S. L. Bartky, 'Toward a phenomenology of feminist consciousness', *Social Theory and Practice* 3, 4 (1975), p. 14).