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Socially Embedded Agency

Lessons from Marginalized Identities

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Abstract: This chapter proposes a distinctive kind of agency that can vindicate the agency of members of marginalized groups while accommodating the autonomy-undermining influences of oppression. *Socially embedded agency*—the locus of which is in the exercise of our ability to negotiate between different social features—is compatible with, and can explain, various phenomena, including double-consciousness and white fragility. Moreover, although socially embedded agency is neither necessary nor sufficient for autonomy, exercising it is practically necessary to achieve autonomy, at least for members of marginalized groups in our non-ideal world. This means that we can also explain why many have thought that there was a tension between autonomy-eroding effects of oppression and the call for respecting the agency of those who are oppressed.

Keywords: autonomy, agency, oppression, negotiation, reason-responsiveness

One important question in contemporary analytic philosophy of agency is how to characterize *autonomous* actions: what makes a particular decision action properly attributable to the agent so that it can be described as truly hers or as an instance of self-government? Various attempts to answer this question have also given rise to meta-questions about the concept of autonomy itself. Some argue that there are multiple dimensions to the concept of autonomy whereas others insist that there are multiple conceptions of autonomy.[1] In this chapter, I do not attempt to settle these debates. Instead, I assume that one desideratum of any account of autonomy is that it explain the ways in which oppression undermines our autonomy. Many have pointed out that adaptive preferences are formed under circumstances of oppression and that acting on these preferences is non-autonomous.[2] Others have claimed that regardless of the *process* of preference-formation, any preference for excessive deference, subservience, or servility is itself non-autonomous.[3] Moreover,

[1] See Catriona Mackenzie (2014) and Nomy Arpaly (2004), respectively.

[2] James Taylor, for instance, claims that adaptive preferences are 'paradigmatically nonautonomous' (2009: 71).

[3] See, for instance, Marina Oshana (2006) and Serene Khader (2011).

when we take into account the different psychological effects oppression can have on the marginalized, the scope of autonomy in our non-ideal, unjust world is significantly restricted.[4]

However, although many members of marginalized groups live in circumstances of oppression, many have noted that even those 'living in severely oppressive conditions find outlets for the exercise of autonomy' (Veltman and Piper 2014: 5). In particular, theories of autonomy that highlight the autonomy-impeding effects of oppression have been criticized for failing to vindicate the autonomy of the oppressed. Serene Khader refers to this challenge as the Agency Dilemma and claims that '[f]eminists who theorize about oppression and deprivation are faced with a balancing act—that of trying to represent deprived people as agents without thereby obscuring the reality of their victimization' (2011: 30).[5]

Some respond to the Agency Dilemma by claiming that although oppression undermines autonomy of choices in many parts of our lives, it does not restrict *all* of our decisions.[6] However, those who want to vindicate the agency of the marginalized are not content with the claim that their choices in some areas of their lives (say, whether to bike or walk to work) are autonomous even though their other decisions (say, which career to pursue) are nonautonomous.

Another way to respond to the Agency Dilemma is to point to some minimal notions of autonomy and show that they are *not* undermined by oppression. After all, members of marginalized groups, even under circumstances of severe oppression, can engage in intentional conduct, and are capable of planning and engaging in means-end reasoning. However, intentional agency and means-end rationality do not seem sufficient to vindicate the agency of the oppressed.

The question that remains, then, is whether there is 'something more than the minimal self-direction intrinsic to mere *intentional* action' (Buss 1994: 95). The aim of this chapter is to identify this kind of something more that is not undermined by oppression. As Andrew Schwartz notes, '[a]lthough the survival strategies abused women employ can be inimical to the development of autonomy, they are, nonetheless, manifestations of agency and power they already possess' (2007: 455). My aim is to precisify this kind of agency.

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[4] See, inter alia, Susan Babbitt (1996), Sandra Bartky (1990), Paul Benson (1991), Suzy Killmister (2015), and Natalie Stoljar (2000).

[5] While I find Khader's description of Agency Dilemma helpful, I do not engage directly with her arguments for two reasons. First, the topic of the book concerns adaptive preferences as autonomy deficits but my primary concern is not with any particular autonomy deficit. Second, and more importantly, she sometimes equates autonomy with choice (along with the capacity for means-end reasoning) with the implication that 'a woman who risks HIV exposure in order not to anger her husband' acts autonomously. I find this problematic for the reasons outlined by Mackenzie, namely that Khader 'conflates autonomous deliberation with the capacity to make instrumentally rational decisions' (2015: 57).

[6] Sonya Charles uses this strategy and claims that 'an individual woman might be perfectly autonomous in her decisions about what career to pursue and whether or not to get married, but not autonomous in her decision to have a baby or get cosmetic surgery' (2010: 426). However, I find her examples puzzling. Even if we deny the claim of the more radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin (1987) and Catherine MacKinnon (1987) that all or almost all of women's desires are deformed and nonautonomous, decisions about which career to pursue and whether or not to get married *do* seem like nonautonomous decisions when influenced by oppression.

To this end, I propose a notion of agency that is robustly social and takes seriously the lived experiences of marginalized people. The locus of this *socially embedded agency* is in the exercise of our ability to *negotiate* between different social features.[7] Socially embedded agency is a sub-type of another type of agency, namely *reason-responsiveness* (where exercising agency doesn't require responding rationally or correctly to reasons). Moreover, socially embedded agency is weaker than some accounts of autonomy (including some procedural accounts) and thus is compatible with the desideratum that oppression undermines autonomy.

In Section 5.1, I outline how oppression can undermine autonomy. In Section 5.2, I discuss some prominent accounts of autonomy, not to criticize, but to identify some assumptions made by them. In Section 5.3, I pay special attention to the marginalized people's lived experiences of navigating the social world to illustrate a certain kind of agency. In Section 5.4, I precisify this kind of agency and propose my account of *socially embedded agency* which does not accept the assumptions identified in Section 5.3. In Section 5.5, I explore the relationship between socially embedded agency and autonomy, and show how my account can help solve the Agency Dilemma.

5.1 Autonomy and oppression

We are heavily influenced by social factors in myriad ways. In particular, there are social groups where being a member of that group entails that they are systematically subordinated. For example, Sally Haslanger (2000) claims that to be a woman is just to be observed, or imagined, to have certain female sex characteristics on the basis of which she is marked as someone who is systematically subordinated along social, political, economic, and legal dimensions.[8] These social positions, then, arise from being perceived as having certain social properties that are associated with particular social groups. This social arrangement also involves a network of interrelated social blueprints that allow us to 'interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect' (Haslanger 2016). These social blueprints, in turn, give rise to norms to those who belong to particular social groups. Given that I am a woman, I might feel the pull of the norm that I ought to wear make-up, shave my legs, and refrain from devouring two slices of pie in one sitting. I might feel the pull of these norms even if I often don't conform to them or even if I always resist conforming to them.

To show how these social positions and blueprints might undermine autonomy, some have pointed out that they give rise to *adaptive preferences*. Jon Elster (2016) describes the process of forming these adaptive preferences as one that involves agents unconsciously turning away from our (current) preferences to avoid unpleasant cognitive dissonance associated with holding onto those preferences. Hence, adaptive preferences are new preferences that are formed because having the current ones give rise to unpleasant cognitive dissonance.

As many have noted, some adaptive preferences are formed under circumstances of oppression, especially when oppressive norms are internalized. For instance, when one's desire to

[7] Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting the label.
[8] For her full definition, see Haslanger (2000: 42).

have dessert is unpleasant given the mainstream beauty ideal, one unconsciously forms a new desire to refrain from having dessert. Importantly for the purposes of this chapter, acting on adaptive preferences which Ann Cudd calls 'deformed desires' (2006: 181)—desires that are 'adaptations to and for oppression' (2015: 145)—seem nonautonomous. To illustrate, consider the following example:

> DEFERENTIAL WIFE: 'She buys the clothes he prefers, invites the guests he wants to entertain, and makes love whenever he is in the mood. She willingly moves to a new city in order for him to have a more attractive job, counting her own friendships and geographical preferences insignificant in comparison . . .' (Hill 1991: 5)

Many have argued that this kind of preference for excessive deference 'influenced by oppressive norms of femininity cannot be autonomous' (Stoljar 2000: 95). My working assumption is in the spirit of Stoljar's claim (which she calls the *feminist intuition*), but it is more general than her claim in two respects: (i) my claim is not limited to agent's preferences, but applies to other attitudes such as values, cares, commitments, and dispositions; and (ii) my claim goes beyond the norms of femininity, but appeals to norms derived from any oppressive ideology.

There is, of course, much more said and to be said about the ways in which oppression undermines autonomy. However, I hope that this sketch is helpful as I attempt to identify a kind of agency that can be exercised even in circumstances of oppression and without rejecting that oppression undermines autonomy.

5.2 Existing accounts and their assumptions

5.2.1 Preponderant attitude assumption

Since I am seeking a kind of agency that is not affected by oppression, it is helpful to explore the relationships between oppression and some existing accounts of autonomy. One influential kind of account appeals to the concept of identification: actions that we identify with are the ones that are truly ours. Harry Frankfurt (1971), for instance, appeals to the agent's second-order volitions to play this identifying role.[9] He claims that when you act in accordance with your second-order volitions—second-order desires about which first-order desires are effective—you identify with your actions in a way that matters for autonomy. Suppose I have just finished a delicious slice of pie. I desire to have a second slice of pie. But I have a desire to conform to norms of femininity and the mainstream beauty ideal and because of this, I have a second-order desire that I would refrain from having a second slice of pie. On Frankfurt's view, I act autonomously if I refrain from having the second slice of pie because that choice accords with my second-order volition.

[9] Note that Harry Frankfurt (1982) later appeals to emotional states that constitute *cares*.

Many have criticized this account for arbitrarily picking out our second-order volitions.[10] For instance, Gary Watson (1975) objected that there seemed nothing about their location in the hierarchy that made them authoritative for self-determination. Hence, he proposes an alternative account of autonomy by distinguishing between desires and values, and claims that they are distinct sources of motivation. When we have this distinction in play, we can appeal to the agent's *values* (or their evaluative judgments) and claim that only those actions that accord with one's values are autonomous.[11]

Frankfurt and Watson give different answers to what characterizes autonomous action, but they share a common feature: each claims that there is *one kind of attitude* towards one's action that is constitutive of one's autonomous agency. Each accepts what I call the *Preponderant Attitude Assumption*. For earlier Frankfurt, the preponderant attitude is the agent's second-order volitions; for later Frankfurt, it's the agent's cares; and for Watson, it is our evaluative judgments that constitute our autonomous or free agency.

I do not argue against these accounts, or the Preponderant Attitude Assumption. Rather, I want to highlight that oppression can affect *any* attitude that is a candidate preponderant attitude. Recall that my second-order desire is to conform to norms of femininity and the mainstream beauty ideal. This is a desire that I have because of oppressive, patriarchal norms of femininity. Moreover, as many have noted, these oppressive norms are enforced by the process of *internalized* oppression. Hence, many women identify with, and endorse, their desire to conform to mainstream beauty ideals. Hence, some of our desires, including our higher-order desires, can be products of oppression.

Moreover, what we *value* is influenced by oppression. Watson appeals to the fact that the desires of a kleptomaniac express themselves independently of his evaluative judgments in order to describe the compulsive character of kleptomaniacs (and other additions and phobias). However, to the extent that I have internalized a patriarchal mainstream beauty ideal, plausibly, I do not merely desire to conform to this ideal; the kind of oppression at work in our world makes it so that I *value* the mainstream ideal. That is, my desires about how I want to look and behave are not independent of my evaluative system in the way that a kleptomaniac's desires are.

These observations generalize: *any* pro-attitude towards some norm—desiring to conform to the norm, valuing the norm, identifying with the norm, endorsing the norm—can be affected by oppression, including internalized oppression. Moreover, given the psychological effects of oppression, no part of our psychology seems safe from oppression. This suggests that in seeking a kind of agency that can respond to the Agency Dilemma—the kind of agency that can be exercised by the oppressed—we should reject the Preponderant Attitude Assumption.[12]

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[10] See, inter alia, Michael Bratman (2002), Paul Benson (1991), and Sarah Buss (1994). (Benson explicitly appeals to internalized oppression to criticize Frankfurt's account and other hierarchical accounts.)

[11] To see this distinction between desires and values, '[c]onsider a case of a woman who has a sudden urge to drown her bawling child in the bath; or the case of a squash player who, while suffering an ignominious defeat, desires to smash his opponent in the face with the racquet' (Watson 1975: 210).

[12] One might object to this argument. After all, the fact that our beliefs and desires are affected by oppression doesn't entail that we should reject the claim that our beliefs and desires matter for our intentional agency. However, although intentional agency requires beliefs and desires that cause my

5.2.2 Coherence assumptions: two kinds

Other accounts don't accept the Preponderant Attitude Assumption, but accept what I call the *Coherence Assumption* according to which one acts autonomously only when the action reflects the true self that can be made to be a coherent unit by exercising (a particular set of) agentic skills. John Christman (1991) defends an account that accepts the Coherence Assumption. For Christman, an agent is autonomous when she acts on an authentic desire and a desire is authentic if she did not or would not have resisted the desire upon attending to the process of its development. Given the emphasis on the process of critical, historical reflection, Christman's account exemplifies a procedural account of autonomy. Similarly, Marilyn Friedman (2003) requires reflective endorsement and wholehearted commitment to one's desires for those desires to be authentic. Meyers (1987) also argues that processes of reflection can render an authentic self. She claims that the authentic or 'true' self emerges when one exercises 'a repertoire of skills to engage in self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction' (2004: 69). Hence, on her view, 'the authentic self is the evolving collocation of attributes that emerges in this ongoing process of reflection, deliberation and action' (2004: 70).

Although I am particularly sympathetic to Meyers' account which aims to show how agentic skills of self-discovery and self-definition can be damaged by oppression, any account that accepts the Coherence Assumption will find it difficult to respond successfully to the Agency Dilemma. Suppose an account that accepts the Coherence Assumption sets a high standard for what counts as authentic and coherent self. Since many marginalized people lack autonomy, it can satisfy the desideratum that oppression undermines autonomy. However, it's then unclear how it can satisfy the second desideratum that people living in severely oppressive conditions still exercise meaningful agency. Of course, a lower bar could be set so that marginalized can exercise agency (thereby satisfying the second desideratum). But then it cannot accommodate the autonomy-undermining influences of oppression (thereby failing to satisfy the first desideratum).

Perhaps we can look to accounts that accept the Coherence Account in a different way. Some accounts require *wholehearted commitment* to one's preferences or values without requiring those preferences or values to pass some test of critical reflection or endorsement. On these accounts, only those actions that conform to one's wholehearted commitments are autonomous. As (later) Frankfurt notes, '[w]holeheartedness does not require that a person be altogether untroubled by inner opposition to his will. It just requires that, with respect to any such conflict, he himself be fully resolved. This means that he must be resolutely on the side of one of the forces struggling within him and not on the side of any other' (1992: 9).

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behaviour in the right way to be *mine*, only a minimal sense of 'mine' is required. Since oppression doesn't affect whether an attitude is mine in that minimal sense, the fact that oppression affects our beliefs and desires does not suggest that we ought to avoid explaining intentional agency in terms of beliefs and desires. In contrast, preponderant attitudes that matter for autonomy are meant to be attitudes that are 'ours' in a more robust sense. Hence, rejecting the Preponderant Attitude Assumption when seeking a stronger kind of agency doesn't require us to reject a belief-desire account of intentional agency. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

Some have challenged this account by calling attention to the diachronic nature of agency (Schechtman 2014; Velleman 2002) and others have objected that being true to oneself sometimes requires alienation from oneself (Gunnarsson 2014). However, I want to focus on how this kind of account handles internalized oppression. The Deferential Wife, for instance, who is wholeheartedly committed to being deferential to her husband seems nonautonomous. Indeed, she is, arguably, *paradigmatically* nonautonomous because of her *wholehearted* commitment to being excessively deferential. Moreover, as with other attitudes, internalized oppression can affect norms and values to which we are wholeheartedly committed. Hence, an account that accepts the Coherence Assumption by requiring wholeheartedness cannot adequately accommodate the autonomy-impeding effects of oppression and so cannot satisfy the first desideratum.

I do not presume to have provided conclusive reasons to reject the Coherence Assumption whether coherence is meant to be achieved via the process of critical reflection and endorsement or by being wholeheartedly committed to the relevant attitudes or actions.[13] However, since I want to solve the Agency Dilemma, I need an account of agency that is *compatible* with the claim that autonomy is undermined by oppression, but one that delivers that the oppressed can exercise agency that is stronger than mere intentional agency or means–end rationality. This arguably requires rejecting the Coherence Assumption.

5.2.3 Independence assumption

Many existing accounts also accept the *Independence Assumption* according to which autonomous agency is atomistic. Of course, agency is atomistic in one sense since it is attributable to an individual agent. Moreover, those who accept the Independence Assumption need not accept that we are causally isolated from others. However, the assumption I have in mind claims that features that are constitutive of agency can, in theory, be understood *without* explicit appeals to other agents.[14] For instance, although Watson's conception of values is compatible with the claim that values are *causally* influenced by others, to the extent that we can focus on them and their role in producing the action in question without appealing to other agents, Watson accepts the Independence Assumption.[15]

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[13] One might argue that I have neglected a different kind of coherence account—*integration* accounts—which claims that one acts autonomously when that action is produced by motivational states that are well-integrated within the agent's coherent personality (Arpaly and Schroeder 2014). However, either my observations about accounts that require wholeheartedness apply (because whole personalities or selves must be coherent (Arpaly and Schroeder 1999: 173)), or my observations about the Preponderant Attitude Assumption apply because they regard only those motivational states that are well-integrated within an agent's whole personality as those that truly express her agency.

[14] There are other assumptions that are also sometimes called *independence*. These are related, but different from my Independence Assumption. For instance, Marilyn Friedman (2014) invokes a different kind of independence when she discusses the idea of a 'self-made man'.

[15] Many relational theorists reject the Independence Assumption. Feminists have also rejected a similar assumption as it applies to personal identity. See, inter alia, Alison Jaggar (1988) and Lorraine Code (1991).

Even those who explicitly acknowledge that various features of ours are socially mediated accept my Independence Assumption. For instance, Krista Thomason (2018) acknowledges that self-conception is socially mediated. However, for her, there is a sharp distinction between how you see yourself (self-conception) and how others see you (identities). Although Thomason's focus in her book is shame, not autonomous agency, her understanding of self-conception exemplifies the Independence Assumption. On her view, shame—including gendered and racialized shame—involves there being a disconnect between your self-conception and your identities. For instance, her analysis of body shame involves there being a disconnect between how you see your body (your self-conception) and how others respond to your body (your identities) (2018: 109–10). Hence, although how you see your body and your self-conceptions are socially mediated, her view only makes sense if there is some robust sense in which an individual's self-conception can be understood without appealing to other agents and the social structure in which she is embedded. Given this, Thomason accepts my Independence Assumption.

Recall Haslanger's claim that to be a woman is just to be observed, or imagined, to have certain female sex characteristics on the basis of which she is marked as someone who is systematically subordinated along social, political, economic, and legal dimensions (2000: 42). On this view, being a woman is a constitutive social construction where '[s]omething is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we *must* make reference to social factors' (2012: 87; my emphasis).[16] Moreover, although I focus on the claim that *marginalized* people are socially constituted, we *all* have identities that are socially constituted. Indeed, on Haslanger's account, to be white, for instance, is just to be observed, or imagined, to have bodily features that are presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to certain geographical regions, on the basis of which one is marked as someone who is systematically *privileged* along social, political, economic, and legal dimensions (2000: 44; my emphasis). Since some of our socially constitutively constructed identities are sites of oppression, an account of agency exercised by the oppressed needs to reject the Independence Assumption.

Again, my purpose in highlighting the Independence Assumption is not to argue conclusively against it (although I have provided some reasons for rejecting it). Rather, I want to show that an account of agency that can respond to the Agency Dilemma should reject the Independence Assumption. That is, I want an account of agency that takes seriously the claim that we are *essentially socially embedded* creatures. In the next section, I illustrate how members of marginalized groups navigate the social world to zero in on a kind of socially embedded agency that is exercised.

5.3 Agency of the oppressed

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—

[16] See Haslanger's distinction between causal construction and constitutive construction (2012: 87).

> an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007: 8–9)

The concept of double-consciousness, expressed here by Du Bois, describes a certain kind of subjective experience of African Americans and other people of colour in racist societies.[17] I reflect, not only on the sensation of double-consciousness and seeing yourself through many different perspectives, but also on the process of situating yourself among those perspectives as well as the complicated relationship that you may have with these various perspectives.

Moreover, many members of marginalized groups learn about their own oppression—think of the #metoo movement, or coming across the term 'microaggression' and finding the Everyday Sexism Project, and reading descriptions of racist and sexist (and intersectional) experiences. However, although the kind of knowledge gained in this way (by consciousness-raising) is helpful, if not vital, in resisting oppression and thereby becoming more autonomous, this kind of reflection or awareness is not itself sufficient for autonomy. This is because many whose consciousness has been raised can still experience oppression and double binds which compromise autonomy. To see, let us consider two examples.

TRYING FEMINIST: Ashely, since she was very little, has been very particular about what she wears. She has always been interested in fashion and has come to view fashion as an important way of representing one's individuality. At university, when she comes across a course on feminism, she takes the course having always (albeit superficially) considered herself to be a feminist. She learns about the ideology of patriarchy and the ways that this ideology is implemented and about the varieties of oppression. Ashely starts reflecting on her interest in, and her positive attitude towards, fashion as well as the mainstream beauty ideals that she endorses. She starts to doubt that some of her views and values were freely chosen and comes to believe that her values reflect the dominant ideology of patriarchy. This is distressing to her and she thinks that something needs to change. But when she wakes up in mornings, she really thinks she looks better with her make-up on and with her legs shaved, and so she goes ahead with putting on make-up and shaving her legs.

TEAM PLAYER: Jane is wondering whether she should apply for a newly advertised leadership position in her company. She has been noted by her boss and her colleagues as being hard-working and good at her job. Although her official position does not include data entry, she has been more than willing to do it when asked. But when she reflects on the recent promotions as well as some of the managerial training and responsibilities that some of her (sometimes junior) colleagues have received, she comes to believe that the fact that she is an Asian woman might be playing a role in these decisions. She thinks that maybe she has been too happy to be a 'team player'

[17] This subjective experience is one of the aspects of a tripartite account of the concept of double-consciousness outlined by Robert Gooding-Williams (2009).

> and comes to believe that it's unfair that she hasn't been given more leadership responsibilities. She feels the pull of these reflections and thinks that the fact that she is Asian might even had an effect on how she herself thinks she should behave. But she nonetheless refrains from applying for the leadership position or talking to her boss about leadership opportunities because she would rather be thought of as helpful rather than bothersome.[18]

Many marginalized people experience deep conflict or tension of the kind described in these examples.[19] Especially those who are members of more than one marginalized group may bargain with various social norms to which they feel a certain sort of pull. For example, a black woman might refrain from straightening her curly hair although she continues to wear make-up. Moreover, for many, this decision is related: the costs of violating one norm of feminine appearance are *placated* by her choice to comply with some another norm. To give another example, a woman, animated by gender equality, might be very happy to be vocal about policies affecting gender equality at faculty meetings, but might be quiet about other issues that also matter to her. Similarly, one might attempt to balance or outweigh the potential costs or downstream of not fitting into the stereotype—say, of being submissive or subdued which is a norm of Asian femininity—by engaging in various actions to offset those costs—by being friendly, by going out of one's way not to inconvenience people, and by conforming to certain other norms of feminine appearance and presentation.[20]

Given the hold that dominant ideologies and oppressive stereotypes have over people, many marginalized people experience this kind of conflict: they are pulled by norms that they don't accept, all-things-considered, but they choose, in some sense, to conform to those norms. Using Patricia Marino's terminology, we can describe many members of marginalized groups as being 'valuationally inconsistent'. According to her, 'valuations for A and B are inconsistent when they "essentially conflict," that is, when there is no possible world in which A and B co-exist' (2011: 44). Accordingly, a person who values both a life of security and contemplation, and a life of adventure and risk, is valuationally inconsistent (2011: 45). We can regard Ashely in TRYING FEMINIST to suffer from valuational inconsistency: she values egalitarianism and rejects patriarchy, but she values feminine beauty standards which she now knows to be a manifestation of patriarchy.

However, there is a weaker kind of conflict that is common among many members of marginalized groups. To see this, recall that Jane in TEAM PLAYER values being a team player and also values leadership opportunities. It is not obvious that these two valuations *essentially* conflict—

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[18] Although this example is fictional, this kind of barrier to promotions (especially to managerial and leadership positions) for Asians and Asian Americans is noted by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. See also Jane Huyn (2005) who coined the phrase 'bamboo ceiling' to refer to this phenomenon.

[19] Justin Coates describes two kinds of conflicted discussed by Frankfurt. The first kind concerns the priority or ranking—that is, conflict about what to do first. The second kind concerns 'whether one (or more) of the competing motives can continue to be counted as "internal" in the relevant sense' (Coates 2017: 424). The kind of conflict that is pertinent is the second kind.

[20] This phenomenon of picking one's battles is an important aspect of the lived experiences of members of marginalized groups. I return to this phenomenon in Section 5.5.

there *is* a possible world in which Jane is a team player *and* is afforded leadership opportunities. Plausibly, her white colleagues live in that world. But Jane faces a valuational conflict of a weaker kind: the possible world in which Jane, an Asian woman, is both a team player and is afforded leadership opportunities in a corporate setting is, unfortunately, not a nearby world. Moreover, although the valuational conflict that Jane faces is not an essential inconsistency of the kind Marino discusses, her valuational conflict leads to deep dissatisfaction. Indeed, this is an earmark of double binds, 'situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation' (Frye 1983: 2). Whether Jane continues to be a team player, or whether she demands leadership opportunities, she is 'caught by systematically related . . . networks of forces and barriers that expose [her] to penalty, loss or contempt' (Frye 1983: 3). So although Jane is not dissatisfied under *any* arrangement—namely, a just arrangement with none of the interlocking systems of oppression—she feels that something has been lost and is dissatisfied with a state of the world that is unlikely to change for the better anytime soon.

We should note that the kind of ambivalence, inconsistencies, and tension or conflict that many members of marginalized groups face are *not* mere passive happenings; ambivalence or conflict that one merely notices and is dissatisfied by. Rather, these conflicts provide platforms *from which* many members of marginalized groups attempt to negotiate or 'bargain' with oppressive ideologies.[21] That is, despite the conflict, and more controversially perhaps, *because* of this conflict, I want to suggest that when we pay our attention to the nuances of the lived experiences of marginalized people, we see that although they may lack autonomy due to oppression, they also seem to exercise a certain kind of agency that does not arise when considering more extreme cases like the DEFERENTIAL WIFE. That is, internalizing norms does *not* entail uncritically accepting them and complying with them and it also does not preclude negotiating or bargaining with them.

In the next section, I precisify the kind of agency exercised by members of marginalized groups. We shall see how it is a kind of reason-responsiveness and that it does not accept the three assumptions highlighted in Section 5.2.

5.4 Socially embedded agency

> [T]ake away the gaze of the white male. Once you take that out, the whole world opens up.
>
> Toni Morrison[22]

In this section, I propose an account of *socially embedded agency* that is fundamentally and essentially social. Importantly, I show that this kind of agency is exercised by members of marginalized groups even under circumstances of oppression. Socially embedded agency is not one-directional—starting with the individual (the 'true' or 'authentic' self) who acts on the world—but is *bi-directional* in two different senses. To understand the first sense, we can look to how many think

[21] Similarly, Uma Narayan (2002) contrasts bargaining with patriarchy with being a mere dupe of patriarchy.
[22] Quoted in Ariel Leve (2012).

about intentional actions. To use the frequently used example, suppose I desire beer; since I believe that there is some beer in the fridge, I form the intention to get the beer from the fridge. Whatever our views are in the philosophy of action, we usually start with the individual's desires and beliefs that are already formed and attributable to the individual. But taking seriously our social-embeddedness means that we should pay attention to which desires are formed and how they are formed. Accordingly, socially embedded agency should reflect the causal loop between one's attitudes (desires, values, norms) and the society in which one is embedded.[23]

To understand the second sense of bi-directionality, distinguish socially embedded agency from *shared* agency (or agency in concert). Some take the claim that we are social creatures to mean that we interact or coordinate with others. Shared agency which explores what it takes for two or more individuals to act together is an interesting and important topic. However, to think that the social world enters our picture of agency only when an individual intends to act with another individual is not to take sufficiently seriously our social-embeddedness.

So how should we understand the claim that our agency is socially embedded? I propose that socially embedded agency is exercised by *negotiating between different social features*. Negotiating between our desires and values is exercising socially embedded agency since many of our desires and values are causally influenced by social factors which include not only our upbringing, but also what options are available, which are, in turn, influenced by what is valued by others. The social features that I have in mind also include those that are constituted by social factors such as gender, race, class, and so on. In addition, our desires, values, dispositions, and character traits are also heavily influenced by both of these features. Whether or not one is disposed to apologise, for instance, is gendered. More complicatedly perhaps, given that others' perceptions of us are infected by their desires and values as well as various operative stereotypes, what our dispositions or character traits are (as well as how we conceive of ourselves) are influenced by the social world. For instance, if my contribution to a meeting, however polite, is deemed to be aggressive, that might affect my reluctance to contribute. Similarly, what character traits are attributed to me depend on operative stereotypes: my exclamation might be deemed emotional (and irrational), my black friend's exclamation might be deemed angry, and my white male friend's exclamation might be deemed authoritative.

In addition, which *action-type* I am deemed to have performed is socially mediated. Alisa Bierria (2014) illustrates this phenomenon (which she calls the *social authoring of action*) with an example of the 2005 media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. She notes that the caption of a photo featuring two white people travelling through a flooded area carrying food reads: 'Two residents wade through chest-deep water after *finding* bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana' (Agence France Press 2005; my emphasis). Meanwhile, the caption of another image, nearly identical except that the subject of the photo is a black man, reads: 'A young man walks through chest deep flood water after *looting* a grocery store in New Orleans' (Associated Press 2005; my emphasis).[24]

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[23] See Ian Hacking's (1999) related discussion of feedback or looping effects.

[24] This side-by-side analysis comes from Samuel R. Sommers et al. (2006) and is referenced by Alisa Bierria (2014: 129).

So much for the different social features. What does it mean to *negotiate* between them? One negotiates between different features by considering them, feeling conflicted by them, endorsing some, and rejecting others as well as feeling ambivalent about some. This is a kind of reason-responsiveness where one is responding to *social* reasons, in particular, social norms. Moreover, although one can respond to social reasons by wholeheartedly endorsing them, negotiating between social reasons does not entail wholehearted endorsement.

To clarify what is involved in negotiating, consider *code-switching*—changing one's behaviour in order to adapt to different social contexts. Although code-switching refers to the ability to change one's behaviour in order to adapt to different social contexts and in response to social cues, the ability to code-switch is intricately connected to the ability to negotiate. More generally, we can think of perceiving the norms that are in place in particular contexts as well as recognizing context-shifts as skills that are exercised when negotiating. So, when one engages in code-switching, one has negotiated between different social features and thereby exercised socially embedded agency.

Another example of negotiating is the phenomenon that is observed and insightfully analysed by Robin Dembroff and Catharine Saint-Croix (2019). They develop an account of agential identities: 'self-identities we make available to others' which 'bridge what we take ourselves to be with what others take us to be' and they identify the phenomenon of 'purposefully shap[ing] the way [that we] are perceived' and 'placing [ourselves] into particular social positions by choice, rather than simply be[ing] placed into them' (572). Their example of a young man deciding whether to come out to his parents as gay is an example of a person negotiating between social features and hence exercising socially embedded agency.

In addition, negotiating includes other kinds of deliberations such as picking your battles.[25] Figuring out when speaking out is worth the cost is particularly important for members of marginalized groups especially when speaking out about certain matters falls foul of stereotypes or is likely to be perceived negatively (as angry, resentful, or hostile).

These kinds of negotiations and deliberations all reflect a certain kind of reason-responsiveness, namely responsiveness to *social* reasons of various kinds.[26] Given the focus on deliberation and responding to reasons, socially embedded agency shares some similarities with the procedural accounts of autonomy discussed above. One similarity is the focus on exercises of abilities. Since one can exercise an ability to a greater or a lesser degree, socially embedded agency comes in degrees. However, since social-embeddedness does not make the Coherence Assumption, exercising socially embedded agency requires neither that my action is endorsed after critical reflection nor that it manifests my wholehearted commitment to some value. Hence, feeling conflicted or ambivalent is no barrier to socially embedded agency.

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[25] See the text accompanied by footnote 20 above for examples.

[26] The fact that socially embedded agency is a sub-type of reason-responsiveness helps to see why it does not 'problematically invoke some kind of homunculus—an element of the self set apart from the rest, directing it like a ship's captain directs her ship' (Killmister 2017: 11). We do not need to posit a homunculus who is doing the negotiating on our behalf; rather, negotiating involves responding to social reasons. Thanks to Michael Bratman and Manuel Vargas for urging me to consider this issue.

One implication of this is that we can exercise socially embedded agency even when we perform actions that are not endorsed by us in our calm, collected, reflective moments. Hence, Ashely, in TRYING FEMINIST, exercises socially embedded agency even when she decides to shave her legs. Similarly, whether I decide to have the second slice of pie or whether I decide to refrain, I am exercising socially embedded agency since my decision and the resulting conduct is an expression of my social agency of negotiation. Of course, this does not mean that I act *autonomously* whether or not I eat another slice of pie, but engaging in this kind of negotiation *is* exercising socially embedded agency.[27]

I proposed a novel account of social agency to vindicate the agency of the marginalized by paying attention to a certain kind of responsiveness to social reasons. In the next section, I explain the relationship between socially embedded agency and autonomy, and show how my account can help solve the Agency Dilemma.

5.5 Socially embedded agency and autonomy

5.5.1 Importance of socially embedded agency

Being responsive to social reasons by, say, reflecting on your own attitude and how your choices and actions will be perceived by others—that is, negotiating between particular social features—helps to detect the influences of dominant oppressive ideologies and ultimately reject them. Hence, exercising socially embedded agency is helpful for members of marginalized groups to become more autonomous. Mackenzie claims that one dimension of autonomy is *self-governance* which 'involves having the skills and capacities necessary to make and enact decisions and to live one's life in a way that expresses or coheres with one's reflectively constituted diachronic practical identity' (2015: 58). She claims that a person must possess a range of competences or skills, to some degree, to count as self-governing and lists capacities for critical reflection, reasons-responsiveness, self-control and decisiveness, as well as emotional and imaginative skills (2015: 59). In addition, she claims that there are 'social or dialogical skills [that are] required for self-understanding or self-knowledge'.

Similarly, one's ability to negotiate between different social features seems necessary to gain the kind of self-understanding that allows one to resist oppression. This is because negotiating between social features well requires being clear-eyed about those features. Moreover, for many, being clear-eyed about some of these social features involves seeing more clearly the ways in which we have been influenced by our society with its interlocking systems of oppression. Ashely in TRYING FEMINIST and Jane in TEAM PLAYER, each of whom has begun to open their eyes to

[27] The focus on the skills involved in negotiating between social features echoes Meyers' account which highlights 'the skills of the self-as-social, as-relational, as-divided, and as-embodied' (2004: 68). However, she also claims that '[t]he *skilled* self-as-social registers convergences and clashes with cultural norms, accounts for convictions and conduct *when appropriate*, and *revises these accounts as necessary*' (2004: 68; my emphasis). So socially embedded agency is weaker since exercising it doesn't require motivational ambivalences and inconsistencies to be resolved.

oppression, are more likely to achieve autonomy than, say, the Deferential Wife who is not yet aware of the influences of patriarchy on her desires and values. In short, exercising social agentic skills of negotiating is important for gaining knowledge of ourselves and our situations in the world. Moreover, armed with this kind of understanding and knowledge, we are in a better position to start resisting the influences of oppressive ideologies, improving our chances of achieving autonomy in our non-ideal, oppressive, socially unjust world.

5.5.2 Autonomy without socially embedded agency

Although agentic skills may be practically necessary for members of marginalized groups to achieve autonomy in our world, autonomy and agency are not perfectly correlated. This is because members of certain privileged groups are more autonomous in our unjust, non-ideal world than members of marginalized groups, despite having a lesser degree of socially embedded agency. To substantiate the latter claim, we can look to standpoint epistemology according to which 'the perspectives of members of groups that are socially marginalized in their relations to dominant groups' can be more revealing that the members of the dominant groups when it comes to their perspectives on oppression (Bar On 1993: 83).[28] Accordingly, those who are members of marginalized groups are in a better position to know about certain matters, such as oppression, than those who are members of privileged groups. This means that those who are in privileged positions, partly by virtue of having less or worse epistemic access to certain information about certain social features, are likely to have less socially embedded agency despite having more autonomy.[29] In addition, the fact that someone is a member of a privileged group might mean that they may not have had much practice at negotiating between social features because there is less *need* for this kind of negotiation for members of privileged groups.

However, the fact that they have a lesser degree of socially embedded agency does not often impede their autonomy in our world. (This is why social agency and autonomy are not perfectly correlated.) But to see the relationship between socially embedded agency and autonomy, suppose they are transplanted to a world like ours but where the social hierarchy is reversed. In that world, where they are now members of marginalized groups, they are unlikely to have the skills necessary to achieve autonomy in that world. They may be at a loss about how to make sense of themselves and their social situation and something like this might be how the so-called men's rights activists feel as some social progress is being made!

Socially embedded agency can also help illuminate the phenomenon of *white fragility*. This phenomenon, identified by bell hooks (1984: 12–13), has been recently popularized by Robin DiAngelo who defines white fragility as 'a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves' (2011: 54). She notes that many white

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[28] For articulation of standpoint epistemologies, see, inter alia, Lorraine Code (2006), Patricia Hill Collins (2002), Nancy Hartsock (2003), Alessandra Tanesini (1999), and Alison Wylie (2003).

[29] This is consistent with the claim that those in privileged positions may have more agency in the sense that they are more able to act in conformity to their wholehearted commitments. Thanks to Dave Shoemaker for this point.

people insulate themselves against racial stress—by living, learning, and working in predominantly white spaces, or by refusing to engage with the realities of race. Hence, many white people have had little practice in thinking or talking about race in any kind of sustained, honest, or meaningful way. This is supposed to explain why they become stressed, or even distressed, and to react in ways that are defensive and counter-productive to racial justice.

However, it's not simply a matter of white people having had little practice thinking or talking about race, but also because they lack the general agentic skills to negotiate between certain social features. That is, some white people may have had less need to exercise their socially embedded agency than some people of colour. Since socially embedded agency is exercised (and needs to be exercised) by members of other marginalized groups, we can also explain why, despite being white, women, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people are *less* likely to suffer from white fragility, or at least overcome white fragility with more ease.

We should note, however, that members of marginalized groups are not alone in exercising socially embedded agency. This is because all human beings, including members of privileged groups are socially embedded even though they may be less aware of it. As Laura Davy notes: 'A person who appears to be ideally and independently self-determining their life (that is, a young male professional with no care responsibilities who must consult with others only minimally in self-determining his own life) can only be doing so because of a whole host of visible and less visible forms of interpersonal and structural care and support that enabled him to be in this position' (2019: 105). But, members of privileged groups can come to recognize the ways in which they are socialized and socially embedded creatures. Indeed, members of privileged groups are not immune from having their autonomy undermined by oppression. After all, many men are influenced by toxic masculinity and so are influenced by explicit or implicit adherence to masculine norms that venerate dominating behaviour, attitudes of insensitivity (to others as well as to themselves), and particular conceptions of strength that are incompatible with apologizing or crying. Plausibly, toxic masculinity, one manifestation of oppression, can undermine autonomy of men.

Moreover, although I have focused on negotiating between conflicting norms where at least one of the norms is oppressive, those norms don't have to concern oppression. After all, we sometimes feel the pull of two conflicting norms although neither of them is oppressive. Suppose you're a fan of hockey and you think that fighting on ice and other violent actions such as cross-checking are 'part of the game'. But you're also generally disinclined to violence (for good reasons!) and sometimes think that it's morally problematic to enjoy the kind of violence that is valorized in hockey.[30] When you feel hesitant about buying a ticket to a hockey game, but eventually decide to go to the game and cheer for the fight that breaks out on ice (even though in your more calm and collected moments, you feel bad about this), you are exercising socially embedded agency.

5.5.3 Solving the agency dilemma

[30] Thanks to Matt King for the example.

I have vindicated the agency of the marginalized by proposing socially embedded agency. According to the Agency Dilemma, there is a tension between acknowledging the autonomy-impeding effects of oppression and vindicating the agency of those who are oppressed. To solve the Agency Dilemma, then, we can supplement any account of *autonomy* that can accommodate the autonomy-impeding effects of oppression with socially embedded agency which recognizes our dependence on others as well as our dependence on various social structures without regarding that dependence as *agency*-undermining subordination. Recall Du Bois's claim that one's dogged strength alone keeps one from being torn. I have been suggesting that it is not just strength (although strength is often required), but that the agentic skills of negotiating are also important. However, we should note that although exercising socially embedded agency may be helpful and practically necessary for members of marginalized groups to achieve autonomy in our world, they are not *sufficient* for autonomy. Indeed, I agree with Du Bois when he claims that the 'merging' of the two selves can only take place when racism has been eliminated. And similarly, autonomy might only be realizable when oppressive ideologies have been eliminated.

5.6 Concluding remarks

I have identified some assumptions that are made by some existing accounts of agency and autonomy and suggested that these assumptions make it difficult to vindicate the ways in which oppression undermines autonomy while at the same time making room for meaningful agency exercised by the oppressed. My solution consists in proposing a distinct kind of agency, socially embedded agency, the locus of which is in the exercise of negotiation. My account takes seriously our social-embeddedness which includes the fact that our interactions with others as well as the social structures in which we are located have profound effects on us such that we cannot easily separate ourselves from others. Furthermore, one implication of my view is that although social injustices will not disappear soon or suddenly, there is hope that as we learn about oppression and negotiate with oppressive ideologies, we can learn to, in small and big ways, resist them.[31]

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