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What Makes an Oppressor? A Response to Ann Cudd's *Analyzing Oppression*

Mari Visscher

Introduction

Ann Cudd's *Analyzing Oppression* ends on the question of resistance, where she details how each social group identified within oppressive systems should take up the project of creating a more just social structure. To do this, Cudd distinguishes between the oppressed, the merely privileged, and the oppressors, each with their own unique responsibilities for dismantling oppression. I find Cudd's definition of 'oppressors' to be too narrowly tailored, and am arguing that seeking to increase or maintain one's privilege relative to another group is sufficient to qualify an individual as an 'oppressor'. Additionally, I will be expanding Cudd's analysis of deformed desires to include the desires of the privileged in order to demonstrate the ways in which members of privileged groups act to improve or sustain their privileged position. These desires are deformed by a person's privileged state and operate to maintain systems of oppression. It is these systems of oppression which mold a society that recognizes the culture of the privileged group as the dominant culture. It is for this reason that privileged individuals see their desires as naturally occurring, inherently good, and universally desired. I will argue that given that these desires are a direct result of a culture founded on false presumptions that some social groups are superior to others, these desires are neither natural nor universal, and would not be desirable in an egalitarian society. I will be applying these desires to all individuals who belong to privileged groups and will argue that this expansion of Cudd's deformed desires can help us further distinguish between those who are merely privileged and who are oppressors. By applying this expansion to Cudd's argument we will have gained an improved and more intimate examination into the experiences and motives of privileged individuals.

Exposition

Privilege is an essential component to understanding Cudd's account of oppression. The existence of a privileged social group that benefits from the institutional harms done to a corresponding oppressed social group is one of the four jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for identifying instances of harm as oppression (Cudd, 2006, 25). The remaining three conditions for assessing oppression require that there is a harm done to the oppressed group through unjust institutional practices, that the group harmed exists as a social group apart from the harm, and that there is "unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm" (25). It is the privileged social group who are identified by Cudd as the benefactors and perpetrators of the institutional practices that cause harm to the oppressed group (26). The privileged group achieves and maintains dominance by implementing social constraints on the oppressed group by means of direct and indirect material and psychological forces (41). Direct psychological forces include those which are culturally diffused, such as tradition and convention, religion, ideology, and cultural domination (167). In a society that has been molded by a dominant social group's will to subordinate other social groups, all social institutions within that society will become deeply entrenched within this systems of oppression. The mainstream traditions, conventions, religions, and ideologies will all serve to privilege the dominant group and subordinate the oppressed group. It's within this environment of direct and culturally diffused psychological forces that both the oppressor and the oppressed will learn to recognize themselves as their prescribed role schemas stereotypes. Under this context of social domination, the oppressed group becomes vulnerable to indirect forces of psychological oppression, which include feelings of shame or low self-esteem, the cognitive function of false consciousness, and the development of deformed desires (176). Cudd describes false consciousness as objectionable beliefs formed under the

conditions of oppression. These false beliefs, held by members of privileged groups and oppressed groups, suggest that their respective dominant or subordinate social positions are justified (178). Under systems of oppression, the context of the privileged group's social domination becomes the unquestioned reality of privileged groups, who are often unaware of their privilege and may not knowingly act with the intention of further disadvantaging oppressed groups (156). Thereby, false consciousness refers to the collective beliefs that the status quo reflects the true nature of social relations. When oppressed individuals are unaware of their disadvantaged state, they believe the social and economic inequalities they experience are deserved, and they may begin to form what Cudd calls deformed desires (180). The term deformed desires describes the preferences for social and material limitations held by the oppressed, though the limitations are defined not by the individual's true desire, but by the circumstances of oppression (180). These limitations are not consciously or deliberately developed by the desirer, but instead are oppressive mechanisms resulting from the desirer's oppressed state. By holding or acting on these desires, Cudd identifies that members of the oppressed group are acting in ways which reinforce their own oppressing conditions (152). Given the social and material limitations placed on them, the oppressed may be unaware that these desires are due to group-based inequalities. Whether they are aware of their oppressed state or not, they may either find these limitations to be too great to change and so chose to succumb to them, or they may come to form co-opted preferences for their restricted conditions of living (153). These preferences are formed on the basis of the oppressed individual's rational assessment of the circumstances surrounding their lives. Choosing to resist the given conditions of their lives under oppression often requires the oppressed to forfeit situations which benefit their immediate interests, including security and a comfortable position within the status quo

(154). Cudd terms a similar corresponding preference formation which she calls the ‘habituation of preference’, which describes a sense of contentment for the subject’s own “lot in life” (181). This can apply to both the privileged and the oppressed, who are both capable of becoming accustomed to their given life circumstances, and may become very uncomfortable with any change to their social position, even when the change favors a system of more fairly distributed resources among all people. This is to say that those who are oppressed may feel that their circumstances are comfortable and warranted, and similarly so for those holding privileged positions. The oppressed become convinced that their inferiority is natural, just as the privileged become certain of their natural superiority.

In order for someone to be considered an oppressor under Cudd’s analysis, they “need to be a member of a privileged group, to gain from the oppression of another social group, to intend to so gain, and to act to realize that intention by contributing to the oppression of the oppressed group from whose oppression one gains” (25). Cudd later returns to this analysis to distinguish between the oppressors and those who she calls ‘the merely privileged’, where she additionally requires that oppressors “must be aware that he or she is acting unjustly and harming someone thereby” (195). Someone who is merely privileged simply gains materially or psychologically from oppression. These merely privileged need not seek out or desire these privileges. They are in fact unavoidable according to Cudd, and the privileged may not even be aware of them. The only necessary factor that determines whether an individual is merely privileged is whether or not they belong to a social group that benefits from the oppression of another social group. Based on whether an individual is oppressed, merely privileged, or an outright oppressor Cudd prescribes varying instructions for resistance strategies. The responsibilities of the oppressed do not have direct consequences for the arguments of this paper and will not be deliberated here.

The responsibilities of the privileged non-oppressor require them to renounce their undeserved privileges, and to attempt to change the oppressive social institutions that produced them (196). Cudd's analysis requires oppressors to desist their oppressive behaviors and remedy past harm they have caused.

Critical Analysis

I take issue with Cudd's qualifications for identifying someone as an oppressor, which requires that the individual intends to act in a way that is unjust and is also aware of the consequent harm those actions cause the oppressed group. Cudd establishes preliminary qualifications for oppressors, which require that the oppressor intends to gain from the oppression of another social group and acts to realize that intention in a way that actively contributes to the oppression of the oppressed group (25). This means that it is not enough to say that someone actively engaging in behaviors that systematically harm other groups is an oppressor. They must also be aware that they are causing harm. Through my analysis of the deformed desires of the oppressors to follow, I will demonstrate how one may desire to increase their relative privilege, and that to act on these desires contributes to the oppression of the oppressed group. Under Cudd's terms, the 'merely privileged' may hold these deformed desires not with the intention to "continue or intensify the oppression of others", but to increase their own privilege, without perceiving the contingent relationship between privilege and oppression (195). I am arguing that expanding the deformed desires model to include those who hold desires which require them to gain from the oppression of another social group would qualify the holder of those desires as not merely privileged, but as an oppressor.

Though one may not perceive the relationship of their desires to the oppression of the oppressed group, I do not believe an oppressor must be aware of their oppressive behaviors to be

an oppressor and contest Cudd on this point. By requiring that someone must be aware that they are acting unjustly and harming someone thereby, we require that the oppressor sees themselves as an oppressor, and under these requirements we may never identify an oppressor. Cudd herself reminds us the most crucial aspect to consider when assessing group harm is the “effect on the victim, not the intention of the perpetrator” (156). Proving intention of the perpetrator requires us to subject our findings to the self-perception of the oppressor. Cudd warns that this is difficult, first because the true intentions of an perpetrator are sometimes impossible to determine, additionally because the perpetrator may not have been aware that their actions were oppressing another group. Furthermore, I would argue that all oppressors believe themselves to be justified in their actions. It is under the veil of an oppressive false consciousness that a privileged person’s oppressive behaviors are seen as normal and warranted.

I argue that the deformed desires of the privileged should be included alongside Cudd’s description of the deformed desires of the oppressed, because these desires are developed as a mechanism of oppression, and operate to reinforce the narrative of inequality between different social groups. Just the oppressed do not necessarily desire to occupy an oppressed state, but only to occupy the social roles that tend to subordinate them, I am arguing that the privileged do not necessarily desire to occupy an oppressive state, but only to occupy social roles or perform certain behaviors which actively privilege them (180). I consider this to be a necessary expansion on Cudd’s argument, because it demonstrates how one may deliberately act in ways that do oppress others, but only with the interest in further privileging themselves. In this way, though the individual may not be aware that they are acting in ways that do oppress others, they still qualify as oppressors.

Not only do these deformed desires of the privileged uphold systems of oppression, but I am arguing that they are mutually inclusive with these systems. This is to say that the desires of the privileged that I detail are not inherently desirable and would not exist in an egalitarian world. One of the mechanisms of oppression is that it recognizes privileged groups as the dominant culture. Therefore, the desires that these privileged groups hold are seen as natural desires. Here I will detail some of the desires which I am arguing are commonly held among privileged groups and are widely recognized as ‘natural’ desires but in fact are directly defined by systems of oppression and would not otherwise exist. For example, it is common for white people to recognize within themselves a desire to date exclusively within their own race. It is commonly argued that this is simply a sexual or romantic ‘preference’ that is specific to the individual. However, we can examine this from within the context of an oppressive and racialized society in which dominant beauty standards are dictated by whiteness. Furthermore, only dating white people preserves the white privilege of the individual and of their family lineage, whereas dating outside of one’s race might result in an uncomfortable awareness of this privilege, or even require that this privilege be acknowledged and denounced.

Regarding class privilege, consider how the accumulation of immense wealth is credited to a Darwinian ‘drive’ among the richest of the rich, where wealth inequality is imagined to be a natural result of the presence of this drive in some and the absence of it in others. The desire among the privileged to obtain immense wealth is thereby seen as natural and universally desirable, but I would argue that this is not the case. Were it not for the gross concentration of material resources and capital among the wealthiest economic class, the luxury lifestyles that are now seen as universally desirable would not be imaginable, let alone attainable for a small

minority. The desire for excessive material wealth exists only within the context of oppressive economic structures.

In the 20th century heterosexuality was modeled as the only natural biological human sexuality from which homosexuality was a disordered deviation. Diverse physical and mental abilities were pathologized as opposed to a dominantly defined physiological 'normal'.

Concerning the desire among parents for 'normal' children, meaning those which are cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied and neurotypical, all of these desires are in the interest of avoiding having child who lacks the same privileges they have and would not exist in a society which does not oppress queer and differently abled persons.

Lastly, the dominant culture surrounding sexuality is largely tied to the oppression of women, where only men were recognized as capable of enjoying sex because sex is was seen as an act that exists for reproduction and the sexual fulfillment of men. Because sex is so directly tied to oppression, it has been considered normal and natural for men to have irrepressible and 'animalistic' sex drives that do not require an active or willing sex partner to experience pleasure. I am arguing that in an egalitarian world where there was no gender inequality and the systematic subordination of females had never been enacted, it would not be desirable to engage in sex acts with an unwilling partner. The desire for men to have sex with someone who does not desire them is a product of the oppression women. All of these examples demonstrate how desires held by those in privileged positions are defined by their privilege and though the individuals may not be acting with the desire to further oppress others, their actions serve to uphold and preserve their own privileged positions.

As Cudd defines them, oppressors are those who act intentionally to continue or intensify the oppression of a social group to which they do not belong (195). This is to say that they must

be aware that they are acting unjustly and thereby causing harm to a social group, though they might not recognize this harm as oppression. As I describe them, the deformed desires would demonstrate how ‘merely privileged’ are still actively participating and upholding oppressive structures, though they may not realize the extent to which they are causing harm. By directly examining the deformed desires of privileged groups, we can demonstrate the intimate connections between these desires and the mechanisms of oppression which produced them. Cudd’s definition of the ‘merely privileged’ suggests that to simply “gain materially or psychologically” from one’s privilege does not qualify one as an oppressor (195). However, I am arguing that it is necessary to expand Cudd’s definition of ‘oppressor’ to include those who actively seek to increase their privilege relative to other groups, regardless of whether they recognize the relationship between privilege and oppression or intend to cause harm to those who are oppressed.

It is only through widespread fundamental consciousness raising that members of both privileged and oppressed groups may become aware that they are not inherently deserving of their social positions. It is at this point that we can also begin to develop more far-reaching resistance strategies. I agree with Cudd that the responsibilities of the oppressor should require the cessation of all oppressive behaviors, which now include the desires to obtain or preserve one’s own privilege. This is to say that oppressors must critically examine the desires they hold, and evaluate where these desires come from to determine if they are their own or a product of a system of oppression which favors the desire in question. The desires must be assessed by the oppressor to see whether they can be attained without causing systematic harm to anyone else. Once an oppressor has recognized their own deformed desires to increase or maintain their privilege, and has ceased to act on those desires, they may be re-categorized as merely

privileged. An objection could be raised here that asking oppressors to evaluate their own desires is no more effective than asking oppressors whether they believe their actions to be oppressive or not. However, what I believe to be especially effective about reframing one's self-evaluation to include an examination of one's actions, as well as their desires, is that it reveals non-malicious intents are often inadvertently oppressive. Reliance on individual self-reflection will always be a necessary component of oppression resistance discourse, and may always prove to be a difficult hurdle to overcome. The aim of this paper is to provide a more critical lens for members of dominant social groups to apply to themselves while doing this personal work.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued for an expansion of Cudd's consideration of who qualifies as an oppressor, to include those who intend to increase or maintain their positions of relative privilege. To explore this argument I provided some examples of deformed desires of the privileged, including dating exclusively within one's race as a romantic or sexual 'preference', desiring substantial wealth, power, or prestige, wishing for cisgender heterosexual children with 'normal' physical and neurological abilities, or experiencing sexual desire and satisfaction through sex acts within nonconsensual contexts. These desires are commonly occurring and unnatural desires, products of widespread oppression and designed to maintain or increase the privileged position of the carrier of these desires. Reserving the term oppressor for only those who actively intend to harm others for their own benefit is too narrow a definition, and thereby limits the scope of the resistance strategies we can hope to employ. By exploring these desires, we are able open a more intimate investigation into the motives and experiences of the oppressor, which better prepares us to design strategies to desist oppressing systems.

Sources

Cudd, Ann E. *Analyzing Oppression*. Oxford University Press, 2006.