

## (Why) Do We Need a Theory of Affective Injustice?

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Philosophers have started to theorize the concept of 'affective injustice' to make sense of certain ways in which people's affective lives are significantly marked by injustice. This new research has offered important insights into people's lived experiences under oppression. But it is not immediately clear how the concept 'affective injustice' picks out something different from the closely related phenomenon of 'psychological oppression.' This paper considers the question of why we might need new theories of affective injustice in light of the well-established cross-disciplinary literature on psychological oppression. I suggest that, whereas psychological oppression is found in the hearts and minds of people who are oppressed, affective injustice is most fruitfully understood as a *structural* phenomenon. It operates primarily outside of us: in affective norms, practices, and relationships that are embedded in social conditions of injustice. The account I offer is tentative and incomplete. But my hope is that it will help show how theorizing affective injustice has the potential to enrich existing theories of justice and theories of psychological oppression.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are now several proposals for a definition of 'affective injustice' in the philosophical literature. The discussion is inspired in part by the growing literature on epistemic injustice in philosophy. That literature has helped to make visible the ways in which people who are oppressed are often denied credibility in belief-formation and expression; how they are dismissed, silenced, and gaslit; and how an absence of interpretive resources for understanding oppressed people's lived experiences serves as a barrier to their own self-understanding and sense-making. Similar questions arise if we turn our attention to agents' affective lives. For example, how might oppressed people be similarly denied credibility in emotion-formation and expression, dismissed and silenced for their emotional expressions, and denied interpretive resources for understanding their affective experiences?

The recent and increasing attention to theorizing affective injustice has the potential to offer new and important insights about how considerations of justice may apply to our affective lives, and thus to enrich existing literature in feminist moral psychology and related fields. Philosophers have illustrated how stereotypes about the oppressed (e.g., as irrational and overly emotional) function to legitimize the common practice of dismissing

their emotional expressions (Burrow 2005; Campbell 1994; Frye 1983; Lorde 1981; Narayan 1988; Poupart 2003; Stockdale 2017). People who are frequently dismissed for how they feel may come to doubt themselves and their experiences, and they might internalize the social message that they are the problem. Feminist scholars and activists have examined how consciousness-raising can help members of oppressed groups to articulate, and make sense of, shared experiences of injustice in part to resist and overcome their internalized oppression. And they have shown how what Alison Jaggar (1989) terms 'outlaw emotions' like anger, contempt, and bitterness function to challenge dominant social norms and expectations (Bell 2009, 2013; Frye 1983; Lorde 1981; MacLachlan 2010; Stockdale 2017; Tessman 2005).

Given this rich philosophical literature on the significance of oppressed people's affective experiences to understanding the nature and harms of injustice (cf. Gallegos 2022, 186), I confess that I've been unsure whether we need new theories of affective injustice. Part of my concern is that the emerging literature on affective injustice is inspired by, and contributes to, the cross-disciplinary literature on 'psychological oppression'—a term that is similar to 'affective injustice'. So it's not immediately clear what a theory of affective injustice seeks to capture that is distinct from a theory of psychological oppression. In other words, why or *do* we need a theory of affective injustice?

This paper seeks to identify what a theory of 'affective injustice' might add to the literature on psychological oppression. Psychological oppression, as I understand it, captures how harmful mental states arising from people's experiences living under oppressive conditions sustain and reinforce their oppression. I suggest that, whereas psychological oppression is found in the hearts and minds of people who are oppressed, affective injustice is most fruitfully understood as a *structural* phenomenon. It consists in affective norms, practices, and relationships that inhibit what Iris Marion Young (1990) calls "the values of social justice" (37). The account I offer is meant to be a preliminary sketch, not nearly a comprehensive theory. But my hope is that it is a useful starting point for developing a plausible theory of structural affective injustice—one that may have the potential to enrich existing theories of justice and theories of psychological oppression. One surprising and perhaps uncomfortable implication is that even the very privileged among us live with affective injustice. But confronting it will, I think, help us to more fully understand many people's emotional struggles in modern societies, and why people who are privileged are so likely to think, feel, and act in ways that contribute to others' oppression.

## 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL OPPRESSION

The literature on psychological oppression aims to capture how people can be oppressed in a distinctly psychological way—that is, through mental states and processes like beliefs, desires, emotions, values, and feelings. Some are conscious, such as when an oppressed person is well aware of their deep shame about who they are. But others are unconscious.

Implicit biases, for example, may cause women to make inaccurate and negative judgments about their own and other women's competence while consciously believing that those judgments are accurate and justified. Psychological oppression thus refers to how people can be oppressed *in their minds* and how certain mental states and processes reinforce their oppression (cf. Cudd 2006).

The term 'psychological oppression' is often used interchangeably with 'internalized oppression' (e.g., Leland 1988; Liebow 2016; Tessman 2005, 65). In her well-known account of psychological oppression, Sandra Bartky (1990) suggests that to be psychologically oppressed is to be "weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors ... Differently put, psychological oppression can be regarded as the 'internalization of intimations of inferiority'" (22). Bartky's theory is inspired by Franz Fanon's (2008 [1952]) discussion of how colonized peoples come to have an 'inferiority complex' through which they see themselves as inferior to the colonizer (cf. Césaire 2000 [1950]; Freire 2000 [1968]; Ramos 1963 [1934]). This can occur from living under other forms of oppression (e.g., economic and political); but there are also distinctly psychological modes of oppression. For example, through stereotyping, people of color and white women are seen as incompetent and overly emotional. They might come to believe that they really *are* those stereotypes—or, at least, they might find themselves struggling against them to live as their authentic selves. Through cultural domination, the oppressed come to believe that their absence from the dominant culture's literature, art, and political institutions is natural and unalterable, not a result of systemic exclusion. And through various kinds of sexual objectification and dehumanization, they experience alienation or fragmentation of the self. Some oppressed people's worth is even defined in terms of their body as a sexual object, or a *part* of who they are; and, importantly, not one that is essential to personhood.

The oppressed thus learn that they are inherently incapable of doing the sorts of things that human beings can do or to be what 'persons' in the fullest sense of the term can be (Bartky 1990, 29). Their lives are dominated by feelings of inferiority, diminished self-worth, and shame (cf. Beauvoir 1989 [1952]).<sup>1</sup> Bartky (1990) argues that women's shame is not just a response to particular failures or shortcomings, but a way of *being in the world* (in Heidegger's sense of the term). Women navigate the world *through* shame as an 'affective attunement' to their social environment (85). Similarly, bell hooks (2003) argues that 'systematic shaming' is one way in which racism "colonizes the minds and imaginations of black people" (94). Black children grow up surrounded by messages about their inherent inferiority and criminality, and they internalize these messages about themselves. Their feelings of inferiority are affirmed by the media, popular culture, and in how they are treated by other people as they navigate the world. Thus shaming, hooks

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<sup>1</sup> See also Amy Chandler (2020) for a defense of shame as a form of affective injustice. She defines affective injustice as an unequal distribution of shame, self-harm, and suicide across social groups.

argues, is “a weapon of psychological terrorism that can damage fragile self-esteem in ways that are irreparable” (99).

hooks’s writings on racism are inspired by thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois, who also explored the relationship between racism and shame, and in particular, the shame of middle-class African Americans. Du Bois (1933) argues that middle-class African Americans are ashamed of themselves as well as lower-class Black people whom they interpret as reinforcing the perception of African Americans as impoverished, dirty, bad mannered, and ignorant (350). But Du Bois’s most famous contribution to our understanding of psychological oppression is his notion of ‘double-consciousness’ through which Black Americans look at themselves “through the eyes of others”—through the lens of being an ‘American’, but also a ‘Negro’ (Du Bois 1994 [1903], 8). Du Bois calls this experience a ‘peculiar *sensation*’ of two-ness consisting of conflicting ‘thoughts’, ‘strivings’, and ‘ideals’. Black Americans who experience double-consciousness wish to merge these two identities, making it possible to be both Black *and* American, free of racial oppression. This possibility requires eliminating social conditions that deny Black Americans equal opportunities to white Americans, while preserving and valuing Black cultural traditions and resisting assimilation into the broader Eurocentric culture (Jeffers 2013, 419). Iris Marion Young (1990) argues that the experience of double-consciousness is a result of cultural imperialism (or what Bartky calls cultural domination).

Much of the discussion of psychological oppression has focused on *internalized* oppression, or the internalization of oppressive attitudes about oneself and one’s social group(s).<sup>2</sup> But not all cases of ‘psychological oppression’ can be accurately classified as internalized oppression. For example, Simone de Beauvoir (1989 [1952]) identifies in the adolescent girl “desperation in her rage” (397). This affective experience can lead to outbursts of anger, which—though often self-destructive—function as a kind of symbolic protest of her oppression. As Beauvoir writes: she “rebels against her future enslavement; and her vain outbursts, far from losing her bonds, often serve only to tighten them” (397). Later on in life, women experience pervasive anxiety as a response to their “distrust of the world”—a world that is threatening and unjust, and in which women are fated to suffer (673). Their lives are dominated by feelings of anxiety, despair, and ‘impotent rage’ (674). Although these states are not internalized oppressive attitudes, or attitudes that reflect the attitudes of the oppressor, they are psychologically harmful in ways that reinforce women’s oppression.

bell hooks (2014a) similarly describes how ‘life-threatening stress’ and experiences of mental illness are “directly related to the ways in which systems of domination” disrupt

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<sup>2</sup> Closely related is Hilde Lindemann’s (2014) notion of ‘infiltrated consciousness’—or oppressed people’s internalization of ‘master narratives’ about the social groups to which they belong (82). Other concepts used in the literature on psychological oppression include ‘false consciousness’ (i.e., oppressed people’s false beliefs about the causes of their subordination) and ‘adaptive preferences’ which consist of attitudes that “contribute to, endorse, or express the aims of an unjust social order” (Khader 2022). I do not have space to do justice to the rich literature on psychological oppression here.

Black people's ability to exercise self-determination (40).<sup>3</sup> Meenakshi Thapan (1995) documents Indian women's feelings of anguish, depression, despair, suicidal behavior, and fear under domestic violence.<sup>4</sup> And Sandra Bartky (2004) argues in later work that 'intimidation', or "the most general sense of threat of harm," amounts to 'psychological violence' when feeling intimidated prevents victims from reporting their experiences. Although feeling afraid and intimidated might in some sense protect women from harm (e.g., by keeping them silent), these states do at the same time 'oppress'. They reinforce constraints on women's freedom of movement and expression, as well as men's power over them.<sup>5</sup>

These examples suggest that rage, despair, depression, and other mental states and processes can be psychologically oppressive even though they are not internalized oppressive attitudes. Instead, they respond to the reality of what it's like to live under oppressive conditions, and thus track the truth in a way that internalized messages of inferiority do not. They are psychologically oppressive not because they involve an oppressed person taking on the beliefs, values, and other attitudes of the oppressor but because they harm people psychologically in ways that reinforce their oppression.

So I suggest that we classify 'internalized oppression' as a specific *form* of psychological oppression that involves the internalization of oppressive norms and attitudes, rather than equating the two. Psychological oppression is broader, referring to the ways that oppression takes up residence in people's minds through mental states and processes that reinforce their oppression.

So what else, if anything, is 'affective injustice'?

### 3. THEORIES OF AFFECTIVE INJUSTICE

The concept of 'affective injustice' in the philosophical literature comes from two separate articles published in 2018 by Amia Srinivasan and Shiloh Whitney. In "The Aptness of Anger," Srinivasan (2018) analyzes a 1965 debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr., during which Buckley argues that Black anger is counterproductive to racial justice—a critique that is meant to be a decisive strike against anger. But because anger about racial injustice is fitting or *apt*, Black Americans (and other oppressed groups) face a double bind: they are forced to choose between being prudent in resisting or suppressing anger and being aptly angry about the injustices they experience. Srinivasan

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<sup>3</sup> She points out that Black people's one claim to superiority is that they apparently do not suffer from mental illness at all, which is reinforced by stereotypes like the myth of the 'strong Black woman' (51).

<sup>4</sup> The women interviewed referred to this form of oppression as 'mental torture' and 'emotional violence' (Thapan 1995, 72).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Jones (2004) similarly explores how the oppressed come to have what she terms 'low basal security'—an "underlying affectively laden state" characterized by an unwillingness to trust other people, and a tendency to engage in self-protective behaviors (e.g., to scan one's environment for risk and danger).

argues that this conflict is “a form of unrecognized injustice” that she terms ‘affective injustice’. Affective injustice is “the injustice of having to negotiate between one’s apt emotional responses to the injustice of one’s situation and one’s desire to better one’s situation” (135). It is ‘parasitic’ on first-order injustice—a kind of ‘psychic tax’ of oppression.

Srinivasan’s discussion illuminates a significant affective phenomenon. But I’m not convinced that the normative conflict she identifies is *unjust* in virtue of the fact that “it forces people, through no fault of their own, into profoundly difficult normative conflicts—an invidious choice between improving one’s lot and justified rage” (Srinivasan 2018, 136).<sup>6</sup> Notice that, in a nonideal world that is necessarily messy and difficult (even when the mess and difficulty are not a result of injustice), we find ourselves faced with the choice between apt and prudent emotions all the time. *Despair* is arguably an apt response to at least some desired outcomes that are nearly impossible (e.g., despair about being offered a highly competitive job), yet hope is often more prudent. *Envy* might be apt in response to a friend’s natural talent in sports, but imprudent if all envy does is damage the friendship. Similarly, *amusement* might be an apt emotional response to an offensive joke, even if it would be imprudent to laugh (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). Of course, not all of these normative conflicts are especially psychically painful. But they help to show that having to choose between apt and prudent emotions is ubiquitous in human life—something that we should expect and (in my view) embrace and work through. So if there is something unjust about the affective phenomenon in question, what is unjust is not the normative conflict itself.

Although Srinivasan’s focus is on anger, she does suggest that people might suffer affective injustice as a result of normative conflicts between other apt and prudent emotions as well, such as sadness, hopelessness, and despair (fn. 45).<sup>7</sup> But it seems even less clear to me how the injustice of, say, a person’s *despair* as a result of living under oppression (cf. Stockdale 2021) lies in the normative conflict between prudent hope and apt despair, or that there is something distinctly or additionally unjust about having to choose between these affective states. What seems importantly unjust is how despair is constitutive of and reinforces oppression. The feelings of helplessness involved in despair, its relationship to depression (as a cause or constitutive feature), and its role in suicidal thinking and behavior are examples of ways in which despair takes up residence in the minds of the oppressed and, in turn, reinforces the very conditions to which it is an (arguably apt) response. In other words, despair can be psychologically oppressive.<sup>8</sup> But,

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<sup>6</sup> David Plunkett (2021) expresses a similar concern about Srinivasan’s use of the word ‘injustice’ to describe the affective phenomenon she identifies (27).

<sup>7</sup> Qiannan Li (forthcoming) draws upon Srinivasan (2018) and my work on hope (2019) to defend the view that oppressed people’s choice between apt despair and prudent hope constitutes an affective injustice.

<sup>8</sup> It’s notable that Baldwin was also concerned about the harms of bearing hostile emotions like anger, bitterness, and despair to people who are oppressed. See, for example, *Notes of a Native Son* (2012)

if this is right, we may be returning to a discussion of psychological oppression rather than identifying an unrecognized form of injustice.<sup>9</sup>

In “Affective Intentionality and Affective Injustice: Merleau-Ponty and Fanon on the Body Schema as a Theory of Affect,” Shiloh Whitney (2018) offers a different way of thinking about ‘affective injustice’. She argues that affective injustice occurs when a recipient of or witness to an oppressed person’s expression of anger is not appropriately moved or *affected* by it. This response to anger does not just fail to acknowledge the emotion, but disables it, thereby cutting off the circulation of affect. The angry person becomes affectively marginalized or expelled “from participation in affect circulation that depletes affective agency, influence, or authority” (497). At the same time, they are pressured to give uptake to others’ (conflicting) emotional experiences—a dynamic that results in affective exploitation. Taken together, Whitney argues that these two forms of affective injustice constitute affective violence, or the violence of “quarantining affective force within the racialized body until it becomes toxic” (497). She draws upon Audre Lorde’s (1981) testimony of white women both refusing to give her anger uptake and demanding that Lorde acknowledge and attend to *their* feelings as an example of affective injustice. Thus, affective injustice is a form of injustice that “damages the weight afforded to [people’s] feelings” (495).

But as Francisco Gallegos (2022) points out, Whitney has not defended a *right* to emotional uptake; and so it remains unclear why failures to give uptake are unjust. He offers an alternative account that aims to capture what, exactly, is *unjust* about certain affective phenomena. Affective injustice, in Gallegos’s (2022) view, is “a state in which individuals or groups are deprived of ‘affective goods’ which are owed to them” (186). There may be certain fundamental, noninstrumentally valuable affective goods that people are owed—and the challenge for theories of affective injustice is to specify which ones those are. If, for example, *subjective well-being* is a fundamental affective good, then affective justice may involve securing affective freedoms (e.g., freedom from interference in the pursuit of well-being); affective resources and opportunities (e.g., nurturing relationships, access to therapy); and affective recognition (e.g., respect for one’s affective needs; 191).

Gallegos suggests that *emotional aptness*, or “the fit or harmonious correspondence between evaluative properties in the world and one’s emotional response to those properties” is a second fundamental affective good (192). Our normative practices of

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[1955]) in which he describes how these emotions destroyed his father’s life, health, and relationships and how Baldwin needed to overcome or conquer them in his own life for his well-being.

<sup>9</sup> It might be tempting to insist that emotions cannot be psychologically oppressive if they are genuinely apt—that ‘aptness’ necessarily excludes experiences of anger, sadness, despair, etc., that are psychologically harmful in ways that reinforce oppression. But as Srinivasan (2018) argues, insisting on something like Aristotelian perfection is too high a bar. She suggests that “just as one can know all sorts of things without being a perfect reasoner, one can be aptly angry without always perfectly targeting and proportioning one’s anger” (fn. 33).

aiming to have apt emotional responses, directing others to do so, and correcting ourselves and other people for responding with inapt emotions are, he suggests, noninstrumentally valuable. We see these normative practices at work in a wide range of relationships, from parent-child relationships to relations between teachers and students, friends, romantic partners, and participants in political debates. Failing to give uptake to a person's apt emotions may thus be unjust because it deprives them of emotional aptness.

Although I'm not convinced that emotional aptness is itself a fundamental affective good,<sup>10</sup> there are several attractive features of Gallegos's proposal. First, it is clear about how the affective phenomena in question are potentially matters of justice. Second, it shifts beyond the common focus on individuals' affective states and experiences as the site of injustice toward the social conditions enabling them, thus offering a conception of affective injustice that is clearly distinct from theories of psychological oppression. Third, Gallegos's approach complements important literature in the social sciences on affective justice (and injustice). For example, Kathleen Lynch (2022) takes inspiration from feminist care ethics to argue that affective justice would consist in an equal distribution of love, care, and solidarity. Affective *in*justice thus consists in unequal societal distributions of these affective goods. For example, many children grow up in abusive or neglectful homes in which they are deprived of the love and care they need and deserve. Caregivers (most often, women) are overly burdened, undervalued, and underpaid for their work (cf. Kittay 2019 [1999]). And in the context of global justice, refugees and asylum seekers displaced from their homes have "their care worlds torn apart" (Cantillon and Lynch 2017, 179). Even those who find themselves in new societies aiming to rebuild their lives are very often deprived of solidarity—an affective good required for flourishing.

One important question that arises in light of this shift toward theorizing affective injustice at the structural level is whether affective goods are the sort of thing that can be distributed according to principles of justice. If they are, it's possible that existing theories of (distributive) justice have the resources to capture them.<sup>11</sup> Yet Lynch (2022) observes that 'care' is both a distributable good *and* set of processes and practices (112); and

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<sup>10</sup> The challenge, I think, is that it's not clear how to determine what emotions a person should feel—both in terms of specifying general rationality constraints on emotions, and by assessing people's emotions in real contexts. 'Aptness', as I understand it, is one way to evaluate emotions among many. Emotions can also be evaluated as instrumentally rational, morally appropriate, and—given this variety of considerations—whether the emotion is the right thing to feel overall. There is thus a further, all-things-considered practical question about what a person should feel or strive to feel; and in my view, answering it is necessarily a contextual matter. It depends on who the person is, the unique circumstances of their life, and even their own perspective on what emotions are valuable for them (Stockdale 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Walzer (1983), for example, discusses the "distributions of affect" such as love within a family (227). Iris Marion Young (1990) notes that she finds this use of the distributive paradigm 'strange' though doesn't elaborate (18). More recently, philosophers have been investigating the significance of 'personal relationship goods' like love and nurturing relationships to justice (Brake 2017; Brownlee 2022; Cordelli 2015).



Gallegos (2022) points out that, although social conditions that enable or constrain affective goods can be distributed justly or unjustly, affective goods cannot themselves be “directly bestowed or guaranteed” (196). My own view is that affective phenomena *and* many important aspects of the social conditions that enable or constrain them are not best understood within a distributive framework. So I want to explore a different line of inquiry. What might it look like to defend a nondistributive theory of affective (in)justice?

#### 4. TOWARD A NONDISTRIBUTIVE THEORY OF AFFECTIVE (IN)JUSTICE

Iris Marion Young (1990) famously argues that not all aspects of society that are matters of justice can be captured by a distributive theory of justice. Norms, practices, rules, and language are not ‘things’ that we can quantify and distribute among citizens, but they “condition people’s ability to participate in determining their actions and their ability to develop and exercise their capacities” (Young 1990, 22). *Opportunities*, for example, are not things that are given out but enabling conditions for doing things we might want to do. When we say that a person has educational opportunities, we don’t just mean that they have material resources such as money, books, and computers. These distributable things are required for educational opportunities, but ‘education’ is itself a *process* rather than a thing. It takes place within a complicated context of social rules, relations, attitudes, and policies that serve to either enable or constrain whether and to what extent people receive a quality education. Similarly, *power* is not a measurable thing that can be analyzed independently of how it is exercised between people, groups, and institutions; and rights are best understood as *rules* that govern our interactions with one another. Theories of justice that fail to capture these nondistributable aspects of society run the risk of obscuring the social context that generates and reinforces the more or less just distributions of societal goods that we see.

I think there is good reason to be skeptical that affective phenomena are ‘goods’ that can be distributed according to principles of justice. We can’t reliably measure the amount of love, joy, hope, frustration, discomfort, and fear in people’s lives; nor can we secure or prevent people’s affective experiences through a correct application of any given principle.<sup>12</sup> We even reasonably disagree about exactly what these states and processes consist in, what their ‘ideals’ look like (e.g., an ideal parent-child relationship), and which affective states and processes are valuable (e.g., the role of empathy across social difference). Fortunately, too, affective phenomena are not finite ‘resources’. There is no sense in which one person’s having a significant amount of love, joy, or satisfaction in their life necessarily means that someone else is missing out. If there are affective phenomena that are significant to justice, then they seem more akin to the social

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<sup>12</sup> As Anca Gheaus (2009) points out, part of the issue is that our affective experiences are largely a matter of luck.

conditions that enable people to determine their actions and to develop and exercise their capacities (Young 1990, 22).<sup>13</sup>

Along these lines, I want to suggest that affective injustice consists in affective norms, practices, and relationships that are embedded in social conditions of injustice. *Affective norms* are socially accepted standards for emotional experience and expression.<sup>14</sup> They tell us that girls and women ought to be compassionate and caring, and that boys and men ought to be strong and emotionally restrictive. In political communication, there is an affective “norm of dispassionateness”—one that devalues forms of expression that are more embodied and emotional (Young 2000, 56). There are affective norms that govern who gets to express what emotions, in what places, and at what times; and many children learn at a young age to suppress their emotional expressions in public spaces, however developmentally appropriate those emotional experiences are. There are affective norms that tell us to be proud of our accomplishments, but not too proud—otherwise we are arrogant (especially women). And they tell us to be grateful for the good in our lives, to forgive those who wrong us, and to grieve the loss of loved ones (in certain ways, for a specifiable period of time).

Affective norms mediate social interactions in the family, friendships, educational institutions, leisure activities, professional settings, and in politics. They govern every aspect of our lives, though the specific norms that apply to us as individuals depend upon our social identities and how they are enforced through a wide range of *affective practices* (cf. Lynch 2022, 102). Any time we praise, encourage, criticize, dismiss, diagnose, foster, or stifle our own or other people’s affective experiences we are engaging in affective practices that uphold certain affective norms.<sup>15</sup> And we are engaging in affective practices virtually all the time—in the family, classroom, workplace, healthcare centers, public debates, social media, and political rallies. Managers, for example, engage in affective practices when they provide encouraging feedback, or when they threaten penalties to motivate employees through fear. Politicians, activists, and authors attempt to shape

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<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that there are *no* questions of distributive justice that are relevant to our affective lives. Money, water, food, and housing very much affect people’s well-being, as well as their ability to experience positive emotions such as joy, contentment, and hope. But I follow Young (1990) in thinking that many important aspects of the social conditions relevant to justice are best understood in nondistributable terms, including power, norms, opportunities, and—as I argue here—affective phenomena.

<sup>14</sup> I am using this term similarly to how sociologists use the term ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild 2012 [1983]; Holmes 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Archer and Georgina Mills (2019) build upon Srinivasan’s account to argue that the demand for oppressed people to regulate their emotions constitutes an affective injustice. In my view, any particular ‘demand’ (or suggestion, encouragement, etc.) that an oppressed person regulate their emotions is not itself an injustice, or at least it’s not most helpfully framed as an unjust act with a direct victim. Rather, the demand for an oppressed person to regulate their emotions is a matter of justice insofar as it is an instance of an affective practice that participates in social conditions of oppression.

citizens' emotions through rhetoric<sup>16</sup>; and truth commissions aim to foster forgiveness, trust, and hope for the future.

We also form *affective relationships* with ourselves, other people, social groups, institutions, and other nonhuman entities that are shaped by affective norms and practices.<sup>17</sup> When we urge a friend to *forgive themselves*, we are urging them to treat themselves in ways that are constitutive of self-forgiveness—like practicing kind and compassionate self-talk. When we describe family relationships as *loving and nurturing*, we mean that family members relate to one another in ways that display loving and nurturing behavior such as attentive listening, physical affection, compassionate understanding, and mutual support. In contrast, *toxic and hostile* family relationships are characterized by patterns of violence and abuse, withdrawal and avoidance, and other behaviors that display family members' feelings of hostility or fear toward one another. For example, caregivers who yield power over their children in the form of arbitrary punishment and abuse become a source of fear for their children who might in turn become withdrawn and avoidant from their positions of subordination.

At the level of social groups, race relations might be accurately characterized as *hostile and distrustful* under conditions of white supremacy, though power shapes the form that the reciprocal hostile and distrustful behavior takes. For example, when white people call the police on people of color whom they perceive to be a threat, they are acting from hostility and fear rooted in racist biases and stereotypes. And it is their racial *privilege* that makes white people feel justified, and safe, calling the police for 'help' (however unjustified their action really is). In contrast, people of color who avoid white people or who act from fear of white supremacist institutions are responding to the real threat of racist violence under conditions of racial oppression. Power thus operates in and through our affective relationships with one another, determining our roles in the affective relationship, how we experience it, and how it benefits or harms us (e.g., as the source or victim of a threat).

As these examples begin to illustrate, the specific affective relationships that we form and cultivate in our lives depend on our upbringing, socialization, and other social features of our identities. They are not things we have or lack, but ways of affectively inhabiting our roles in relation to others and to ourselves. We might not even notice the ways in which affective relationships mediate our social interactions, such as when affective race relations of distrust and fear cause white people to unconsciously avoid people of color (Young 1990, 133). But our intentional actions do matter, and we can change our affective relationships for better (or for worse). Individuals often attend therapy to cultivate a loving and compassionate relationship with themselves,

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<sup>16</sup> See Melvin L. Rogers (2012) for an analysis of W. E. B. Du Bois's use of rhetoric to bring about sympathy and shame in his white audience.

<sup>17</sup> Although some scholars define 'affective relationships' as necessarily good (e.g., care-oriented and nurturing; Lynch 2022), I am using the term broadly to include hostile affective relationships as well.

corporations attempt to foster trusting relations with consumers, and politicians work hard to shape societal affective relationships. They might aim to bring social groups together by fostering positive affective relationships; or they might encourage divisive ones to serve their own ends (Young 2000, 6).

Of course, not all affective norms, practices, and relationships are matters of justice. For example, though the affective practice of encouraging, say, a poor person to be grateful for their care (Card 1988, 124) might be a matter of justice, it's not clear that an individual's personal gratitude rituals are. Similarly, although romantic partners' breaking off of a love relationship is a tragic, often painful consequence of the relationship coming to an end, this is not typically a matter of justice. I want to suggest that affective phenomena *are* matters of justice when they participate in social and institutional conditions that promote or inhibit what Young (1990) calls "values of social justice" (37). These values go beyond the fair distribution of material goods and include things like learning satisfying skills and having opportunities to exercise a variety of them in socially recognized settings, playing and communicating with other people, and expressing one's "experiences, feelings, and perspectives on social life in contexts where others can listen" (37). Young (1990) calls these values of social justice the values of self-development. But there are also values of self-determination, which involve the ability to participate in determining one's actions and the social and institutional conditions of one's actions. In Young's view, oppression denies certain groups of people the values of self-development, whereas virtually everyone in modern capitalist societies is denied the values of self-determination through various relations of domination. Importantly, though, the *realization* of these values in individual people's lives is not itself justice, but the good life. The two are not equivalent. Rather, "social justice concerns the degree to which a society contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for the realization of these values" (Young 1990, 37).

I'm not sure that the values of social justice can be separated into two classes of values that ground the distinction between 'oppression' and 'domination', as Young argues. But I want to endorse the general point that social conditions are unjust to the extent that they inhibit people's ability to develop and exercise essential human capacities and skills, and to participate in determining the course of their lives. I take the values of social justice to include opportunities to develop affective skills and capacities (e.g., affective communication skills and the capacity to form affective relationships), as well as participation in the construction of affective norms and practices that mediate interactions in social, professional, and political contexts. This does not mean that I am abandoning 'oppression' as a distinct form of social injustice that people experience *as* members of certain social groups. We are not all oppressed. But I do think that most of us live in at least some social conditions that are accurately characterized as (affectively) unjust, in the sense described above. While some philosophers might worry that this includes too many of us among those harmed by social injustice (e.g., Mikkola 2016, 199), I just think the

depressing alternative is right: that social injustice is ubiquitous in the societies in which most readers are likely to live.

So how might this approach to theorizing affective injustice work in practice?

Consider the case of a single mom, Olivia, who is a public relations specialist. She always dreamed of starting her own business but lacked the confidence to do so. Now that she's a mother without a co-parent, she's given up on that dream entirely. Olivia was brought up to put others' needs before her own (especially her children's), and to cultivate a caring and selfless disposition more generally. And she *is* that person, to her parents' delight. She *wants* to put her son's 'best interests' first and believes that she has made the right decisions about her life and career given her circumstances. But she can't help feeling resentful about not being able to pursue her dreams, and for being underpaid and undervalued at her current job. She puts in significant overtime most weeks at the expense of her well-being and family, which is par for the course at the company.

The result is a lot of guilt and shame for Olivia about not 'doing enough' with her son. When she does find the time, she feels burnt out and struggles to 'be present' and playful with him. She worries that her son has picked up on her depression, for which she takes Zoloft and benzodiazepines as prescribed to her by various telehealth physicians. The drugs do help keep her symptoms at bay, but they feel like a 'band aid solution'—one that also numbs her ability to feel joy. But Olivia doesn't have the time and money for other things that might help, like friendships, leisure activities, and a therapist. She feels angry, a lot of the time, about these constraints; and her boss, Will, has started to notice. "You seem on edge a lot. What's going on?" he asks in their weekly meeting. She confesses that she's been frustrated about all of the overtime hours and wishes the company could do more to accommodate parents. But her boss's response is disappointing. Will tells Olivia that everyone works just as hard as she does, and that as someone without a family, he'd be grateful if he were in her shoes. She has a good job in a tough economy and custody of her child! Olivia is taken aback in shame, but a small part of her questions Will's perspective. He looks exhausted, and she thought she might have smelled alcohol on him from where she sat on the other side of his desk.

I take it that this is a pretty common story and not all that extreme. In a way, it seems to reflect many ordinary people's struggles in everyday life: a hard time being kind to oneself, feeling burnt out about the responsibilities of adulthood, poor mental health, economic hardship, breakups, toxic workplace climates, and so on. But parts of Olivia's all-too-common situation does, I think, reflect the presence of something like affective injustice. In other words, there are affective norms, practices, and relationships at work contributing to the social conditions of her oppression. Affective norms about what good girls and women are like (e.g., selfless, caring, and grateful) as enforced through a variety of affective practices (e.g., how Olivia was parented and socialized) constrained her self-development early on, and her ability to learn and exercise a variety of meaningful interpersonal and professional skills. She relates to herself with contempt and shame, which exacerbate her depression—and for which the only accessible treatment is

psychotropic drugs. She does not have access to adequate mental health care, which would involve the ability to form a trusting relationship with a physician, psychiatrist, or counselor. These experiences and barriers are also part of why Olivia is struggling to cultivate the kind of affective relationship with her son that they both deserve. She wants to be loving, playful, and empathetic but frequently finds herself falling short.<sup>18</sup> And her boss has just given her yet another piece of evidence that she's inadequate.

This is a story of a woman who is dismissed in her (careful, measured) expression of anger. But I'm trying to give the *full* story, or at least sufficient background for us to understand what might be 'unjust' about it. Notice that, if we explain why the encounter between colleagues is a matter of justice primarily in terms of the forced normative conflict between apt and prudent anger Olivia is now forced to endure (Srinivasan 2018), how Will's reaction is an example of the demand for emotion regulation (Archer and Mills 2019), the toxic affective consequences for Olivia (Whitney 2018), or Olivia's being deprived of fundamental affective goods (Gallegos 2022), we remain focused on the consequences of Will's action for Olivia. But these features of the encounter seem intricately connected to a much broader problem: that many *affective norms, practices, and relationships mediating social interactions in Will's and Olivia's social worlds inhibit the values of social justice for them both.*

This interpretation requires adopting what Young (2011) calls a 'macro' point of view on social relations.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, Will's dismissal of Olivia's anger is a *matter* of justice because it is an instance of an affective practice that participates in women's oppression. The common practice of dismissing women's anger is based in, and reinforces, stereotypes about women as irrational overreactors; affective norms about how women are supposed to feel (e.g., selfless, grateful, and happy), and how (if at all) they should express those feelings, and in what contexts. Dismissing women's expressed

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<sup>18</sup> Readers who identify as moms likely understand first-hand the affective phenomenon of 'mom guilt', or the guilt moms experience about failing to live up to demanding norms (affective and otherwise) of motherhood in a society that fails to foster social conditions that would enable 'good parenting' (whatever that looks like). Many parents do not have the skills or resources to provide the nurturing affective relationships their children need (Macleod 2018), and even the most privileged moms can't live up to impossible standards. As Lynch (2022) points out, the social 'surveillance' of mothers is felt especially by lower-class women who may feel disproportionately guilty and inadequate as mothers (63).

<sup>19</sup> Young (2011) describes a similar case where Sandy, a woman suffering from housing insecurity, is treated "dismissively" by landlords who are gruff and impolite, and who even lie to her when they find out she is a single mother (71). Although Young agrees that the landlords are acting wrongly, she reserves the language of 'injustice' for the "more systematic wrongs" that are behind these specific interactions: the shared and socially enforced prejudice of men as the heads of houses, the disproportionate representation of nonprofessional women in low-paying jobs, etc. So it is possible that Will's action, and the landlord's actions, are morally wrong but *not* unjust, even though they *are* a matter of structural injustice.

I want to remain neutral about the question of what might make an *action* affectively unjust and whether Will's dismissal of Olivia's anger counts as one. My purpose is to show how adopting a structural level analysis yields important insights left out of any particular analysis of the individual interaction.

concerns in the workplace also participates in a corporate culture of toxic affective relationships between employees that is disproportionately and uniquely harmful to women and other marginalized groups. Being dismissed, in this instance, might also contribute to an accumulation of similar experiences in Olivia's life that exacerbate her feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame and thus reinforce her psychological oppression. These dynamic and cumulative interworkings of affective norms, practices, and relationships mediating social interactions between Will and Olivia are unjust *at the structural level*. They are embedded in social conditions of injustice.

But I also want to say some things about Will. We can imagine that Will is cis, white, nondisabled, etc.—not a member of an oppressed social group. He's the classic privileged white guy we tend to think about when we theorize the differences in lived experiences between people who are privileged and oppressed. Will was socialized by caregivers, teachers, and coaches who taught him to grin and bear it, bottle up his emotions, and be a man. He had strict 'authoritarian parents' who enforced rules "because we said so," grounded him harshly for disobedience, and dismissed Will's negative emotions. "You can't let that get to you"; "there's no point in being upset about it"; "go to your room until you get a grip of yourself" were messages he heard often. At the same time, he was expected to get straight As, go to an Ivy League college, be a varsity football player, and make a lot of money. He got it all (except for the family he always wanted). But all of that pressure, and the feelings of stress and anxiety that go along with it, still lives inside of him. He has talked to one person (doctor) about these feelings for the purpose of acquiring prescription drugs, on which he relies with a glass of scotch here and there, to get by. When others voice their struggles, especially at work where the norm is to leave one's personal life and feelings at home, Will is deeply uncomfortable and reacts in ways that reflect his socialization—which included subtle and not-so-subtle messaging that women are sensitive overreactors who complain a lot about nothing.

Once we bring the details of Will's life into view, we get a fuller picture as to why he was likely so dismissive of Olivia. This doesn't mean that he did nothing wrong or should be absolved of responsibility for engaging in an affective practice that contributes to women's oppression. But our intentions, inclinations, and actions don't come out of nowhere. They are a product of our social conditioning and environment—and much of Will's is, I think, *unjust*. As bell hooks (2014b) observes, "in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cultures of domination children do not have rights" (73). They are frequently subjected to violence, 'autocratic rule', and shaming—including the shaming of boys who fail to conform to sexist norms of masculinity (73–75).<sup>20</sup> Although boys and men are not *oppressed* as men by these norms, it is uncontroversial that they are harmed by them, and that affective norms of masculinity contribute to the prevalence of 'anger issues' and emotional suppression among men (e.g., Frye 1983; Jaggard 1989; Tessman 2005). Will's

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<sup>20</sup> Lynch (2022) similarly argues that being deprived of the ability to develop nurturing affective relationships with others is a "serious human deprivation and an affective injustice" (22).

relationships with teachers and coaches reinforced the lessons he learned from his parents as well: poor performance meant sitting on the bench (in shame), displaying behavior coded as feminine meant bullying from peers (for being a sissy), and breaking rules in the classroom meant scorn and detention (for being bad). Will was thus shaped by affective norms, practices, and relationships that inhibited his ability to develop and exercise affective important communication skills, to form meaningful affective relationships with others, and so on.<sup>21</sup> And despite the fact that Will now occupies a position of power and authority himself, his corporate job is extremely stressful. His company culture is one of hyperproductivity, competitive performance, and individual resilience. Even if he had the affective skills and insight to act to promote a cultural shift, there is no plausible path forward for doing so short of overthrowing the entire management team and starting from scratch. These days, like many of his colleagues and friends, Will feels burnt out, angry, and alone.

It is tempting to resist focusing on Will's experiences in this way, mindful of the real risk that we might be himpathizing (cf. Manne 2018). Aren't we already programmed to expend a disproportionate amount of sympathetic energy toward people like Will? In important ways, this is true—particularly when privileged perpetrators receive a great deal of sympathy for having to suffer the unpleasant consequences of their morally atrocious actions. But in the spirit of a nondistributive approach to theorizing affective injustice, it might be worth noticing that *sympathy* might not be an 'affective good' that can be quantified or distributed. It is, rather, a way of relating to oneself or others—and this way of relating that can be appropriate or inappropriate depending on the context, the identities of the parties involved, and the sympathizer's motivation and goal. And if our goal is to identify structural affective injustice, I think that attending to Will's situation is essential.

Broadening the focus of inquiry to include Will's experiences is, I think, important both for developing a plausible theory of structural affective injustice and for understanding why it is that privileged people are so likely to engage in affective practices that reinforce others' oppression. For example, I suspect that if Will grew up in a loving home in which he cultivated nurturing affective relationships with his caregivers who taught him that it's okay for everyone, including boys, to have and express feelings; if his caregivers and teachers had encouraged him to resist affective gender norms that pressure girls to be self-sacrificing and caring, and boys to be tough and competitive; if the people in his life modeled different affective practices (e.g., listening and acknowledging, rather than shaming and dismissing); if Will's company fostered a culture of teamwork and supportive encouragement between employees, whom it treats as

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<sup>21</sup> He lacks what Chris Lebron (2020) refers to as 'attentiveness' and 'skillfulness'—that is, practical capacities that involve a kind of social awareness and sensitivity to others' circumstances, as well as adjusting one's utterances and affective responses in light of them. Lebron argues that these capacities are necessary to "secure a just and good society" (39). And though he is focused specifically on issues of racial injustice, I take the point to extend more broadly.



human beings rather than objects in the service of corporate ends (cf. Fromm 1970); if he loved himself, and if he had meaningful affective relationships with others and knew how to foster them<sup>22</sup>; etc., he might have not been so dismissive of Olivia. Or, at least, his social conditions may have enabled a better reaction—one that defied the dominant affective norms and practices of manager-employee relationships and relationships between people of different genders in capitalist, patriarchal societies.<sup>23</sup>

Some readers might worry that this approach to theorizing affective injustice de-centers the experiences of the oppressed in problematic ways, perhaps inviting the privileged to declare “me(n) too.” But I’m not arguing that we shift our focus of philosophical inquiry away from the lived experiences of people who are oppressed toward the privileged. Instead, I think we need to expand our focus of philosophical inquiry to capture the broader structural affective processes to which sexist ones are intricately connected. Structural affective injustice participates in group relations of privilege and oppression, but it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of them. It consists of affective norms, practices, and relationships that inhibit the values of social justice even for people who are very privileged. In other words, there might be forms of social injustice that affect *us all* because we have arranged society in such a way that many aspects of our social conditions benefit no one, from the perspective of what promotes our ability to live good human lives.<sup>24</sup> This broader conception of affective injustice may even have the resources to help us to identify where the dismissive and defensive responses we so often see from privileged people who feel unfairly targeted are coming from. Only then, I think, we will be in a position to effectively undermine them.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that theorizing affective injustice might help us to see how affective norms, practices, and relationships mediate social interactions in ways that inhibit the values of social justice for even the privileged among us; and consequently, how the presence of structural affective injustice is part of why people who are privileged are affectively conditioned to reinforce others’ oppression. Affective injustice is thus a much broader phenomenon than psychological oppression as I understand it. People are psychologically oppressed through mental states and processes that reinforce their oppression (e.g., living

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<sup>22</sup> As Erich Fromm (2002 [1956]) observes, the modern businessman hates other people with whom he must compete as well as himself, “because he sees his life passing by, without making any sense beyond the momentary intoxication of success” (184).

<sup>23</sup> These considerations are potential reasons for thinking that Will should not be blamed too harshly for his morally wrong (and potentially unjust) action. But I see this as consistent with holding him to some extent morally responsible—both for what he did, and for *taking responsibility* for the toxic, sexist workplace culture of which he is a part and doing what he can to resist it.

<sup>24</sup> Here I am assuming that living a good human life is incompatible with accumulating enough wealth to own a superyacht, despite what any particular billionaire or those who strive to become one might think.

in shame and fear), whereas affective injustice is structural. It operates primarily *outside* of us: in the affective norms we construct and reinforce through a variety of affective practices and relationships in social, economic, and political life. What is unjust about these structural affective phenomena is that they reinforce institutional and social constraints on people's ability to develop essential human skills and capacities and to use them in socially recognized settings, to communicate and play with one another, to express their feelings and perspectives on social life, and participate in determining the course of their lives (Young 1990, 37).

It is an unfortunate reality that all of us are likely to live with affective injustice. We might find its forces at work in our families, social lives, educational institutions, workplace cultures, on social media, and in democratic life—all of which involve systems of affective norms, practices, and relationships that mediate how we interact with ourselves and other people in ways that participate in social injustice. Like other forms of injustice, we should expect affective injustice to disproportionately harm the most disadvantaged among us, and to do so in ways that are qualitatively distinct from its effects on the privileged. But I've argued that there is something to be gained from expanding the focus of philosophical inquiry, and to consider how the societies in which readers are likely to live affectively condition us to think, feel, and act in ways that participate in social injustice—including why the privileged engage in affective practices that reinforce others' oppression.

I mentioned at the outset that these reflections are meant to be tentative and incomplete. There are further important questions about who creates the affective norms governing our social, professional, and political lives and whose interests they serve (if anyone's in particular). We should ask what affective norms, practices, and relationships promote the values of social justice; how we might conceive of a 'right' to them; and how we can best distinguish unpleasant and even harmful affective experiences from those that are matters of justice. I also suspect that theorizing structural affective injustice may help us think about how technology is reshaping, disrupting, or even eliminating our ability to cultivate and sustain the kinds of affective relationships with one another that are conducive to human flourishing; how the medicalization and commodification of affective human experiences might influence affective norms, practices, and relationships for the worse (Cohen 2016); the 'epidemics' of mental illness, loneliness, burnout, and exhaustion (Alberti 2018; Anthony 2023); hostile affective relationships and practices mediating interactions on social media (Norlock 2017); and corporate and political attempts to influence (even manipulate) citizens' affective lives to serve their own ends (Wildman et al. 2022). Affective injustice is certainly not the only relevant form of injustice involved in these social crises. But I think it might be part of the story about why so many people across diverse social locations are struggling emotionally in our complicated and often painful social world.

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