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Oppression – A New Definition

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to conclude with a new definition of oppression. The project is descriptive and analytical; the ambition is to construct a definition that correctly captures the social structures involved and that the definition can be of help in the emancipatory struggle of oppressed groups.

The theories on oppression by Ann Cudd, Marilyn Frye and Alison Bailey have been my starting points. These theories are critically discussed and I argue for whether or not I regard their understandings of central concepts as useful for a comprehensive concept of oppression.

My conclusion is that *oppression is an enclosing structure that, by way of institutional practice, harms members of a social group, while members of another, or other, corresponding social groups benefit from the harm suffered by those oppressed.*

I also pose four conditions which, if satisfied, show that a person is oppressed. The conditions are: The harm condition; the enclosing structure condition; the social group condition; and the privileged group condition.

One of the advantages of this new definition is that it involves the aspect of privilege and in turn the fundamental feature of injustice without including a condition of coercion which I believe may prevent oppressed persons from recognizing the oppression against them. The definition also contains such general conditions which make it independent of any specific form of oppression such as sexism or racism etc. Due to this general character, it largely corresponds to the everyday conception of oppression although it does not include 'non-structural' forms of supposed oppression.

Key words: Oppression, Feminism, Social Institution, Privilege, Social group, Social structure

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1 Introduction

The word oppression probably leads the thoughts of most of us to acts involving force or even violence, most of the time occurring in foreign societies and cultures. Such a conception of oppression may make us less sensitive to oppression when it occurs in a less conspicuous form and perhaps in our own society.

When I had my son I was soon quite surprised by the discussions on parental leave issues taking place among young parents in my neighborhood. New acquaintances as well as old friends reported all kinds of reasons not to share the parental leave equally between the mom and the dad. Countless times I listened to the phrase “Of course we both want to stay at home just as much. But, sadly enough, in *our particular case* it is not possible.” According to official records, men in Sweden use only 20 % of the parental leave.¹ A recent report from The Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*) shows that that it is not the issue of money that determines how parental leave is divided between the parents. When parental leave is divided unequally, money is often referred to as the main reason, but when looking at income levels in couples with an unequal division of parental leave, by and large this explanation lacks validity.² Generally speaking, the explanations given could actually be used both ways, that is, to explain why the parental leave is divided equally as well as unequally. For example, the fact that one parent is unemployed could function as a reason for that parent to stay at home as well as a reason for the other parent to stay at home. Women stay at home with parental leave to a far greater extent than do men. What makes one wonder is the sheer amount of explanations, sometimes contradictory, even by parents who explicitly have the ambition to share parenting equally. “I have to stay at home because it is easier for my husband to get a job.” “I have to stay at home because it is harder for my husband to get a job and therefore more important that he is not restrained due to parental leave.” “We wanted to share equally but my husband got this great job opportunity.” A great number of men seem to get these great job opportunities, but personally I have actually never heard about a situation where the husband had to stay at

¹ Försäkringskassan: ”Jämställt uttag”, Publ. Juli 4 2007

<http://www.fk.se/omfk/analys/barnfamilj/foraldrap/#ju>

² Peter Letmark: “Ekonomi styr inte föräldradedigheten” in *Dagens Nyheter*, June 28, 2007.

home for the greater part of the parental leave due to the woman's great job opportunity. Do women not receive great job opportunities? Another line of argument builds on presumed biologically determined differences - there are all kinds of theories and explanations, but when we get to the bottom of it, women are better suited for taking care of kids, and therefore the families tend to divide parental leave in this way. Then, of course, one might also ask: could perhaps the concept of social structure provide some kind of explanation?

Parental leave is not the only domain where it seems possible that social structures influence on our behavior in ways that may be to the disadvantage of women.

On the 17th of April, 2007, an historical event took place in England. For the first time, a men's football game was commented live by a woman on the BBC One programme *Match of the Day*. Jacqui Oatley, the woman in question, is a great football lover. She has been a football player herself and can quite reasonably be regarded as an authority on the subject. She is the author of sturdy Saturday football bulletins for Radio Five Live³, and she also covered the England women's internationals at the 2005 UEFA Women's Championship. Nevertheless, she managed to divide British society in two halves: one half claiming that a woman actually can comment a men's football game, the other half vehemently arguing that such a thing is impossible.

The former football player and manager Dave Basset commented the event: "I am totally against it and everybody I know in football is totally against it. [...] You must have an understanding of the game and the tactics and I think in order to do that you need to have played the game."⁴ The fact that Oatley was a "keen amateur footballer until the age of 27"⁵ was obviously not taken into account. Her broadcast was also described as an "insult" to her male colleagues by Daily Mail sports journalist Steve Curry.⁶ How can we make sense of the questioning of Jacqui Oatley? Could an understanding of social structures be of any help?

Sports journalism may perhaps be regarded as a typical free zone for male chauvinism. However, the academic world, in spite of what one would perhaps have presumed, seems to be far from free from situations where similar social structures may be exerting an influence. Christine Wennerås and Agnes Wold have shown that a woman applying for post-doc fellowship in medicine has to be 2.5 times more productive than a male applicant to be scored as equally competent.⁷ The authors suggest that the reasons are to be found in prejudices against women⁸, something that

³ Paula Coccozza: "Move over Motty!" in *The Guardian*, Thursday April 19, 2007.

⁴ Coccozza, 2007 and Matt Barlow: "She talks a good game, but the verdict is split on the first lady", in *Daily Mail*, 18th April 2007.

⁵ Coccozza, 2007.

⁶ Barlow 2007.

⁷ Christine Wennerås & Agnes Wold: "Nepotism and Sexism in Peer-review", *Nature* 387 (May 22, 1997) pp 341-343, p 342.

⁸ Wennerås & Wold, 1997 p 343.

can be explained by social structures. There seems to be something beyond laws and regulations that marginalize women. I believe that the gender roles in society tend to make women give up on job careers in order to take care of family and children to a far greater extent than do men. I believe there are social constraints that go beyond laws and official rules and that these constraints bring about unjust disadvantages to women. But if so – are these disadvantages to be regarded as merely unjust or are they part of oppression?

1.1 Purpose

Examples like the ones I mentioned in the prelude can be found in abundance. Whether such examples should be regarded as due to oppression or not is, however, a contentious issue. Members of emancipatory social movements seem to be using the concept of oppression in a way differing from the more conventional use, where oppression is mainly identified as a tyranny where one or a few people exercise power over other people in a brutal and evil way.⁹

In order to thoroughly discuss this matter in a constructive and interesting way, we first need to make clear how, exactly, we should understand and use the concept of *oppression*. An analysis of the concept may produce a theoretical tool for the academic domain of social science as well as for problematizing discussions of the living conditions of women.¹⁰

For feminists, this analysis is fundamental since feminism is grounded on the very belief that women are oppressed. Certainly, ‘feminism’ represents many different conceptions and as a theory it has developed and changed since the ‘first feminist essay’, *A vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Mary Wollstonecraft) was published in 1792, followed by Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869). But, as I see it, the basis of any feminism is this belief that women are oppressed. Therefore, to understand and contribute to the feminist struggle, we must have a clear concept of oppression.¹¹ This concept should correspond to phenomena in the social world and should also, ideally, be something that feminists can agree upon in order to minimize internal terminological struggle. Even though feminists may disagree on which method is preferable in the struggle against oppression, the debate is likely to benefit if an agreed upon concept of oppression can function as a starting point.

⁹ See Iris Marion Young: *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990, p 40 passim.

¹⁰ see Colette Guillaumin: *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*. Routledge London, 1995. p 159

¹¹ Sally Haslanger & Nancy Tuana (2003, revised in 2004): “Topics in Feminism”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p 4.

In discussions on particular cases or situations (like when parents share parental leave) it appears to be easy to disregard aspects possibly related to oppression. In conjunction with advanced empirical science (such as the investigation made by Wennerås and Wold) a clear comprehension of oppression is imperative.

In the following, I will present an analysis of three theoretical concepts of or concerning *oppression*. Two feminist philosophers, Ann Cudd and Marilyn Frye, who have made great contributions to feminist theory, will be my starting point. In addition, I will also use Alison Bailey's expansion on Frye's definition.

The theories I will be referring to do not agree on the exact meaning of oppression and I will look for similarities and differences. The concepts and/or conditions that I find useful will be argued for and will later be included in my own definition. I will discuss in some detail some aspects of oppression that neither of the theorists argues for explicitly. The analysis will deal only with 'structural' oppression, i.e. institutional oppression against social groups, or against individuals because of their membership in a certain social group. Therefore, some forms of injustice which would probably be regarded as oppressive according to the conventional use of the concept, will not be regarded as oppressive according to the definition presented in this paper. Even though these forms of injustice may indeed be harmful, I regard the 'structural' form of oppression as such an important feature that it should not be confused with these other injustices.

The remarks I will make on Frye's article involve an expansion on some key aspects in order to clarify the concept. Partly, this expansion builds on Bailey's work, but also differs from it to a substantial degree. My concern with Cudd's theory originates in a striving to find a way to unite (primarily) women in the struggle for some kind of liberation from oppression. I believe that one of Cudd's conditions functions to counteract such an ambition. The condition I call into question is Cudd's "coercion condition". A key point in my critique comes from the fact that I believe that building on a condition that has to do with coercion might restrain oppressed persons from noticing the oppression they are subjected to. Oppressed persons might very well not regard themselves as coerced and if coercion is a necessary condition for oppression, they will consequently not regard themselves as oppressed. I believe it would be an advantage for the feminism movement and for the advancement of feminist thought if oppression could be sufficiently understood without the victimizing feature that, as I see it, the coercion condition brings with it. I will argue that Cudd's concept of oppression involves an unnecessary condition.

Although my examples will focus on sexist oppression, my ambition is to provide a definition of oppression that is not contingent on the form of oppression. Oppression based on, e.g., race, culture, religion or sexual preference should also be captured by the definition.

Thus, the conditions of adequacy consist in that the definition must correspond to different forms of oppression; be able to unite feminists (in the terminological sense

described above); be action guiding and; to some extent correspond to our everyday conception of oppression.

As I will describe later on, feminism is far from a unitary perspective. Rather, there are several different standpoints that are regarded as central for different theorists. My ambition, however, is to put forth a definition that could be accepted and used by individuals representing differing perspectives.

The three theories I will refer to will be critically discussed in chapter 2.

1.2 Methodological issues

In line with analytical tradition, I value explicit argumentation as well as precise use of language in order to make possible a stable foundation for a constructive discussion and empirical science. This is urgent if we are to be able to agree upon the questions of to what extent and in which situations oppression of women actually exists.¹²

Sally Haslanger presents three different kinds of projects that reflect aspects of an analysis of a certain concept. A *conceptual approach* seeks to articulate the everyday conception of, e.g., oppression; what do people mean when they talk about oppression? A *descriptive project* on the other hand investigates whether a concept tracks some natural or social kind. Finally, an *analytical approach* strives for a concept that can be an effective tool for some normative purpose.¹³ In this paper, a descriptive project approach will prevail, though with strong elements of analytical approach. More specifically, a definition will be strived for that correctly comprehends and describes the social structure that ‘oppression’ tries to capture. The analytical approach of the present paper takes its starting point from the idea that a definition of oppression may be helpful in the normative struggle against oppression. Consequently, focus should be on how the concept can be defined in a useful way to serve normative means.¹⁴

1.3 Dominant perspective

In addition to external questions that challenge feminism (“is there really such a fundamental structure that representatives of, among others, gender studies and feminist activism maintain?”), there is a widespread criticism of gender theories in that they are constructed by and for white middle class well educated women. Much of the most significant research in the field of gender studies has been made by feminists in Europe

¹²Ann Garry (2004): “Analytic Feminism”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 5.

¹³Sally Haslanger (2000): “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?” pp 154-170 in Ann Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen (ed.), *Feminist Theory. A Philosophical Anthology*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Malden 2005, p 155 passim.

¹⁴Haslanger, 2000, p 155 passim.

and in North America. The internal critique derives partly from within these societies. In an attempt to pluralize the feminist voice, Black feminism has developed as an alternative to 'traditional' (White) feminism. But it is not only traditional (White) feminism that has to deal with critique from marginalized groups. "Third world feminism" also presents a great deal of critique of "Black feminism" in that it claims to speak for Black women globally even though it actually starts from the perspective of African American women. This highlights the disputes on ethnocentrism that exist within the feminist field.¹⁵ It is urgent, in analyzing the term 'oppression', to consider this critique and to watch out so that the definition and analysis are not biased in this way. One might think that a non-biased approach is a natural or self-evident aspect of analyzing and presenting a definition. However, this is an ethnocentric idea that functions as excluding; we regard our own experiences as the natural ones.¹⁶ Conflicts such as these may seem destructive and some would even say that they constitute a proof of an inbuilt weakness in feminist theory. However, any internal debate will inevitably focus problematic aspects. Most feminists regard the heterogeneity as something rather positive, something that proves that the theory and practice are open to debate.

In spite of the dominant perspective debate, my aim is to provide a definition of oppression that captures all forms of oppression. Already here my project opens for objections. My idea, however, is that differences concerning the substance of e.g. women's lives (the different practices, norms and beliefs) may lead to differences in the ways oppression is expressed or experienced, but that it is possible to formulate a definition that involves such general features that it could actually apply to these differences.

1.4 A definition of oppression

In the next chapter (ch.2) I will discuss the theories of Cudd and Frye as well as Bailey's expansion, with the purpose to conclude with a new definition of oppression. I will already here briefly present the definition:

¹⁵ Pernilla Lundmark: "Do you remember when God was a Woman?" Lund University, Department of Gender Studies, 2007, p. 4, 18.

¹⁶ See M Lugones & E Spelman "Have we got a theory for you!" p 494-507 and Hill Collins "Social construction of black feminist thought" p 526-547 in Nancy Tuana & Rosemarie Tong (ed) *Feminism and Philosophy*. Westview Press, Boulder 1995.

Oppression is an enclosing structure that, by way of institutional practice, harms members of a social group, while members of another, or other, corresponding social groups benefit from the harm suffered by those oppressed.

A member of a social group is oppressed if and only if:

1. The institutional harm condition: There is a harm that comes from an institutional practice.
2. The enclosing structure condition: The harm(s) in (1) are brought about by social constraints forming an enclosing structure that immobilizes the person subjected to the harm.
3. The social group condition: Individuals are harmed in (1) due to their membership to a certain social group.
4. The privileged group condition: There are individuals belonging to a corresponding group that (unjustly) benefits from the harm in (1).

In chapter 2 I will discuss key concepts within the theories and argue for my making use of them or not. Then I will move on to discuss central concepts in the definition presented here, to explain how they function together as sufficient and necessary conditions of oppression.

1.5 Previous analyses of oppression

Although a lot has been written on oppression over the past couple of centuries, and even if, from time to time, also sexist oppression has been studied, it is during the last decades that sexism as the object for extensive philosophical theory has appeared more frequently. Some of these theories offer a definition of the phenomenon. Not all feminist philosophers, though, agree that a single definition of oppression is possible. To some extent, this may depend on what kind of project the philosopher is pursuing.

Ann Cudd holds that it is possible to formulate one single definition of oppression that can be used to identify all different forms of oppression. She argues that this is useful since it makes it possible concerning new cases to judge if they are in fact oppressive.¹⁷

Frye does not explicitly formulate a definition, but an outline of a definition can be found in her article "Oppression".

I will now move on to the analysis of the theories by Cudd, Frye and Bailey. I will discuss key concepts and give reasons for what parts of the theories I will use and what parts I will exclude from my conclusive definition.

¹⁷ Ann Cudd: *Analyzing Oppression*. Oxford University Press, 2006. P 26.

2 Analyzing three concepts of oppression

In this chapter, I will discuss the benefits and flaws of the theories I will use. I will clarify and argue for what concepts I will make use of in my own definition, which in turn will be further explained and argued for in the next chapter.

2.1 Cudd

Oppression is a central aspect in society, today as well as historically, and it is an often used concept in the field of philosophy. Even though much has been written on the subject, deep and general analyses are conspicuous by their absence. Here, Ann Cudd fills a vacant place with her recently published *Analyzing Oppression*. Cudd holds that it is possible to formulate one single definition of oppression that can be used to identify all different forms of oppression. She argues that this is useful since it makes it possible concerning new cases to judge if they are in fact oppressive.¹⁸

According to Cudd, oppression is:

“a harm through which groups of persons are systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened or reduced by any of several forces.”¹⁹

However, this definition seems only to involve necessary, but not sufficient, conditions and thus Cudd lists four conditions which, if satisfied show that a member of a social group is oppressed:

1. The harm condition. There is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice.
2. The social group condition. The harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm in (1).
3. The privilege condition: There is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in (1).

¹⁸ Cudd, 2006, p 26.

¹⁹ Cudd, 2006, p 23.

4. The coercion condition: There is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.²⁰

As I see it, the strength of Cudd's definition lies in the fact that she explicates the unjust aspect of oppression. I am not sure, though, that all four conditions are needed for a definition. I will suggest the removal of Cudd's coercion condition. Another aspect that I will argue for is that, when it comes to oppression, there is no need for a distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary groups - a distinction that Cudd makes, though not in the definition but in the discussion on her concept of social group.

In the following passage I will discuss "harm"; "social institution/institutional practice", and within these "systematically"; "privilege"; "coercion", within which "unfairly/unjustly"; and "social group". Coercion will be the main subject of my analysis since it is this condition I want to remove, but also social groups will be thoroughly discussed. "Privilege" will be discussed in detail further on since this concept is fundamental in the section that concentrates on Bailey.

2.1.1 Harm

The ways in which Cudd defines the harm she is talking about is that it must come out of an institutional practice (which will be discussed in the next section), that the harm is perpetrated on a social group and not on an individual alone and that there must be a corresponding group that benefits from the harm. The restrictions on which kinds of harm that count are thus defined by the fact that they come out of institutional practices which are in turn defined by the social institutions. Therefore, to understand Cudd's concept of harm we have to understand her other relevant concepts.

2.1.2 Social institution/institutional practice

To make clear what Cudd means by the harm condition, we need to explicate her use of "institutional practice". In showing this, we can also understand what Cudd means by social group. Social institutions are entities that set constraints that specify what kind of behavior is regarded as appropriate for persons in their particular roles, without consideration for the individual character. The constraining aspect is primarily realized in specifying unacceptable behavior. Social institutions are also constitutive in that they make behaviors possible, yet the constraining aspect is the one in focus here. As I understand Cudd, the example in my introduction where the female football expert caused a great stir simply by being the live commentator of a men's football game is an example of such constraints being realized. The woman was not judged by her knowledge of or passionate interest in football but simply by her identity as a woman

²⁰ Cudd, 2006, p 25.

(which implies her not being fit for that kind of job). Her behavior is not regarded as appropriate and therefore she faces social constraints. The entities which can set these constraints; the social institutions, can be, e.g., governments and schools, but also norm systems or classifications on behalf of race, class or gender.²¹ It is important to notice that Cudd's definition of social institution is a broad definition.

In the football example, the social institutions would be the norm system and classification on behalf of gender jointly that set constraints for appropriate behavior for women/sports journalism. As I understand Cudd, we are dealing with an institutional practice when the social institution is realized in people's actions. Furthermore, the "systematic" character of the harm, described in Cudd's definition, is best understood, or so I believe, through the understanding of the institutional practice. The fact that the harm comes from an institutional practice makes the harm systematic. From the understanding of Cudd's use of social institution we can understand social groups as collections of individuals who face common restraints that are structured by social institutions.²² Cudd does however distinguish between two kinds of social groups, something to which I will return further on.

2.1.3 Privilege

Cudd does not explain the privilege aspect or privilege condition in great detail. In different parts of her book Cudd discusses privilege simply in matters of persons belonging to corresponding social groups that benefit from the harm against the oppressed social group at issue. In short, privilege can be explained as the corresponding benefit that comes from (or demands) the harm on a certain social group. I will make a closer analysis and expand the conception of privilege. This expansion will be further accounted for in the discussion of Bailey's expansion of Frye's theory and also within the chapter on my own definition.

2.1.4 Coercion versus constraint

I will argue here against the necessity of the coercion condition. I will argue that the key point in the coercion has to do with injustice, which can be accounted for by the concept of social constraints. For Cudd, the coercion condition is important. According to Cudd, if a person voluntarily agrees upon a situation, it is impossible to regard the situation as oppressive. I oppose to this and I also believe that the condition generates a sense of something stronger than Cudd actually demands since "coercion" may connote violent actions, and this is not what Cudd means.

²¹ Cudd, 2006, p 50.

²² Cudd, 2006, p 51.

The name of the condition; “the coercion condition” is misleading because it is significantly normative in a negative way that I will return to further on. I also believe that it is unnecessarily strong; when hearing the word ‘coercion’ at least I start thinking about someone violently forcing you to do something you really don’t want to do. This, however, is not demanded in Cudd’s concept of coercion, according to which “a social institution is coercive if it unfairly limits the choices of the members of some social group relative to the members of other social groups.”²³

As I see it, the key point in the argument is related to another aspect that is not explicit, one that has to do with social constraints.

To be sure, oppression against women is a complex phenomenon. An important aspect of this lies in the fact that women often choose situations which, theoretically or statistically, might be regarded as containing elements of oppression. For example, women choose to work within labor sectors that are characterized by low wages, heavy workload, little possibility for flexibility and low status. One might argue that, since people voluntarily choose these jobs, the negative aspects are not to be regarded as oppressive. The workers (women) can choose to do something else with their lives, and in an ideal market economy, these things have a way of sorting themselves out; if nobody accepts bad working conditions, then employers must make efforts to make the jobs more attractive. The key point is that there is no coercion. But coercion is more complex than that. Cudd shows the complexity of coercion by using a mugging-example.²⁴ A person who is mugged surely had a *choice* either to give away her/his wallet or risk an act of violence. According to Cudd, every action is preceded by a choice. Choices, though, can be coercive or voluntary. To Cudd, a choice is coercive if the alternatives are, in relation to other social groups, unfairly or unjustly limited by social institutions.²⁵ It is due to this that I regard the condition as too strongly expressed. Whether the alternatives are just or unjust can be examined through Cudd’s conception of just and unjust constraints, since it is the constraints that specify the alternatives. As I understand it, women working in unfavorable labor sectors are somewhat coerced if we believe that the constraints set by gender norm systems, and to some part class and race norm systems, provide women with few alternatives that do not evoke harm. The constraints guide women to give higher priority to family life than to career; women are supposed to take greater responsibility for sick or, due to other factors, disabled family members. They are supposed to cut down on working hours so that they can spend more time with their children. The caring aspect of the stereotype of women is also likely to influence the choices so that jobs involving caring for others appear as more appropriate

²³ Cudd, 2006, p 147.

²⁴ Cudd, 2006, p 125f.

²⁵ Cudd, 2006, p 131.

for a woman. Instead of using a coercion condition, I will focus on social constraints and privilege in my definition of oppression.

I believe there is a risk that the strong normative implication of the coercion condition frightens people from the feminist struggle and turns women to ally with the privileged group instead of with each other. While Cudd argues that coercion is a 'must', I see the unfairness aspect of social constraints as sufficient to regard a person as oppressed (jointly with the other conditions I will argue for). Certainly, it can be difficult to understand why a person seemingly agrees to a situation that one might regard as oppressive, but I will argue that we do not need to explain this by referring to e.g. rational choice theory, false consciousness, etc. A person can be oppressed even if she agrees on the situation. Cudd's coercion condition thus also demands a psychological theory that can explain this behavior, and in line with the principle of economy, I find it appropriate to exclude this part of the definition.

According to Cudd, the injustice in oppression is identified by the non-justification of social constraints and how these harm individuals. "Thus, to make a claim of oppression is to show that the harms involved are unjustified."²⁶ First of all, an unjust distribution of constraints means that the constraints fall unequally; and by this Cudd means that they differently affect the life outcome. However, some unequal distributions are just. The constraints are unjust if they a) affect the lives of members of different groups differently and b) there is no special need that can justify this difference in how life is affected. If no such need exists, and the distribution is unequal, then the distribution is unjust.²⁷ Thus, harm can be unjust even if it is not a matter of oppression, according to Cudd.

I have argued against the coercion condition because the injustice aspect is understood through the distribution of social constraints and as I see it this is sufficient for claiming that someone is oppressed. The unjust aspect will thus be included in the part of my definition that focuses on privileges and social constraints. If the constraints are of a kind that harms a person in an unjustified way then the injustice criterion is satisfied. The enclosing structure (which will be discussed in 2.2) will account for the 'coercive' aspect, or the fact that the alternatives are severely limited. As a consequence of the removal of the coercion condition, Cudd's distinction between two kinds of social groups will also be redundant. This I will argue for in the next passage.

²⁶ Ann Cudd, "How to Explain Oppression. Criteria for Adequacy for Normative Explanatory Theories", *Philosophy of the Social Science* vol 35, no. 1, pp 20-49, March 2005. p 22.

²⁷ Cudd, 2006. P 51.

2.1.5 Social groups

Cudd distinguishes between voluntary and non-voluntary groups. I see some problems with this distinction and this is what will primarily be discussed in the following.

According to Cudd, the question we should ask concerning oppression due to membership in a voluntary group is whether the individual *has a right* to participate in that certain group. Here, the choice or the possibility to choose is not the primary aspect. Thus, a person is free to join a social group, knowing that oppression will follow. “Voluntariness” is not an issue. This person is not *coerced* into being oppressed. The *right* to make that choice is what is important.

However, the same does not count when it comes to oppression of the second kind; oppression against non-voluntary groups. Here, Cudd requires the element of coercion. Cudd does not explicitly state why the right to belong to a non-voluntary group is not sufficient. Or does Cudd mean that one has not got the *right* to be a woman, or a Black or a Jew, or a member of other non-voluntary groups? Does the absence of choice remove the *right* to something? I have a hard time figuring this out. To me, Cudd’s distinction between situations characterized by *the right to something* and *the choice to do something*, respectively, seems less than clear and thus the distinction between different kinds of groups.

A person could be said to have a right to join some political group since political freedom is an important right in liberal societies. So even though the person can avoid oppression (by not joining the group), this right to belong to a political group, according to Cudd, makes voluntariness (and thus the choosing of an action that leads to being oppressed) unimportant. The right to join a political group is, in this context, also to be viewed as universal. Surely, the members of resistance movements in the Soviet Union or in South Africa during apartheid would be regarded as oppressed groups even though they (in the country at issue) did not have a legal right corresponding. It is thus not the actual laws, defining the citizens’ rights, which determine whether or not one has a right (in Cudd’s sense). If it were so, then the concept of oppression would not be universal.

Cudd also writes that voluntariness is a matter of degree²⁸ but this does not seem to be of consequence to her idea that oppression against voluntary groups is conceptually distinct from oppression against non-voluntary groups. The main difference seems to be that a person does not need to recognize (or choose) her membership in a non-voluntary group in order to be a member, whereas this recognition is necessary when it comes to voluntary social groups.²⁹ However, this difference seems not to have any normative consequences. If I sincerely recognize my membership in the social group “women”, does this make a change? I argue that, since the coercion condition is unnecessary, there is no need for a distinction between voluntary and non-

²⁸ Cudd, 2006, p.44.

²⁹ Cudd, 2006, p.45

voluntary groups in this matter. Perhaps it would be regarded as worse to be oppressed due to the membership in a non-voluntary group but the fact that a person chooses to join a group does not make the harm non-oppressive.

Like Cudd, Åsa Andersson argues that social groups exist even if the members do not define themselves as members. Andersson does not, however, label the two kinds of groups differently, and neither will I. What's important is that "other people's definition of them as a group constrains their actions in important respects"³⁰.

Another aspect of Cudd's comprehension of the social group at issue is that it needs to be identified in some other aspect than that the members are harmed due to the same social constraints. Yet she states that we understand social groups as collections of individuals who face common restraints that are structured by social institutions.³¹ It thus appears as if the social group must face common restraints but also be regarded as a social group due to some other aspect. Cudd does not defend this in detail, and I cannot see the point in this. If we suddenly discovered that all people who are wearing black sneakers were actually oppressed (if it was shown that these individuals met the same constraints and no other shared feature other than that they wore black sneakers was identified), I would say that this group is oppressed even if there is no other reason to regard them as a social group than the fact that they are harmed due to their shoe-wear.

2.1.6 Summary

In this section I have tried to capture the important concepts in Cudd's definition of oppression. The harms are defined in that they come out of institutional practice. This institutional practice can in turn be understood as the actions that realize social institutions, such as norm system and classifications. Cudd's conception of privilege seems only to involve benefits that causally correspond to the oppressive harm. My account of privilege will be more extensive, as will be seen further on.

I have argued that the coercion condition is unnecessary because the unjust character, which I believe is the important aspect of this condition, is accounted for in reference to social constraints and the privileged group. "Coercion" may connote actions of a more violent form than I believe Cudd actually intends. Since I believe this condition potentially frightens women from taking part in a feminist struggle, I regard it as an advantage that it can be removed.

Also, I have argued against the need of separating two kinds of social groups due to voluntary or non-voluntary membership. I claim that oppression against voluntary social groups as well as non-voluntary groups can be accounted for by the same definition of oppression.

³⁰ Åsa Andersson: *Power and Social Ontology*. BokBox Publication, Lund 2007, p 123.

³¹ Cudd, 2006., p.51.

2.2 Frye

Marilyn Frye does not explicitly formulate a definition, but an outline of a definition can be found in her article “Oppression”. According to this ‘definition’, oppression is:

An enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or a category of people.³²

Frye’s article possesses great strength in that it, partly by way of metaphors, explains the double-binding aspect of oppression (in the definition called “enclosing structure”). The content of the double-bind is that oppressed people face very few options in different situations and that all of the options bear a consequence involving some kind of penalty, in short it can be explained by the phrase “damned if you do, damned if you don’t”. Frye also focuses on served interests by asking: “Whose interests are served by its [the oppressive structure] existence?”³³ and thus stresses the issue of power and privilege. If I understand Frye correctly she wants to present something akin to an analytical definition of oppression: “We need this word, this concept [oppression], and we need it to be sharp and sure.”³⁴ But in order to meet the demands on an analytical concept of oppression, the privilege aspect needs to be explicit in the definition. What Frye’s definition lacks even more, in order to be analytical, is a conception of oppression as unjust. Where a removal can be made from Cudd’s definition, Frye’s definition, on the other hand, needs expansion and the conception of privilege will be applied.

The following terms are central in Frye’s theory: enclosing structure; forces and barriers; immobilization/reduction; (social) group, and, due to the expansion: privilege. Social group will not be explicitly discussed in the section on Frye since she does not define in what way she uses the concept.

I will defend the use of ‘enclosing structure’ and argue for why ‘forces and barriers’ as well as ‘immobilization/reduction’ are not necessary, but will also argue that ‘immobilization’ makes it easier to understand the enclosing structure and that it is, therefore, useful.

As mentioned above, Frye’s definition lacks the privilege aspect of oppression. This aspect, however, is explicit in the article and therefore we know that Frye, too, regards this as crucial. In appreciating the relevance of the privilege aspect of oppression, the interest being served is the key to identifying oppression. For a theory of oppression to be comprehensive, the privilege aspect is important. This aspect might be

³² Marilyn Frye: “Oppression” pp 1-16 in her *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. The Crossing Press. Trumansburg, N Y 1983, p 10.

³³ Frye, 1983, p 14.

³⁴ Frye, 1983, p 2.

the most important aspect in the maintaining of an oppressive system; if no one gained particularly from someone else's harm it would be more likely that the harm would come to an end.

In order to show why the unjust aspect is crucial I want you to consider the following example: A prisoner is immobilized and reduced in several ways. There are the physical walls, there are restrictions on when, where and what to eat. There are restrictions on the availability of television, newspapers, visitors, mail. These restrictions or barriers are part of a structure that tends to immobilize and reduce the prisoner. Also, the prisoner is exposed to this structure as a member of the potential social group 'criminals'. Furthermore, an important aspect of imprisoning (at least concerning crimes of violence) is the security of other members of the society. In this, the structure serves the interest of the people outside the prison. This case seems to fit Frye's definition of oppression and yet most of us would deny that the prisoner (if she/he is in fact guilty of the charges) is oppressed. The reason for this rebuttal is that most of us believe that imprisoning in this way is justified and fair. This shows the importance of including explicitly the aspect of injustice into the definition of oppression.

Privilege will not be further discussed within the section on Frye; instead this discussion takes place within the section on Bailey.

2.2.1 Enclosing structure

Frye compares the enclosing structure to a birdcage by which she illustrates that the barriers, examined one by one, fail to make us understand the *enclosing* characteristic of the structure. It is when you take a step back and look at the whole cage that you can understand that each one of these cage wires is a part of an enclosing structure. What exactly Frye means by "structure" is not explained in detail.

The enclosing feature of oppression is, according to Frye, a key feature that oppressed people experience. She also calls it the double-bind which I believe is a suitable term. This feature is part of what makes oppression truly and thoroughly harmful. Women's labor situation is a situation in which the double-bind is realized and which is experienced by many individuals. If a woman chooses to work for wage she will, in the first place, face a situation in which she will generally be paid less than her fellow male workers. She will also, in case she lives in a heterosexual relationship, and especially if she has got children, still be in charge of the household work. Choosing (if there is such an option) to work outside the home will involve the harms of practically having two jobs; one outside the home and one at home. And for this she is paid less money than her male colleagues. If she does not work outside the home, she will be financially dependent on somebody else (as a rule a man), and she will, in the eyes of many beholders, be regarded as unemancipated (at least in Sweden). Frye uses an example that shows a double-bind situation that seemingly functions as a gatekeeper of the oppression: when it comes to facing oppression and the emotions that follow, a

woman might very well get mad about the situation. The alternative that involves expressing these feelings presumably involves the consequence of being perceived as “mean, bitter, angry or dangerous.”³⁵ The other alternative - to put on a sunny face, perhaps trying to forget about the oppression and, so to speak, make the best of the situation - will most likely lead to others experiencing her as complying.

Sexuality is another sphere involving double-binds. On one hand, as is well known, a (hetero)sexually active young woman might have to stand judging looks and name callings such as “whore” or “slut”. She might be popular for the night but will probably not be looked upon as “girl-friend-material”. If, on the other hand, she does not get involved in any (hetero)sexual activity, she might be scorned for being “uptight”; and she might feel pressure to let her be persuaded into a sexual relationship. And yet, if she chooses something in between, she might very well feel guilty of not wanting to go all the way, risking to be called a “cocktease”.

The enclosing character of oppression is thus an important feature in the raw experience of the oppressed. It also functions to keep oppressed people in their place.

The double-bind carries a strong similarity to Cudd’s coercion argument and it sure is a vivid way to explain the situation of the oppressed. But despite the similarity, I want to use the enclosing aspect while yet not using the coercion condition. Even though the enclosing feature may help to explain the behavior of the oppressed, primarily it also has the quality of graphically describing the strength of and dreadfulness in oppression. This is the reason why I will use Frye’s “enclosing structure”.

2.2.2 Immobilization/reduction

The immobilization aspect of oppression is connected to the ‘pressing’ element, the root of the word oppression. When something, or someone, as in the case of oppression, is pressed, she is “caught between or among forces and barriers” and this restricts and reduces her mobility. It is therefore obvious that the immobilization is directly connected to the enclosing structure. The social constraints are related in a way that presses women to a limited area of possible actions. Frye does not to any greater extent describe what she means by immobilization. Therefore the enclosing structure seems to be enough in a definition of oppression; the immobilization comes with it. The reason why immobilization should be in the definition seems to be that it further describes the character of the enclosing structure. I have thought about not using the immobilization aspect since it appears to bring nothing new to the definition. However, it does give some image of the enclosing structure. As I see it, it does not demand any extra entity to

³⁵ Frye, 1983, p 2.

be accounted for which would have been a reasonable objection. Therefore I will make use of this concept in my definition.

2.2.3 Forces and barriers

I have described what Frye means by enclosing structure and the immobilization that comes with it. But what about the ‘forces and barriers’ that supposedly form this structure? What kind of forces are we dealing with? Frye uses an example of a printing press, which makes the forces seem rather violent. In that case, a dense material is violently pressing something. To be sure, there are instances of oppression that are about as violent; women are being raped, beaten and murdered by husbands, fathers and brothers if they start to follow a path that, to the man, is not an acceptable behavior. But I believe that the word oppression should also be able to capture considerably less violent forces and barriers. As I understand Frye, she suggests that these ‘lighter’ forces should also be taken into account. Surely, not all women are immobilized like the bird in the cage example, but Frye wants us to regard oppression as a much broader feature. To understand Frye’s forces and barriers I think it is useful to return to Cudd’s institutional practice and social institutions. I believe that Frye is referring to the same kind of structures. She states that there are social barriers and forces. For example, labor sectors that are almost exclusive for one sex are presumed to be surrounded by barriers keeping the other sex out.³⁶ Since the service sector, which Frye uses as an example of a sector surrounded by barriers, is not formally exclusive for women, we must be dealing with something that goes beyond official laws and rules. These barriers seem instead to consist of norms or social constraints that guide behavior.

An advantage of using the words force and barrier might be that, in this broad sense, they can account for violence as well as for norm systems. However, the words are so strong that they may open for misunderstandings. One may suspect that we are in fact only dealing with the violent kinds of forces. Therefore I will not follow Frye in this aspect. In my reasoning I will use the concept of harm. The term ‘harm’ can of course not be substituted for ‘forces’ or ‘barriers’, but denotes consequences of being subjected to forces and barriers, in Frye’s sense. The word harm, though it needs to be defined, also may be seen as being more neutral. We certainly need the word oppression to be strong and sharp but I claim that a definition can meet these demands without containing the words forces and barriers.

³⁶ Frye, 1983, p.12f.

2.2.4 Summary

In this section I have described the theory of oppression presented by Frye. I have argued that the enclosing structure is an important character of oppression in that it points out the severely damaging effects of oppression. I have also shown why I regard the immobilization aspect as being included in the enclosing structure aspect. However, since it serves the means of describing the character of enclosing structure I regard it as useful. Frye uses ‘forces and barriers’ to explain the different features that form the enclosing structure. Even though these words in Frye’s sense can account for violence as well as more ‘passive’ norm systems, I argue that the words are unnecessarily strong and may lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, as explained above, I choose to use the concept of harm.

In the beginning of this section I claimed that Frye’s definition lacks important element; the element of privilege and also the element of unfairness. In the following I will describe how Bailey expands on Frye’s theory to make it account for these elements as well.

2.3 Bailey

Alison Bailey stresses the issue of injustice in her “Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s ‘Oppression’”. As argued above, I think Frye’s definition is missing this aspect. Therefore I find Bailey’s expansion most interesting and to some extent I agree with Bailey. However, I will introduce some important changes. For example, I argue that Bailey’s definition of privilege is circular and needs to be adjusted. But even then the definition meets with problems. I will therefore in the next chapter formulate a perhaps more radical definition of privilege. I will argue that such a definition can solve the problems that arise with Bailey’s definition.

2.3.1 Privilege

Bailey distinguishes between privilege and advantage. Whereas all privileges are advantages, not all advantages count as privileges. This is similar to Frye’s comprehension of oppression, as distinguished from harm. Like all oppression is harmful, all privileges are advantages. But as well as there is non-oppressive harm, there exists advantage that is not a privilege. In the case of the post-doc fellowship study presented briefly in the introduction, getting the fellowship due to scientific productivity (and other formal aspects regarded as relevant) would mean the granting (or earning) of an advantage. Getting the fellowship in spite of a scientific productivity inferior to that of co-applicants, however, would be the granting of a privilege. While advantage is earned, a characteristic of privileges is that they are *unearned*. Instead of earning, we are granted privileges. The easiest way of being granted a privilege is by birth. In this way, factors like class, sex and race are possible factors that grant a person privilege.

Bailey makes distinctions between privilege and earned advantages in the following way:

1. Benefits granted by privilege are always unearned and conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups.
2. Privilege granted to members of dominant groups simply because they are members of these groups is almost never justifiable.
3. Most privilege is invisible to or not recognized as such by those who have it.
4. Privilege has an unconditional “wild card” quality that extends benefits to cover a wide variety of circumstances and conditions.³⁷

Thus, a simple definition of privilege might be:

An advantage is a privilege if and only if its benefits are

- i) unearned
- ii) conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups.

But Bailey also suggests that in order to find out whether a particular advantage is to be regarded as a privilege, “we need to look at that advantage macroscopically in order to observe whether it plays a role in keeping complex system of domination in place. We need to know if the advantage enables *members of privileged groups* to avoid the structured system of forces and barriers which serve to immobilize members of marginalized groups.”³⁸

To formalize, as I understand Bailey, an advantage is a privilege if and only if:

- a. It is unearned.
- b. It is conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups.
- c. It plays a role in keeping a complex system of domination in place.
- d. The advantage enables members of privileged groups to avoid a structured system of forces and barriers which serve to immobilize members of marginalized groups.

The last condition, however, makes the definition circular. To be a privilege, an advantage must be assigned to a member of a *privileged* group. If we need to have an identified privileged group to identify privileges, we have a problem. Is it possible, then,

³⁷ Alison Bailey: “Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s ‘Oppression’”, pp 104-119, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29:3, Winter 1993, p. 108.

³⁸ Bailey, 1993, p. 108.

to just remove the specification “members of privileged groups” and replace it with “the advantaged person”, making a privilege* definition by using conditions a-c above and:

d*. The advantage enables *the advantaged person* to avoid a structured system of forces and barriers which serve to immobilize members of marginalized groups.

Bailey’s students claimed that Blacks as well are privileged; there are for example certain loan programs that are only available to Blacks. According to the definition above, this would not count as a privilege since privileges are conferred to members of dominant social groups. Therefore, a black person can never be privileged based on her getting advantages because of her skin color. Further, the advantage in question does not play a part in keeping a system of domination in place.

To explain why Blacks in this kind of loan programs have earned the advantage (since privilege differs from simple advantages by this aspect) or that it is not a privilege, Bailey refers to the dominance aspect in the definition of privilege. According to the definition, privileges are conferred to members of dominant social groups only. But Bailey also wants to make sense of the ability for dominant groups to make exceptions for certain individuals (belonging to non-dominant groups). According to Bailey, in some situations, members of non-dominant groups can also be granted privileges. In my opinion, Bailey does not succeed in solving this problem: “Perhaps the point here is not that earned advantages and privilege are necessarily distinct”³⁹. I believe that the problem can be solved by making the distinction between advantages and privileges even sharper. In the next chapter, where I present my definition, I will describe exactly how I propose to solve this problem and thus how I will use the concept of privilege.

2.3.2 Summary

In this section I have described how Bailey understands ‘privilege’ and how she uses the concept in order to make a definition of oppression more complete. Bailey distinguishes between advantages (earned) and privileges (unearned). Generally, privileges are granted to a person by birth (like sex, class, race). But Bailey’s definition is circular and I have made changes to her definition in order to avoid this. However, even with these changes, the definition meets with problems that Bailey’s conception can’t solve. In chapter 3 I argue that these problems can be solved by making the difference between advantages and privileges more distinct through an expansion on the ‘earned’ aspect of advantages.

³⁹ Bailey, 1993, p. 110.

3 A new definition

In the previous chapter I discussed the theories of Cudd, Frye and Bailey in an attempt to conclude in a new definition of oppression. This definition can hopefully meet the conditions of adequacy that I stated in the purpose: to correspond to different forms of oppression; to be able to unite feminists; to be action guiding and; to correspond to some extent to our everyday conception of oppression. I will return to these conditions of adequacy after my presentation of and arguing for the definition.

In this chapter I will further explain and defend this definition. I will start by briefly presenting the main differences and resemblances when comparing my definition with those previously referred to. Then I will move on to argue for each condition in the definition.

Together with an extensive concept of privilege that includes the unjust aspect of oppression, as I will argue, the enclosing structure, the social group and the harm condition will be sufficient to explore the concept of oppression.

It seems to me that Cudd's coercion aspect is based on the same characteristics as my expanded privilege-criterion: "An institution is coercive if the institution unfairly limits the choices of some group of persons relative to other groups in society."⁴⁰ I will argue that the privilege criterion can account for the aspect that social institutions unfairly and unjustly distribute constraints and thus choices or alternatives as well as advantages. Cudd's concept of coercion might very well be a logical consequence of the privileged group condition: The privileged group condition states that for someone to be oppressed there has to be another social group that privileges from the harm. The privileges are to be understood as unjust advantages and the oppressed group/person faces corresponding unjust constraints. Facing these constraints most certainly involves facing limited choices, relative to the group that receives the privileges corresponding to the constraints. Let us return to the post-doc fellowship example to illustrate: The privileges that some men seem to have been granted (since the advantage of getting the post-doc was not earned by their being formally qualified in a superior way) corresponds to the social constraints that some women are faced with (since they appeared to be judged as less suitable based on their sex). By getting a post-doc, one's choices (and opportunities) certainly have increased, in principle. An oppressed woman

⁴⁰ Cudd, 2006, p. 131.

faces constraints like these in just about every aspect of her life; thus, the women in the post-doc example were, due to the social constraint and the corresponding privilege, facing a situation with unjustly limited choices relative to the privileged social group (men).

I agree with Cudd on her first condition (the harm condition), the only difference being that I want to make explicit already in the definition of the condition that the harm comes from institutional practice, since this aspect is of utmost importance. It is important because this is what makes it part of the enclosing structure and what, in turn, makes the enclosing structure so powerful. If the harm or constraint came from some individual action due to some individual belief, then the constraint would not demand such consideration. If the belief that women are sexual objects were held only by some people individually, it would not be able to constitute such an influential stereotype about women. The point with social institutions is that they exert a strong influence on the constrained individuals.

My second condition has to do with what Frye calls (and what I will call) the enclosing structure. This aspect clarifies important aspects of what we are talking about when we talk of oppression.

My third condition resembles Cudd's second condition; a necessary aspect of oppression is that the harm is perpetrated against a person due to her membership in a group, and not to a person's based on her individual characteristics. As I stated in the prelude, my concept of oppression only deals with structural oppression.

The fourth condition is, as I see it, of pivotal importance. This is the privileged group condition. This feature is, as previously stated, to some extent explicit in Frye's article, though not in her definition. Cudd's privilege condition covers a rather narrow concept while my concept of privilege is more extensive. As I have stated above, I see the unfairness aspect of oppression to be sufficient, when taken together with the other conditions. Unfairness, in my conception of oppression, stems from the privilege feature. I will argue for a concept of privilege that includes the unfairness aspect, since I regard it to be of central importance to any theory on oppression.

My definition reads as follows:

Oppression is an enclosing structure that, by way of institutional practice, harms members of a social group, while members of another, or other, corresponding social groups benefit from the harm suffered by those oppressed.

A member of a social group is oppressed if and only if:

1. The institutional harm condition: There is a harm that comes from an institutional practice.
2. The enclosing structure condition: The harm(s) in (1) are brought about by social constraints forming an enclosing structure that immobilizes the person subjected to the harm.

3. The social group condition: Individuals are harmed in (1) due to their membership to a certain social group alone.
4. The privileged group condition: There are individuals belonging to a corresponding group that (unjustly) benefits from the harm in (1).

I believe that some key characteristics of my conception of oppression also correlate to Alison Jaggar's conception that can be outlined as "the imposition of unjust constraints on the freedom of individuals or groups."⁴¹ The elements of injustice and constraints that limit the freedom of choice (or likewise) seem to be crucial elements in many different conceptions of oppression.

My definition is different from Frye's in that it places emphasis on the unjust aspect (within the privileged group condition) and that it (within the same condition) clarifies that there is a corresponding social group that benefits from the harm.

The definition differs from Cudd's definition in perhaps more obvious ways. It does not include a condition of coercion and it does include the enclosing structure condition, a condition which further clarifies the severe harm condition. This condition makes it pointless to talk of an oppressive instance, action or situation. The nature of oppression is that it forms an enclosing structure. Therefore it is more comprehensible to talk of *persons as oppressed* in parts of or the whole of their lives and to talk about actions and situations as *parts of oppression*.

I will discuss and explain crucial concepts in my definition in the following; this will proceed from a discussion of the conditions.

3.1 The institutional harm condition

There are many kinds of harms that make people suffer. But all harms are not oppressive. Oppressive harms are institutional. Like Cudd, I use 'institutional' in a broad sense, including formal institutions as well as social institutions such as norm systems. These institutions specify and constrain what kind of behavior is regarded as appropriate for a person, without consideration to that person's individual character but due to her / his membership of certain social groups. The institutional practices are harmful when they restrict people's life chances in comparison to people with the same relevant abilities.⁴² I will not define exactly what counts as relevant abilities, but build on the idea that sex, race and sexual preference are examples of irrelevant abilities in

⁴¹ Alison M. Jaggar: *Feminist Politics & Human Nature*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland 1983, p 6.

⁴² See Andersson, 2007, p 121 and Jürgen Habermas: "Kampen för ömsesidigt erkännande i den demokratiska rättsstaten" in Charles Taylor: *Det mångkulturella samhället och erkännandets politik (Multiculturalism and the Politics of recognition, 1994.)* övers. Sven-Erik Torhell and Thomas Lindén, Daidalos, Göteborg, 2003.

many situations when, at the same time, they appear to be the cause of differences concerning life chances. The constraints that come from the institutions at issue are social constraints; that is, they come about as a result of social action. Thus, they do not result from differences that can meaningfully be described as being uniquely biological in nature. Furthermore, by being institutional, the harms are systematic. This structural aspect, which is necessary for a harm to count as oppressive, will be further explained in the section on the enclosing condition.

Since I find it vitally important for the concept of oppression to include harms that have to do with seemingly innocent or at least non-conscious actions, I use ‘harm’ instead of ‘forces and barriers’. I think these latter concepts may be seen to imply, in some sense, a violent form of harm which is not necessary for something to be oppressive.

The immobilizing feature of the harm refers to the fact that the harms are connected in a way that restrains the oppressed person’s liberty of action. For example; a gay person is sometimes made the subject of condemning glances and/or remarks walking the streets with his boyfriend. He may experience fear of walking outdoors hand in hand with his boyfriend at night. His parents might ask him not to bring the boyfriend to the family Christmas party, since they don’t want their own parents to know. The harms that these actions bring are likely to immobilize the oppressed person. He may avoid walking hand in hand with his boyfriend in public places, and he can’t let his boyfriend into his family like his heterosexual siblings and cousins. Thus, the immobilization relates to how the harm affects the everyday lives of oppressed persons.

3.2 The enclosing structure condition

The enclosing structure or double-bind exerts a limiting influence in that it narrows the possibilities for the oppressed individuals/group. The social constraints are correlated in a way that the possible alternatives become scarce and all of them expose one to harm. Åsa Andersson explains structure in a sense that I fully agree with. Like Andersson, I “regard structure as a higher order feature of macro phenomenon constituted by micro-phenomena.”⁴³ The micro-phenomena, which are the ones we first and foremost view and consider in our daily lives, do not simply add up to the structure. Compare it to Frye’s birdcage; one wire alone cannot account for why the bird does not fly away. But all the wires put together in a certain way constitute the macro-phenomenon; the enclosing cage. Yet the enclosing cage, the macro-phenomenon, is constituted by nothing else than the wires, the micro-phenomena. The oppressive harm results from social constraints that restrict the oppressed person in comparison to other persons due

⁴³ Andersson, 2007, p 113.

to irrelevant factors. But a person who is oppressed faces not just a single harm of this kind but a series of harms brought about by the enclosing structure. The oppressed person is surrounded with constraints that restrict the life chances. However, if a person is harmed in this way due only to some purely individual characteristic, the harm is not to be regarded as oppressive. The constraints must concern the social group of which she is a member. My concept of social group will be accounted for in the following section.

3.3 The social group condition

I discussed at some length the conception of social groups that Cudd provides. I do not agree with Cudd in distinguishing between different kinds of social groups. At least, I do not think that this aspect is of importance to the discussion on oppression.

In my view, for a social group to be regarded as such, it does not need the characteristic of the members defining themselves as being members of that group. This is important since it makes it clear that a person can be oppressed without even being aware of it. Facing the same constraints, or privileges, due to others' regarding one as belonging to a social group is sufficient in order to meet the social group condition. Cudd would probably agree on this but would perhaps argue that this description fits one kind of social group only: the non-voluntary social group. According to Cudd, oppression against voluntary social groups has to be accounted for differently. As I see it, there is no need for a distinction between the two kinds of social groups in the discussion on oppression.

Social groups can be formed due to the members recognizing themselves as having some important experience in common, or sharing a goal. But social groups can also be formed on the basis of others regarding them as sharing something significant. Groups of this kind can consist of many people; like the social group of women, or Blacks. I believe that the definition of oppression presented in this essay captures the oppression against both these kinds of groups.

3.4 The privileged group condition

There are opposite ideas on the nature of the privileged group. Some feminists argue that the group that benefits from the oppression is an *oppressing* group, which indicates the moral wrong the members of this group do.⁴⁴ Others, including myself, regard the privileged group as corresponding, in the sense that it simply benefits from the oppression suffered by others. Although it is certainly a fact that members of the

⁴⁴ Jaggar, 1983, p 6.

privileged group act according to the oppressive structure, so do members of the oppressed groups. I discussed privilege rather extensively above, but I want to make clear how I let this condition account for the unjust aspect of oppression. I will draw on Cudd's conception of unfairness and injustice which in turn starts from a discussion of equality.⁴⁵ Just as constraints can be unequally distributed (not to be understood in terms of numbers but in the resulting outcomes and how they affect the lives), advantages, too, can be unequally distributed between social groups. But the absence of equality does not in itself involve injustice. Unequal distribution can be justified if the social group at issue has certain needs that other social groups lack. If, on the other hand, the social group at issue does not possess certain needs that have to be accounted for, an unequal distribution of (unearned) advantages is to be regarded as unjust. To illustrate an unjustified distribution of constraints and advantages: imagine two schools that are located in two areas of a town. School A is located in a middle class area where the students often come from homes with parents who have both gone to college or university and thus can be helpful to their children with their school work. These students do well in school. The other school, school B, is located in a working class/underclass area where the parents can seldom help their children with school work to the same extent that can the parents in school A. These students do less well in school. The funds to these schools can be distributed in, roughly, three different ways: (1) School A and School B receive the same amount of funds; (2) School A receives more funds than School B; and (3) School B receives more funds than School A. As I see it, all three of these circumstances may be unequal, i.e. affect the life outcomes differently. In (1) the distribution is unequal if the children in School A do better than the children in School B, due to the unequal distribution and thus have a better chance of getting into a good college and getting good jobs. Due to the unequal distribution of advantages (the parents in school A have better possibilities of helping their children with school work), the children in school A have certain needs that are not accounted for. In (2), we face the same result as in (1), but probably resulting in an even bigger difference between the two groups. Here, the children in school A receive an extra advantage, while it is the children in school B who are in need of an advantage. In (3), the distribution might be unequal if the difference in funding correlates insufficiently to the differences the children face due to their background. But it may be equal if it results in more even (between the two groups) chances at e.g. getting in to a good college or getting a good job. The distribution in (2) is unjustified since the children in School A cannot be said to have certain needs that explain the different distribution, while the distribution in (3) is justified since the children in school B do have certain needs.

⁴⁵ Cudd, 2006. P. 51.

Thus, by being disadvantaged in an ‘unearned’ way, you earn (in the “deserved” meaning) compensatory advantages. Hence, unearned advantages are unjust. Since privilege is conditioned as unearned advantage, privilege is unjust.

Now, the only criterion we need to define privilege is that it is an unearned advantage. I will thus not make use of Bailey’s privilege conditions but focus on the earned/unearned character. Privilege in my definition is conditioned as the granting of unearned advantages. As I see it, ‘dominant social group’ is perhaps best understood in terms of privileges; a dominant social group is a group that is systematically granted privileges. Therefore, even the privilege* definition in the section on Bailey would be circular since in that definition privilege is conditioned as conferred to dominant social groups. My definition of privilege avoids this circularity since it focuses on advantages as earned or unearned only.

Looking then at the corresponding phenomenon, the constraints on the corresponding, presumably oppressed group, the unjust constraints placed on that group make the privileges enjoyed by another group possible. The unjust constraints are required in order to let privileges be realized.

This approach is the one I will use in my definition of oppression. I will call it, “the privileged group condition”. Although this name resembles the name of Cudd’s condition I regard my condition as far more extensive.

3.5 Conditions of adequacy

The conditions of adequacy posed consist in that the definition must correspond to different forms of oppression; be able to unite feminists; be action guiding and; to some extent correspond to our everyday conception of oppression.

Even though there is no fact proving that this definition of oppression will be able to unite feminists, I believe that the general character in which the conditions are formed will be helpful. I also believe that the exclusion of the coercion condition is an advantage in this matter since this condition might frighten off women from the struggle since they may not experience themselves as coerced.

The definition is action guiding since it is normative; one of the conditions is that there has to be harm in order for a person to be oppressed and the privileged group condition involves the normative element of injustice.

As I understand the everyday conception of oppression, this definition does actually distinguish itself from at least one common everyday conception in that it focuses on oppression as part of structures and not only on single powerful persons exercising this power in an unjust way. However, when looking at e.g. feminist or anti-racist talk on oppression, this structural understanding of the concept appears to be rather widely spread.

3.6 Potential objections

Let's say that an artist is walking down the street and crosses a market place. It's sunny and all of the open air cafés on the market place have lots of parasols. To the artist, the parasols are an insult to any idea of esthetics. They are of all kinds of colors and patterns that clash. The artist gets really upset. She is sad and angry that the owners of the cafés can affect the public space in such a way. She even gets a headache from looking out over the market place. "How is this possible?" she asks herself. If you stretch it, you might say that there is a social institution which makes this behavior possible: the business owners are in fact entitled to put up these parasols. Thus we can say that the artist is harmed due to an institutional practice. This phenomenon is not limited to this very market place. Almost everywhere she goes in the city there are, to her, horrible sunshades, signs, window dressings and commercials that harm her in this way. Perhaps we can say that the harms form an enclosing structure. Had I followed Cudd in her stating that the social group at issue must exist independently of the oppressive harm, the artist might not have been regarded as harmed due to the membership of a social group. But if the social group condition is not conditioned in this way, perhaps we should regard the artist and other persons (who we suppose exists) who are harmed in the same way, as being members of a social group. In that case, the artist can be said to be harmed due to her membership of the social group "those who feel really bad about the commercial decoration of the city". The artist seems to have met the three first conditions of my definition. Still, I would not say that she is oppressed. The reason for this can be found in the fourth condition: the privileged group condition. There is no such group at issue here. We might say that the café and shop owners benefit from using these and clashing parasols and signs (perhaps they are cheap), but they definitely do not benefit from the harm inflicted on others - rather the opposite, since, due to the harm, the artist will be unlikely to sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee. Now, one might argue that this is too circumstantial a way of making clear that the artist is not oppressed. One might want to condition the quality of the harm suffered so that all harms would not count as oppressive. However, I refrain from further penetrating this aspect in order to decide what kinds of harms are relevant and what kinds are not. Instead I am satisfied with the fact that if one of the conditions is not met then the person is not oppressed.

The definition presented in this paper might appear to be lacking an aspect that is perhaps often assumed as necessary for oppression; an aspect of domination. To respond to this we first need to make clear what is meant by domination. In Bailey's discussion on privilege, she states that benefits that are granted by privileges are conferred to members of dominant groups. But she does not define 'dominant group'. In my understanding, the dominant group can actually be understood in terms of groups that are granted (unjust) privileges. The fact that an individual is a member of a certain group involves being granted advantages simply because of this group membership and not because the individual has in any way earned the advantage. Being granted (unjust)

privileges also involves that the maintaining of the privilege system is in the interest of this group, even if individuals might oppose to the system. By the granting of the (unjust) privileges, the dominant social group gets advantages that involve power over or in relation to non-dominant groups. If men hold positions involving power to a greater extent than women (due to social constraints against women and privileges conferred to men), men are granted with power that directly may influence the lives of women. This power might originate from the fact that a woman is financially dependent on a man or that she works for a man. If we understand dominance in this way, the definition and conditions presented in this paper do involve the aspect of domination.

My response to this 'dominance aspect' critique might not satisfy all readers since the aspect of potential dominance is not covered. Dominance or power as a potentiality concerns e.g. a situation in which a person or a group has the possibility of exercising power or inflicting harm but for some reason chooses not to do this. Concerning my definition of oppression, a situation in which a social group could be exposed to oppressive harm but due to the benevolence from the potential oppressor is in fact not exposed to this harm, would not be regarded as part of oppression. This might lead to objections. However, as I see it, these situations might instead be regarded as parts of 'potential oppression' and thus still involve some important normative implication; i.e. that the oppression should be avoided and the origin of the potential oppression should be removed.

Furthermore, someone might object and claim that the standpoints from which my definition is developed are all feminist concepts or conceptions of oppression, and maybe a non-feminist would not agree on the definition. This might very well be the case. Surely there are philosophers who would not agree on my definition and instead pose other conditions. It would also be interesting to compare my definition (or Cudd's, or Frye's) to a non-feminist approach to oppression. However, my ambition is to come up with a definition that specifically has to do with the sexist oppression (even though I believe that other forms will be captured). Therefore, the standpoints that have been used have been chosen because they are feminist. One of my conditions of adequacy has to do with the hope to find a concept that can unite feminists, and I believe this is made easier if the starting points are feminist.

4 Summary

The last couple of decades, emancipatory movements like feminism have argued that oppression refers not only to the brutal ruling of a tyrant but also to more subtle structures which influence our behaviour. This paper starts from three feminist theories – by Ann Cudd, Marilyn Frye and Alison Bailey – on the concept oppression. In chapter 2, these theories are critically discussed with the purpose to conclude with a new definition of (structural) oppression.

Cudd poses coercion as one of four conditions of oppression. I have argued that a removal of this condition is an advantage for the definition since coercion may be seen as connoting instances of violence, which are not necessary for someone to be oppressed. This connotation might frighten people from recognizing themselves as oppressed and thus distance them from the struggle against oppression. I have also argued that the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary groups that Cudd makes is not necessary concerning oppression. I do, however, make use of Cudd's concepts of harm, social institution and social constraints in my definition.

Frye poses only an outlined definition of oppression in her article and primarily I build on her concept of enclosing structures. Frye's concept lacks the aspects of injustice and privilege. The privilege aspect is expanded by Bailey. In this essay the privilege aspect is further developed, as is also concluded in my "privileged group condition". The injustice aspect of oppression is accounted for also within the privileged group condition.

I have argued that the concept of oppression should be understood *as an enclosing structure that, by way of institutional practice, harms members of a social group, while members of another, or other, corresponding social groups benefit from the harm suffered by those oppressed.*

In chapter 3 I argue for how the central concepts of this definition should be understood, from the starting point of my four conditions: The harm condition; the enclosing structure condition; the social group condition; and the privileged group condition. These conditions are, I believe, necessary and sufficient conditions of any form of structural oppression.

I have argued that oppressive harm comes from institutional practice; actions guided by social institutions which specify what kind of behaviour that is appropriate for a person based on the person's membership to social groups (not on individual characteristics). The social constraints defined by the social institutions form enclosing structures, which means that the constraints are related in a way that limits the possible

alternatives and in turn, all alternatives expose the oppressed person to harm. The privilege aspect is another important aspect of oppression. For a harm to be oppressive there has to be a social group that benefits from the harm.

The conditions of adequacy posed in this essay involve that the definition shall: correspond to different forms of oppression; be able to unite feminists (in a terminological sense concerning the fundamental concept of oppression); be action guiding; and to some extent correspond to our everyday conception of oppression.

The definition satisfies, I believe, the first condition since, due to its general character; it is not contingent on any specific form of oppression.

The second condition has potential of being realized. Feminists will still disagree on the origin of or the method against oppression but my definition does not involve these issues. Whether or not sexism might be e.g. a 'development' of class oppression, the definition captures the key features of oppression that I believe are included in many different feminist perspectives.

The definition is action guiding since it involves normative aspects such as harm and injustice.

Though this definition, as I made clear in the introduction, will not cover some instances of injustice which the conventional use of the concept is likely to regard as instances of oppression, I believe that it still captures the significant aspects of oppression as the concept is understood also in the everyday sense.

Finally, with this paper I wish to contribute to the critical discussion on how oppression as a normative concept can and should be used and hope for a further developing debate.

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