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11. Harmful salience perspectives

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Consider a terrible situation that too many women find themselves in: 85,000 women are raped in England and Wales alone every year. Many of these women do not bring their cases to trial. There are multiple reasons that they might not want to testify in the courts. The incredibly low conviction rate is one. Another reason, however, might be that these women do not want the fact that they were raped to become the most salient thing about them. More specifically, they do not want it to be the thing that others *attend* to the most— that others find most noticeable and memorable. In this paper, I introduce the notion of 'harmful salience perspectives' to help to explain this and related phenomena. This refers either to attention on things that should not be salient, or not enough attention on things that deserve to be made salient. Following ideas within the feminist literature on objectification, I argue that we can be harmed when aspects of our identity that do not reflect our personhood—our agency, rationality, personality, and so on—are more prominent in the minds of others than aspects that *do* reflect our personhood. Crucially, these ways of attending do not need to implicate false beliefs and harmful ideologies to be harmful, but can be harmful in their own right.

11.1. Introduction

Can certain patterns of salience be harmful?[1] I want to consider a normative side to salience. I will argue that we can harm someone simply in virtue of making certain things salient about them. This may be surprising. Whilst a great many factors, from physical and psychological violence, to false beliefs and credibility deficits, have already been identified as potentially harming an individual or group, facts about *salience* have not seemed particularly relevant to harm. I shall argue, however, that certain salience patterns can indeed be harmful.[2]

A woman can be harmed, for example, when what she is wearing is more salient in her interlocutor's mind than her conversational abilities. A philosopher can be harmed

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[1] This chapter was submitted in 2019. Since then, others have written on the ethical dimensions of salience. Jessie Munton's account of salience in connection to prejudice has some particularly interesting parallels with the ideas discussed in this chapter, which would be fruitful to investigate (Munton, J. (2021). Prejudice as the Misattribution of Salience. *Analytic Philosophy,* 00:1-19).

[2] The type of harm being considered in this chapter is what Feinberg (1987, Ch. 1) calls 'setbacks to interests'. I am asking, therefore, if patterns of salience can hinder our interests. Our interests, Feinberg suggests, are those things in which we have a stake. They are components of our well-being, insofar as one 'flourishes or languishes as [one's interests] flourish or languish' (ibid. 34). The sorts of interests that Feinberg judges to be morally relevant are those with some stability, and those that reflect a deep-rooted concern. A person can set back my interest, and thus harm me, by making it difficult for me to achieve my interest.

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when what others find most salient about her is her identity as an ethnic minority, as opposed to her philosophical expertise. For an athlete who has been raped, it can be in her best interests for her athletic achievement to be her most salient feature, and not the fact that she was raped.

In what follows, I will begin, in §11.2, by distinguishing linguistic and cognitive salience perspectives. Certain uses of language make some properties more linguistically salient than others. This tends to make those properties more salient in the minds of its audience, producing a counterpart *cognitive* salience perspective. Linguistic and cognitive salience perspectives can be harmful. They can be instrumentally harmful, as I show in §11.3, when they produce certain beliefs, ideologies and actions. They can be harmful in a constitutive way, as I show in §11.4, for example, when they are in themselves objectifying, or disrespectful of personhood. I conclude that certain salience perspectives can both cause and constitute particular kinds of harm. This has wider ramifications for existing debates in ethics, such as for hate speech, as I show in §11.5.

11.2. Salience perspectives

When we communicate, we try to get our audience to adjust their attitudes in various ways. If I say 'Jane is excellent at philosophy', I may be trying to produce a certain belief.[3] If I say 'Jane's book will open up your mind; you won't regret buying it!', I may be aiming to produce a certain desire. Sometimes, we simply encourage our audience to make something more *salient*. If I say 'yes Jane is a little socially awkward, but we shouldn't forget that she gives an awful lot to charity', I encourage my audience to make Jane's charitable side more prominent in their minds.

11.2.1. Cognitive salience perspectives

When something is salient in our minds, we notice it, remember it, and find it cognitively accessible. Think about listening to a band. You might find yourself focussing on one instrument over the others. That synth is really grabbing your attention! You hear the

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[3] Langton (2012) identifies additional functions of speech beyond merely attempting to get the audience to *know* something they didn't before. She suggests that this occurs through a process of psychological accommodation.

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drums, but they've melted into the background of your experience.[4] Because you've noticed the synth, it also sticks in your memory—a week later, it's the synth that you've remembered the sound of better than the other instruments. When you think about the band, then, you find the synth particularly cognitively accessible, in the sense that it takes little cognitive labour to think of it—it easily pops into your mind.[5] The drums, on the other hand, require a lot more processing power to think of—they're not 'at the top of your mind', so to speak: instead you really have to imagine yourself back in the room, and so on.

When we are disposed to find a property particularly noticeable, memorable, and cognitively accessible, we can be said to have a particular 'cognitive salience perspective'. (The terminology of 'perspective' is borrowed from Elisabeth Camp.)[6] A cognitive salience perspective is constituted by dispositions that structure our *attention*. It structures how properties are foregrounded and backgrounded in our attention by giving some *relative* salience over others.[7] So, whilst the synth *and* drums in the band enter into your attention, it's the synth that is given *relative* salience over the drums.

We can also talk about how cognitive salience perspectives determine how *mental states* such as beliefs are structured in our attention. Whilst I hold various beliefs about a subject, it is a further question whether one of those beliefs has relatively more salience in my mind than another. I might believe that Jane is both socially awkward and charitable, but we can still ask which of these beliefs better captures my attention. Cognitive salience perspectives are individuated by how they *structure* mental content: they are not about *what* is represented in our cognition, but rather *how* that content is organised.[8]

It is this structural nature of attention that makes it a good candidate for an account of salience in the mind. Definitions of salience often hinge on the idea of structure; something is salient when it *stands out relative to the background*.[9] Salience, according to this

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[4] This example is a version of one discussed by Sebastian Watzl (2017, p.74), whose work has influenced some of the ideas in this chapter.

[5] This definition is inspired by Rachel Fraser's (2018) phraseology.

[6] Camp (2017). A Campian perspective is partly constituted by mental dispositions that make certain properties stand out more than others. Campian perspectives also include other dimensions that go beyond salience, including dispositions to find certain properties more *causal and explanatory* than others (ibid. 80). I use the phrase 'cognitive salience perspective' to highlight how my account of perspectives is narrower than Camp's.

[7] This view is inspired by Watzl's (2017, Ch. 4) 'priority structure view of attention'.

[8] Camp (2017, p.77) is also largely concerned not with *what* content is represented in our thought, but rather *how* that content is represented.

[9] Inspired by Amos Tversky's analysis of salience, Camp (2017, p.80) defines salience as in part being about how much a feature 'sticks out relative to the background'.

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definition, is about the structural relations between various contents so that certain of those contents stand out as more prominent than others. Attention has also been explicated in similar ways; indeed, Sebastian Watzl's 2017 book on attention is titled *Structuring Mind*. In it, he offers what he calls the 'priority structure view of attention', which refers to how our mind orders the parts of one's mental life so that certain parts are prioritised over others.[10]

The cases that I will be focussing on in the following sections concern someone recognising all relevant properties of, or having all relevant beliefs about, a subject, but nevertheless having one of those properties or beliefs more salient in their mind—namely, of that person giving *relative salience* to one of those properties or beliefs over another. Let's say, then, that Arif recognises Jane's social awkwardness and her charity. When I implore Arif to attend more to Jane's charity work, I am not claiming that he is *unaware* of this trait of hers, or that he is *ignoring* it. I am instead imploring Arif to give it *relative* salience over her awkwardness—to attend to it *more* than he currently is.

Whilst attention can take many forms, cognitive salience perspectives are characterised by what one might call *habitual* attention. In particular, they are constituted by dispositions to find, *intuitively* and *automatically*, certain properties more salient than others.[11] In and of the moment, Arif is not following a rationalised decision to focus on Jane's social awkwardness. He has developed a habit over time so that his attention simply gravitates towards this trait of hers. Attentional dispositions, then, often bypass our conscious deliberation. As with most habits, we are limited in our voluntary control over our cognitive salience perspectives. Arif, in and of the moment, might be unable to prevent himself from attending primarily to Jane's awkwardness. Despite this, he still possesses what Jules Holroyd would call 'long-range' control over which attentional dispositions he

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[10] Watzl (2017, Ch. 4). This focus on the *structural* side of attention can be contrasted with what Watzl refers to as inquiries into the *manner* in which one attends (Watzl, 2022: §5.6). For instance, whilst I am interested in how the synth is *foregrounded* in my attention over the guitar (i.e. I am interested in attentional *structure*), those interested in my attentional *manner* might question the *way* in which I attend to the guitar; is my attention sensitive and insightful, appreciative of the nuances of the sound of the instrument, or am I blankly and uncritically attending to it? As Watzl suggests, the reader can look to Murdoch (1970) for discussions of this manner-based dimension of attention, including suggestions as to how ethically to evaluate the manner in which one attends. For ethical discussions of salience that are closer to the type of *structural* salience that interests me, see Chappell and Yetter-Chappell (2016) and Watzl (2022).

[11] This type of intuitive, sub-conscious attention is discussed by Camp (2017, pp.80-83). See Watzl (2017) for a discussion of various other forms of attention, including attention that is under conscious control.

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cultivates over time.[12] If he is so motivated, Arif might look to various habit-breaking techniques in order to stop himself intuitively and automatically attending more to Jane's awkwardness. For instance, he might look to the implicit bias literature's suggestions regarding how to change one's automatic, unconscious cognitive patterns. To borrow one technique from this literature, shown to be effective in reducing one's implicit biases, he might repeat certain intentions to himself such as 'when I see Jane, I will think 'charitable''.[13]

Finally, attention is distinct from belief. I might *believe* that the achievements and successes in my life should be salient in my attention—that I should find them noticeable and memorable—but I might nevertheless *attend* more to my worries and flaws.[14] My achievements simply don't intuitively leap out as salient in my own mind. Attention, then, is non-doxastic, and therefore lacks truth conditions.

11.2.2. Linguistic salience perspectives

There are lots of ways that we might explicitly use language to encourage our audience to adopt a certain cognitive salience perspective, as when we say 'well, yes Jane is a little socially awkward, but let's not forget how much she gives to charity'. Here, by explicitly using phrases such as 'but let's not forget *x*', we imply that our audience should make *x* (i.e. Jane's charitable side) more salient in their minds. Alternatively, we might explicitly say 'Jane is very charitable!' If our audience already believes this proposition, this utterance might be an explicit effort to get them to *attend* more to Jane's charitable side.

There are more subtle ways of encouraging our audience to adopt a particular cognitive salience perspective. One is by using what we can call a *linguistic salience perspective*. Linguistic salience perspectives too are individuated by how they *structure* content, in this case, linguistic content.

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[12] Holroyd (2012, p.284) uses this term to describe the type of control that we have over the skills, habits, and biases that we cultivate over time.

[13] According to research by Stewart and Payne (2008), one effective way of reducing an implicit bias that involves associating black people with danger is to repeat the intention 'when I see a black face I will think 'safe''. See Saul (2012) for other techniques.

[14] One might wonder if attention is instead captured by something like Gendler's (2008) notion of *alief*, which is also distinguished from belief. Crucially, aliefs encompass affective and behavioural dimensions; for instance, one might *alieve* that the characters in a film are real insofar as one feels emotions about them, and one is disposed to cry about the bad things that happen to them. It is precisely these dimensions that distinguish aliefs from cognitive salience perspectives. The latter are more minimal, simply involving the structuring of our attention so that we find certain properties more noticeable and memorable than others.

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Consider a journalist making decisions about how to present the costs and benefits of Brexit in a newspaper article. They are obliged, let's say, to include both a cost and a benefit of Brexit—for instance, the increased hate crime since the vote, and the benefits associated with no longer having to pay the EU membership fee. They are obliged, then, to include a particular set of linguistic contents. Even with this constraint on what content they can communicate, the journalist can decide which of these facts to *headline*—namely, which of these facts they make most salient.[15] They mock up two articles, the only difference between them being which implication of Brexit is at the top of the page. We can say, in this case, that the two articles invoke different linguistic salience perspectives. A linguistic salience perspective refers to the *structuring* of linguistic contents so that certain contents stand out more than others.

The aim of this sort of linguistic salience perspective is to inculcate its cognitive counterpart in its audience. So, the newspaper that makes hate crime headline is encouraging its audience to attend primarily to the socio-political costs of Brexit. It is encouraging its audience to make these properties of Brexit more salient in their minds, so that they better notice, remember, and find cognitively accessible, such costs.

Even in an article that discusses the benefits of Brexit in just as much detail as the costs, invoking a linguistic salience perspective that involves simply headlining the costs can successfully encourage its audience to pay more attention to those costs. While the article explicitly recognises both the costs and benefits of Brexit, it nevertheless encourages its audience to come away with the costs looming larger in their minds.

One important thing to flag about linguistic salience perspectives is that they have an *under the radar* quality. They do not make their requests explicit, such as through the phrase 'pay attention to the costs of Brexit'. Instead, they subtly play with the presentation of information. This gives them a manipulative quality, insofar as they do not, in Cass Sunstein's words, '*sufficiently engage or appeal to [people's] capacity for reflection and deliberation*' (emphasis in original).[16] Instead, they attempt to *bypass* a person's conscious awareness. Language like this can have a special power in shaping a person's cognitive and behaviour state. In particular, because we are not *aware* of what this language is getting us to do (in this case, shift our attentional patterns such that we make a certain content particularly salient in our minds), we do not consciously monitor our attentional patterns. As such, we

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[15] Watzl (2017, p.70) also compares our mind to a newspaper when explicating his account of attention.

[16] Sunstein (2016, p.82) is talking about modes of manipulation more generally here, as opposed to linguistic salience perspectives in particular.

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do not attempt to suppress any attentional patterns that we might reject, if given the opportunity to reflect. This can make linguistic salience perspectives especially *effective* in shaping people's attentional dispositions, something we I discuss further below.

In what follows, I will argue that mere salience perspectives, both cognitive and linguistic, can have significant moral implications.

11.3. Salience perspectives and instrumental harms

Imagine a man, let's call him Terry, who, when interacting with men, tends to notice their voice and face more than their body. He easily remembers what they say, as well as their facial expressions. When he considers an individual man that he has met, he tends to find these aspects of them more cognitively accessible than memories of their biceps or chest size. By contrast, when Terry interacts with women, he often notices and remembers a woman's figure or chest more than their face and voice, finding these attributes most accessible in his mind when he later reflects on what they were like. Terry still notices and remembers other aspects of the women he meets; he does notice and remember their conversational contributions and personality quirks. They are simply less prominent in his mind than these other features.

Terry is systematically attending to women differently from men. Is this a problem? Well, you might think that this could be a problem if Terry's cognitive salience perspective on women is helping him to objectify women in what he believes, and in how he acts. Sexual objectification involves treating a person as a thing in some way. Perhaps Terry's cognitive salience perspective is helping him to think things like 'women are reducible to their bodies'. Perhaps it is helping him to act in objectifying ways, for example by touching women inappropriately, as though women are physical objects to be enjoyed, instead of agents with personal space to be respected.[17]

Can these patterns of attention really be enough to activate such substantive beliefs and actions, though? Evidence from cognitive psychology suggests that they could. Let's consider some of this evidence.

11.3.1 Framing effects

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[17] There are many different forms of objectification, as I touch upon in §11.4.2. The form in question here relates best to treating women as though they do not have boundary integrity (Nussbaum, 1995, p.s257).

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Framing effects occur when people respond differently to informationally equivalent contents when those contents are presented in subtly different ways.[18] Consider the question: 'How do women lead differently to men in boardrooms?' Now consider the same question, phrased slightly differently: 'How do men lead differently to women in boardrooms?' Surely, this change in word order is too trivial to evoke different responses from us?

Not so, say Susanne Bruckmüller and colleagues.[19] They found that study participants answering the former question were, amongst other things, more likely to endorse gender stereotypes, attributing a greater number of stereotypical traits to men (such as self-confidence, independence, and decisiveness), and a greater number of feminine stereotypic traits to women (such as being emotional, compassionate, and warm). Why?

Although a full answer to this question is relatively complex, we can give a brief analysis.[20] The two questions differ not in content, but in the *structuring* of that content. More specifically, the only difference between the phrases is the order in which 'men' and 'women' occur in the sentence. These questions differ in virtue of linguistic salience perspective only. By talking about women *first* in the question 'how do *women* differ from *men* in the boardroom', this question makes women more salient than men. This triggers a linguistic norm, that treats women as more salient in the *explanation*. They are the *effect-to-be-explained*, whilst men are positioned as the implicit norm for comparison.[21] As discussed, a salience perspective in language tends to cultivate its counterpart salience perspective in our cognition. This salience perspective suggests that we, as the audience, position women as the group that we *attend* to when giving our explanation as to how men and women differ in the domain of leadership.

By drawing the audience's attention to women in this way, various cognitively accessible, pragmatic associations and beliefs concerning women in leadership are activated that *also* treat women as salient in this domain—namely, that treat women as *striking* and *unusual* in the domain of leadership. In particular, they are striking insofar as they *do not fit the stereotype of a leader*. In our culture, the stereotype of a leader is a man. Leadership qualities are masculine qualities—rationality, assertiveness, lack of emotion,

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[18] Kahneman and Tversky (1979).
[19] Bruckmüller et al. (2012).
[20] See Bruckmüller et al. (2012) for a fuller analysis, which includes a discussion of the linguistic norms that tend to govern such comparative questions.
[21] Ibid. (210).

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and so on.[22] These clash with stereotypes associated with women; women are stereotyped to be illogical, compassionate, emotional, nurturing, and so on. Indeed, in Bruckmüller and colleagues' pre-test, they found that men were called to mind much more easily when participants were asked to imagine a leader.[23]

By making women salient in our minds when comparing the genders in the domain of leadership, then, we activate the cognitively accessible gender stereotypes that make them salient in that domain.[24]

Whilst this can have various epistemic consequences, what is relevant to my purposes is the *harm* that stereotypes can engender.[25] Although Bruckmüller et al. do not discuss this issue, activating inferences to stereotypes can mean also activating various forms of *behaviour* that are consistent with these stereotypes.[26] For instance, research suggests that, thanks to the stereotype that leaders are men, employers are more likely to hire a man as a manager.[27] Research has also shown that men are also more likely to get promoted over women, and receive larger bonuses and variable pay, even when these men's and women's performance evaluations are identical.[28]

Further, it has been shown that where women display assertiveness, a trait stereotypically associated with leadership, and a trait that Laurie Rudman and Julie Phelan describe as 'necessary for success in the business world', they tend to get viewed and evaluated more negatively, and this comes with significant financial setbacks for women leaders.[29] It has been suggested that these factors combine to explain why fewer women put in for leadership roles.[30] Not only do stereotypes tell women that they do not fit the bill of a leader, but the prescriptive side of these stereotypes means that they will likely be penalised if they *do* try to lead, which dissuades them from pursuing leadership roles.[31] Where women *do* pursue leadership roles, research suggests that negative stereotypes associated with women leaders can engender stereotype threat effects, affecting how well

[22] See Bruckmüller et al. (2012, p.212) and the references therein. Also see Hegarty & Bruckmüller (2013, p.457).
[23] Bruckmüller et al. (2012, p.213).
[24] These stereotypes are cognitively accessible in part because they are repeated so often in our culture. We hear them in the media, in everyday conversations and so on, so that they are increasingly familiar to us (Rudman & Glick, 2008, p. 81).
[25] For instance, a stereotype might be false, misleading, unwarranted, and so on. See, for example, Blum (2004), Langton (1993, 2004), Elgin (1996), and Puddifoot (2017) for these sorts of ideas.
[26] Tirrell (2013, p.165), Wheeler & Petty (2001, p.820).
[27] Heilman (2012).
[28] Castilla (2008).
[29] See Rudman and Phelan (2008, pp. 65-66) and the references therein.
[30] Hoyt and Murphy (2016).
[31] Ibid. (388).

women leaders perform. For instance, research conducted on American adults found that when these negative stereotypes are implicitly activated (e.g. where feminine-coded traits, such as empathy, are linked to poor negotiation outcomes), women tend to underperform men in leadership tasks.[32]

It might be helpful, then, to see this stereotype of men leaders as part of a wider *ideology* about leaders. Ideologies, according to Eric Swanson, encompass a great range of mutually supporting components.[33] Some are doxastic, but many are non-doxastic. These non-doxastic components might involve associations, affective dispositions, codes of interaction, values, practices, and so on. An ideology about leaders might involve associations between men and presidents. It might involve feelings of unease at leaders who are women, and codes of interaction that encourage one to behave in distrustful, patronising ways towards women leaders. It might involve valuing cold, unemotional behaviour.

Simply making women salient in the context of a gender comparison of leadership styles, then, can activate problematic stereotypes (and, arguably, ideologies) associated with women leaders being salient (read: striking) in our culture. In other words, a mere salience perspective can activate stereotypes. The action-engendering consequences of these stereotypes make vivid the far-reaching, material consequences that can come with salience perspectives.

11.3.2. Terry and his salience perspective on women

In the example above, no cultural beliefs, associations and ideologies are explicitly discussed, and yet the audience ends up endorsing them. How does this happen? When certain beliefs, associations and ideologies are cognitively accessible, we risk activating them simply by making salient content that is central to those beliefs, associations and ideologies. In the example above, there is a cognitively accessible stereotype that women are unusual because women are too emotional and illogical to lead. Simply making *salient* content that is central to this stereotype (namely, women), in the context of a comparison of gendered leadership styles, is sufficient to activate this stereotype.

Further, it is precisely the fact that the beliefs and ideologies are not explicitly asserted that can explain why framing effects are so successful at altering our responses.

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[32] Kray et al. (2001). This also makes vivid one of the epistemic costs of this particular gender stereotype; it can have the wrong direction of fit with its subject matter (see Langton, 1993).
[33] Swanson (forthcoming).

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Framing effects work in an *under the radar* way, which, as discussed earlier, can make them especially effective in manipulating our thought and behavioural patterns. Research shows that where the sort of implicit stereotype activation above occurs, more people respond in stereotype-congruent ways, in the sense that their responses are consistent with them *endorsing* stereotypes. For instance, I would be responding in stereotype-congruent ways if, when shown a video of a black man behaving in an ambiguous way (e.g. bumping into someone), I am likely to evaluate that man's behaviour as aggressive (i.e. as fitting with harmful stereotypes that black men are threatening). [34] In particular, it is not just high-prejudiced individuals (i.e. those who, according to psychological tests, indicate that they accept and endorse stereotypes)[35] who respond in these ways. Implicit stereotype activation also succeeds in getting *low*-prejudiced individuals (i.e. those who, whilst they have knowledge of stereotypes, indicate that they reject them) to respond in stereotype-congruent ways. When stereotypes are activated explicitly, such as where a stereotype is *asserted*, fewer people have these stereotype-congruent responses. Again, because our ability consciously to monitor our thought patterns is precluded in cases of implicit stereotype activiation, we do not attempt to suppress the activation of the stereotype, or the behavioural codes associated with it.[36]

What can this tell us about Terry and his cognitive salience perspective on women? Well, given that our culture is saturated in objectifying images and narratives that encourage us to think of women in terms of their bodies, objectifying beliefs and ideologies about women are plausibly cognitively accessible.[37] Terry, in virtue of having a cognitive salience perspective on women that makes salient content central to these beliefs and ideologies—i.e., by making women's bodies salient—risks activating those beliefs and ideologies. The behavioural dimension of ideologies is important to emphasise here; Terry's cognitive salience perspective might activate behavioural codes that encourage him to *act* in objectifying ways, such as by touching women inappropriately.

Further, Terry's cognitive salience perspective on women need not be one that he is conscious of having. Where Terry is not conscious of his salience perspective, its activation of any objectifying beliefs and ideologies (and their component behavioural

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[34] Devine (1989, p.7).
[35] Psychological studies often use what is called the *Modern Racism Scale* to assess whether an individual counts as high- or low-prejudiced (Devine, 1989, p.7).
[36] See Bornstein (1990) and Wheeler & Petty (2001, p.820).
[37] Goh-Mah (2013).

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codes) would occur in an under-the-radar way. As such, his cognitive salience perspective would be likely to be *especially successful* in activating these beliefs and ideologies.

What is the problem here? Leaving aside their epistemic issues, objectifying beliefs and ideologies can themselves be harmful; they are ways of treating a person as an object, and of disrespecting their personhood, as we shall see in §11.4. Objectifying beliefs and ideologies have a range of harmful consequences, from decreased self-esteem of those who are objectified, to behaviour that includes sexual harassment and rape.[38] So, Terry's mere salience perspective on women could harm women in just these ways. (One might also consider how his salience perspective on women harms Terry himself. For instance, finding women's bodies more salient than their personalities might limit the meaningful relationships he is able to cultivate in his life.)

In this section, I have argued that certain salience perspectives can be *instrumentally* harmful.[39] They can be damaging because of their *effects*, including the beliefs, ideologies and actions that they are liable to activate.

11.4. Salience perspectives and constitutive harms

Is there a more direct way in which salience perspectives can be harmful? Can a certain salience perspective be harmful *independently of its effects*? I think that it can.

11.4.1. People who have experienced rape[40]

Many women have experienced sexual violence. 85,000 women are raped in England and Wales alone every year.[41] Many cases are not brought to trial.[42] There are multiple reasons that these women might want to avoid testifying in the courts. The exceedingly low

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[38] See Choma et al. (2010) for connections between objectification and low self-esteem, and Vasquez et al. (2017) for connections between objectification and sexual violence.

[39] This echoes one of the ways in which Watzl (2022: §5.7) suggests judging our attentional patterns—attentional patterns that I am calling *cognitive salience perspectives*.

[40] I use the term 'person who has experienced rape' as a form of 'person-first language', which aims to emphasise the personhood of these individuals, by emphasising that they are first and foremost *people* (as opposed to victims/survivors of rape). The importance of emphasising the personhood of those who have experienced rape is discussed in §11.4.1.

[41] Office for National Statistics (2013, p.6).

[42] For instance, the crime survey for England and Wales found that around 5 in every 6 individuals who experienced rape did not report their experiences to the police (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Only 5.7% of reported rape cases result in a conviction for the perpetrator (Kelly et al., 2005).

conviction rate is one. The emotional distress of having to recount a horrific attack to a room full of people is another.[43] A different reason, however, might be that these women do not want the fact that they were raped to become the most salient thing about them. They do not want it to be what others find most noticeable, memorable, and cognitively accessible.

A common concern raised by those who have been raped is that this experience ends up masking other aspects of one's identity. Monika Korra, who was kidnapped and raped when she was out on a run, has said that she wants to be known as a runner, not a rape victim. Calling running her passion, Korra describes it as 'the thing that gave me identity in life', and that her rape threatened the primacy of that identity.[44] Similarly, Simone Biles, seven-time Olympic gymnastics champion, cited similar concerns when she announced that she had been sexually abused by her USA Olympic national team doctor. In a statement published on social media, Biles stressed that 'this horrific experience does not define me. I am much more than this. I am unique, smart, talented, motivated, and passionate. I have promised myself that my story will be much greater than this…[emphasis in original]'.[45]

Many complex issues around identity, and the 'victim' status in particular,[46] no doubt play a role in Korra and Biles' thoughts here. One way of thinking about their statements, though, is by invoking cognitive salience perspectives. Let's think back to what cognitive salience perspectives involve. What would having Korra's experience of rape, for example, be most prominent amongst her various characteristics mean? Amongst other things, this would involve people *noticing* properties connected to the fact that she was raped more than others; for instance, they might notice others discussing her experience of rape more than they would notice others discussing her skills, her interests, and so on. Further, the fact that Korra was raped would be the most remembered feature of her life by others. It would involve the fact that she was raped being at the top of people's minds when considering Korra's other traits.

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[43] See these and other issues eloquently discussed in an open letter by the person who was raped in the Stanford University rape case (Anonymous, reprinted in Osborne, 2016).
[44] Korra, in Lopez (2016).
[45] Biles, S., Twitter statement, reprinted in Lutz (2018).
[46] See Jean-Charles (2014) and Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996) for discussions of the issues surrounding both words, 'victim' and 'survivor', in the context of rape.

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This is a problem when it is in one's interests to have *different* features of one's person most salient in the minds of others (and one's own mind).[47] Korra and Biles would do better having 'runner' and 'Olympic gymnast' respectively more salient than 'person who has experienced rape' in people's minds. They would do better having their athletic successes noticed and remembered more easily than reports of their rape, and for their determination and commitment to their sport to be at the top of people's minds when they come to think about them, contemplate their behaviour, and act towards them.

Why? Consider sexual objectification again. A common feminist explanation as to why phenomena like objectification harm women, have referenced the idea that we deserve to be recognised as agents with personhood—with, amongst other things, rationality, a capacity to set and pursue our own ends, integrity and personality.[48] Objectification is harmful because it involves *disrespecting* an individual's personhood. Rachel Fraser has noted the importance of this idea in feminist writing about rape: 'feminists have long argued for the importance of recognising the complex personhood and agency of those who have experienced rape'.[49] This is especially important when people who experience rape are understood and portrayed as passive and lifeless. In Susan Brison's powerful philosophical paper detailing her experience of rape, she talks about how crime novels and detective films portray the rapist as agential, whilst the victim is treated as 'a merely passive pretext for our entertainment'.[50] Fraser herself cites rape metaphors as evidence for this way of seeing those who experience rape. Metaphors such as 'Germany is raping Brazil in the football right now' are prevalent and successful in part *because* of the ease of seeing those who experience rape as powerless and passive—as *lacking* personhood.[51]

We can harm a person by disrespecting their personhood. How does this apply to salience perspectives? Attending to a person so that their personhood-related traits are their most salient attributes looks to be one way of *respecting* their personhood. Having 'athlete' at the top of our minds when considering Korra and Biles helps us to notice and remember an identity that they have autonomously chosen, displays their individuality, reflects their ability to set their own goals, reflecting their rationality and agency.

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[47] As with stereotype threat, damage can be done through internalising salience perspectives. A person who has experienced rape can harm herself through making her experience of rape her most salient feature in her own mind.
[48] The first two features of this list are borrowed from Kant (*Lectures on Ethics*), who many theorists writing about objectification cite (see Papadaki, 2018: §1). The latter features come from Dworkin (2000, pp.30-1) and Bartky (1990, p.130), who expand upon Kant.
[49] Fraser (2018).
[50] Brison (1993: 11).
[51] Fraser (2018).

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Conversely, attending to a person so that their *non* personhood-related traits are their most salient features is a way of disrespecting their personhood, and of *harming* them. Having 'person who has experienced rape' most prominent in our minds directs our attention to their passive status as someone who has been attacked: a status they did not choose, and so does not reflect their individuality, their agency, and so on.[52]

Disrespecting an individual's personhood is harmful not just instrumentally, but in itself, independently of its further effects. If a certain cognitive salience perspective is a way of disrespecting someone's personhood, it *constitutes* a harm.

11.4.2. Women and their bodies

The example of Terry illustrates this constitutive harm, as well as the instrumental harms discussed earlier. Attending to men so that their conversational contributions are their most salient feature is a way of *respecting* their personhood. Attending to women so that their body parts are their most salient feature is a way of *disrespecting* their personhood.[53]

The particular type of harm seems connected to *objectification*, treating a person as a thing. There are many ways of 'treating' a person as a thing, in actions, or in attitudes. I

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[52] Some individuals who have experienced rape may find their status *as* a person who has experienced rape to be powerfully connected to their personhood. Instead of being something that is passive, it might have allowed them to, for instance, create support networks for others in similar positions, and to spread awareness of their experience. There are at least two ways of explaining this scenario. One is to suggest that these individuals are benefitting from others attending primarily to their status as an *informed political activist*, as opposed to *person who has experienced rape*. They look to be drawing attention to their experience of rape only in order to highlight the political and/or social goals that they wish to achieve, such as to improve the welfare of those who experience rape. It is their informed activism oriented towards these goals that demonstrate their agency, rationality, and so on. Considered by itself, the identity *person who has experienced rape* does not demonstrate these personhood-related traits. In fact, it is an identity that these activists are working hard to erase from the world, precisely *because* of the harm it does to those to whom it has been bestowed. An alternative explanation of this scenario suggests that whether a given trait is a '(non) personhood-related trait' depends on how it is functioning in a given case or context. In the case at hand, *person who has experienced rape* might be functioning as a personhood-related trait.

[53] This idea might helpfully be applied to other examples, too. For instance, a common complaint from artists from minority backgrounds is that they are seen primarily in terms of their ethnicity, race, or nationality, instead of primarily as an artist. The fact that these artists are regularly referred to as e.g. 'Indian artists', while white artists are typically referred to simply as 'artists', gives credence to this complaint (Pollock & Parker, 1981: xix). Using the prefix 'Indian' serves to make these artists' nationality their most salient feature. Understanding that we can be harmed when a non personhood-related feature of ours is made our most salient attribute can help to identify the harm occurring in these cases. Indeed, the professional identity of these individuals (i.e. artist) seems a better candidate for a personhood-related trait than the nationalities, ethnicities or genders of these individuals. (For those who wish to argue that our nationalities, ethnicities and genders can count as personhood-related traits, we may be able to give a response that parallels that in fn. 51.)

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suggest that objectifying treatment includes mere attention. Making an individual's *thing-like* properties more salient than their personhood-related properties is a form of objectification. Attending to a person in this way might count as a way of treating a person as a thing. Martha Nussbaum's influential account of objectification details seven ways of treating a person as a thing, including, for instance, denying a person's autonomy, and treating them as fungible.[54] Other ways have been added since.[55] The speculative suggestion being made here is that *attending* to a person so that their thing-like properties are their most salient feature is another way of treating them as a thing.

This proposal resonates with existing ideas in the literature on objectification. Bartky, for instance, claims that women are 'too closely identified with [their body]'. [56] Paraphrasing her words, Evangelina Papadaki phrases Bartky's view in a way quite consonant with the idea that attentional patterns can objectify: '[a]ll the focus is placed on a woman's body, in a way that her mind or personality are not adequately acknowledged'.[57] The particularly *minimalist* dimension of mere *salience* perspectives is never made entirely explicit, however. Further, Bartky goes on to expand on her view in ways that indicate that something beyond mere salience is at issue. For instance, she uses words like 'infatuation' synonymously with her idea of a 'focus' on the body, as well as using phrases such as '[being objectified] is to have one's entire being identified with the body'.[58] The sort of objectification being discussed here—let's call it *perspectival* objectification—is not as strong as this. Aspects of one's person beyond one's body (such as personality and autonomy) are recognised by the objectifier; it is simply that the objectifier *better* attends to one's body. They give it *relative salience* over one's personality.

Leaving aside this question—namely, whether one can specifically *objectify* a person in virtue of making salient their thing-like properties—we can borrow an important qualification commonly made by those discussing objectification. Diagnosing whether harm results from the various ways in which one can treat a person as a thing often requires examining the particular case and context.[59] A doctor arguably reduces her patient to his body, but various considerations concerning the patient's goal of health, and the role of a

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[54] Nussbaum (1995, p.257).
[55] See Langton (2009, pp.228-229).
[56] Bartky (1990, p.130).
[57] Papadaki (2018, §3).
[58] Bartky (1990, p.35).
[59] Langton (2005) and Nussbaum (1995) advocate this view. For a contrasting view, see MacKinnon (1987).

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doctor, mean that harm does not occur.[60] The same goes for cognitive salience perspectives. We need knowledge of the particular case and context to decide whether *attending* to a person so that their non-personhood-related traits are their most salient feature does in fact harm them.

Do the agent's desires count as one of these contextual variables? What if a woman, let's call her Chun, desires for her appearance to be her most salient feature? She might find others attending primarily to her figure to be empowering, and desires for her body to be given relative salience over her personality.[61] In other words, Chun wishes for (what I am calling) a non-personhood-related trait of hers to be most salient in the minds of others. Although we are attending primarily to a non-personhood-related trait of Chun's, does the fact that we are respecting her wishes mean that we avoid harming her?

How one adjudicates these sorts of cases depends on to what extent one thinks that agents can be *wrong* about what contributes to their well-being.[62] Can we say that Chun is *wrong* to say that having others attend to her body is empowering? An important point to note in this context is that a great many feminists have argued that our choices, preferences and desires are socially constructed, in the sense that society shapes them.[63] Where society is sexist, women can internalise sexist ideologies and end up choosing and desiring things that are congruent with sexism. For instance, due to internalising sexist body ideals for women, many women desire to be so thin that a medical professional would consider them seriously underweight.[64] Although these women's weight is often a result of their choices and desires, we can see in this instance how society has perniciously influenced these women, such that they end up choosing and desiring something unhealthy and harmful.

We must be alive to the fact, then, that the woman who desires for her appearance to be her most salient attribute may not be aware of how society has perniciously shaped her desires in a way that harms her. Whilst an individual can arguably be harmed when she

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[60] There are exceptions. Patients can be harmfully objectified by their doctors where their emotions, and personal perspectives on their health, are ignored, for instance (see Berglund et al., 2012).

[61] This is indeed the message that many 'women's magazines', for instance, push. One example of this is *Glamour* magazine's article on beauty products that empower women (Kay, 2018).

[62] Perhaps, following prevalent positions in contemporary ethics (see Crisp, 2017: §4), one decides to be an objectivist about what counts as a personhood-related trait. Alternatively, one might opt for a softer 'informed desire' account, which takes personhood-related traits to be those that an individual would desire to be made most salient about them if they were fully informed. Or, one might opt for a middle ground, a version of which is indicated on p.204.

[63] See, for example, Hirschmann (1996) and Hirshman (2006).

[64] McCarthy (1990).

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is not attended to in the way in which she wishes,[65] we may well do that individual *greater* harm by heeding her wish, if that wish is for us to attend to her in a way that disrespects her personhood. This sort of conclusion is not an uncommon one. Many feminists recognise that a balancing act is necessary regarding respecting agent's desires, choices, and preferences on the one hand, whilst, on the other hand, being critical of what has *caused* those desires, choices, and preferences.[66] We might conclude, then, that we should indeed respect individuals' desires regarding how they are to be attended to, *but only to a certain extent*.[67] We also want to be able to point out where those individuals have internalised oppressive ideologies.

To summarise, then, simply attending to a person so that their non-personhood-related traits are their most salient feature can *constitute* (as opposed to cause) harm. Merely making a trait of an individual's *salient* in one's attention can by itself harm that individual, by disrespecting their personhood.

11.5. Salience perspectives and hate speech

What is the significance of this suggestion? Well, we do not usually think of salience or attention being relevant to harm. Acknowledging that it is would have implications for existing debates in ethics. Consider the topic of hate speech, for instance. This sort of speech tends to receive criticism on two grounds. Firstly, it is criticised for its liability to inculcate false and harmful beliefs in its audience. Jeremy Waldron, for instance, suggests understanding hate speech as group libel. As such, its harm consists in defaming members of a group through making *false* statements about them. Waldron considers a leaflet published in 1950s Chicago which urges people to protect the white race from being 'mongrelised' and terrorised by the 'rapes, robberies, guns, knives, and marijuana of the negro'.[68] The harm of this hate speech, he suggests, is primarily in its *falsity*, and the damage that false assertion does to the reputation of black people.

Alternatively, hate speech is often criticised on the basis of the violence that it causes and licences (i.e. legitimises). Lynne Tirrell, for instance, focuses on how hate

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[65] See, for instance, Korsgaard (1996) for the general argument that we can be harmed when others do not see us in the way in which we wish.

[66] See, for instance, Hirschmann (1996) and Snyder-Hall (2010).

[67] Defending precisely to *which* extent we should respect individuals' desires regarding how they are attended would take me beyond the scope of this chapter.

[68] Waldron (2012, p.48).

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speech can '[open] the door to previously prohibited [and violent] actions'.[69] Looking at the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Tirrell considers hate speech targeted at the Tutsi people. She notes that Tutsi people are regularly called *'inyenzi'* (Kinyarwanda for 'cockroach'). Tirrell suggests that partly because of the social meanings associated with the word 'cockroach' (e.g. that they are dirty and disgusting), uses of this word ended up licensing actions consistent with the Tutsi people *actually being* cockroaches, such as the mutilation of their bodies. Tirrell locates one harm of hate speech, then, in its ability to license violent, even genocidal, actions. Hate speech, can, in an important sense, *kill*.[70]

These are both important ways in which hate speech can be harmful. The suggestion in this paper, however, is that we should consider the possibility of another harm. We should consider whether hate speech might be harmful simply by inculcating a wrongful pattern of attention in its audience. The Chicago leaflet, for instance, arguably helps its audience to find any instances of crimes committed by black people particularly cognitively accessible—more so than, say, any good deeds they might do. The Rwandan hate speech arguably helps its audience better to notice and remember traits associated with cockroaches in Tutsi people—more so than traits associated with their personhood. For instance, cockroaches are taken to be ubiquitous, dirty and disease-ridden. Calling Tutsi people 'cockroaches' can serve simply to help one to notice crowds of Tutsi people, and to help one remember instances of unclean or unwell Tutsi people. In other words, hate speech might succeed simply in making certain traits of an individual, qua their group membership, particularly *salient*. This, as we have suggested, can *constitute* a way of harming them.

11.6. Conclusion

Salience perspectives can be harmful instrumentally, and harmful in themselves. They can produce harmful beliefs or ideologies. But in themselves, they can *constitute* a harm when they disrespect someone's personhood. Harm can extend beyond the material, behavioural, or doxastic level, then, to include mere salience patterns in our attention.

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[69] Tirrell (2012, p.175).

[70] For this phraseology, see Tirrell's participation in the podcast *Can Speech Kill?* (Philosophy Talk, 2017).

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There is a great deal more to find out about salience perspectives. One question that this chapter has not addressed is whether harming someone in the manner discussed is a way of *wronging* them. Can making the wrong thing salient about a person involve a violation of their rights?[71] We might also ask if, and how, we can successfully change our cognitive salience perspectives. Perhaps the fact that our culture regularly depicts women as sex objects means that Terry, for instance, will struggle to adopt new attentional dispositions on women. Material changes in society may be necessary, therefore, for individuals successfully to cultivate new attentional dispositions.[72] I hope that these issues can be addressed in future discussions.

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[71] In fn. 1, I mentioned a notion of harm introduced by Feinberg—that of a *setback of interests*. This can be contrasted with another version of harm that Feinberg identifies, namely, harm in the sense of *wronging* someone (Feinberg, 1987, pp.34-35). This sort of harm consists in the violation of rights.

[72] See similar advice from Sally Haslanger (2015) on how to change our implicit biases.

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