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ARTICLE

Intersubjective Meanings and Oppressive Social Practices

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Abstract

Recently, social philosophers have argued for a practice-based social ontology that can furnish a robustly social account of oppression and, in turn, illuminate the obstacles to and possibilities for social change. This paper argues for an intersubjective approach to oppressive social practices. Oppressive meanings constitute relationships between agents in ways they neither choose nor decide on; agents uphold those meanings through their relationships to others. This approach, I argue, can illuminate a critical case of an oppressive social practice that revolves around struggles for recognition and the dynamics of social change.

Recently, social philosophers have sought to explain structural oppression in terms of a practice-based social ontology (Gooding-Williams 2021; Haslanger 2012, 2016, 113–30; 2017, 1–22; Jaeggi 2018).[1] Structural oppression, as Iris Marion Young defines it, occurs when the "everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (Young 1990, 41) undermine the institutional conditions social groups need to exercise self-development and self-determination: the ability to express thoughts, feelings, and needs in a way others recognize, and to participate in determining the conditions of one's actions (Young 1990, 37–38).[2] As concepts like "rape culture" or "structural racism" suggest, a structural conception of oppression deemphasizes the role that individual beliefs or attitudes play in large-scale patterns of sexual violence or racism, for example, and instead emphasizes the "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols . . . the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young 1990: 41). Social practices, meanwhile, are activities structured by constitutive rules and resources. There are two primary reasons a practice-based social ontology,

[1]Analytic social ontology more broadly has not traditionally focused on oppressive social phenomena, but two recent works take oppression as a starting point. See Burman 2023 and Jenkins 2023.

[2]The values of self-development and self-determination do not entail a specific conception of the good life for all agents; instead, Young notes, they are comprised of the general necessary conditions for agents to discover and forge their own conceptions of a good life.

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which takes such activities to be the most fundamental components of social reality, has been thought useful for explaining structural oppression.[3]

First, this social ontology can orient our normative judgements towards the social, political, and economic structures from which structural oppression arises. Social ontology is, after all, not neutral. It directs our attention towards certain aspects of the social world and away from others, thereby framing our accounts of social phenomena. As Young observes, "normative judgements of justice are about something, and without a social ontology we do not know what they are about" (Young 1990, 25). A social ontology based primarily on the mental states of individuals may lead one to focus on individuals in explaining structural oppression. By contrast, because a practice-based social ontology prioritizes the rule-governed activities through which agents reproduce social reality, it highlights the way the structure of such activities can undermine the self-development and self-determination of social groups.[4] But such attention to social structures does not come at the expense of attention to individual agents, and indeed, a second appeal of a practice-based social ontology is that it can capture the co-constitutive nature of structure and agency. Agents reproduce the structures that shape their action by drawing on the rules and resources of practices to "express … themselves *as* actors" (Giddens 1984, 2), a co-constitutive relationship that brings out different dimensions of structural oppression.[5] Neglect the role of structure, and it is difficult to explain why oppression is so pervasive and hard to eradicate; neglect the role of agents, however, and a granular account of how oppression persists or can be overcome remains elusive.

The turn to practices to theorize structural oppression is promising. Yet a philosophical challenge remains. In what sense does this social ontology furnish an account of oppression that is robustly *social*? After all, the reason theorists turn to practices is to avoid what they take to be limitations of individualistic models of the social world: namely, that focusing on the mental states of individuals obscures both the "objective" character of an oppressive social reality and the way it can impinge or "push back" (Haslanger 2012, 415) on individuals. A practice-based social ontology, however, promises to articulate the robustly social character of oppression and, therefore, the sense in which an oppressive social reality can acquire an "objective" character. This, in turn, shows why eradicating oppression demands not just a change in individuals but in the social world itself. To accomplish this task, theorists have pointed to the way

[3]The turn to practices to theorize oppression comes in the wake of a broader "practice turn" in social theory. For representative works and discussion of this practice turn, see Bernstein 1976; Giddens 1984; Pitkin 1972; Taylor 1985; Schatzki 1996; Bourdieu 1977.

[4]It is not always clear what it is for a social ontology to be "individualistic". But for the purposes of this paper, I will operate with the standard understanding found in the structural oppression literature: an individualistic approach is one that takes individual-level phenomena, such as individual beliefs, attitudes, desires, and choices, as the fundamental building blocks of social reality. Social ontology shapes what appears as relevant to social explanation; an individualistic approach will seek to explain other social phenomena by reference to individual-level phenomena. It should be noted that individualism can be understood as distinct from accounts that invoke collective intentionality to explain the construction of social reality. As Brian Epstein argues, the latter understands the social world to be a projection onto "brute facts," while the former understands social facts to supervene on facts about individuals. See Epstein 2015. While the intersubjective approach is intended to be in opposition to an individualistic one, it may be compatible with some collective intentionality approaches, though not all (see n. 14).

[5]For other accounts of the co-constitutive nature of structure and agency, see Archer 1988 and Sewell 1992.

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oppression is instantiated in the material world, embedded in social roles, or internalized by individuals. Yet far less attention has been paid to the concept of *intersubjective meanings* or the way it can aid a practice-based analysis of oppression. My aim in this paper is to show that this concept illuminates a fundamental yet underexplored sense in which oppression is robustly social, one that focuses on the way oppressive meanings constitute and are constituted by the relationships agents construct to others.

The argument proceeds in three stages. In §1, I present the general features of a social practice and explain what makes a practice oppressive by analyzing a critical case. In §2, I motivate the need for the concept of intersubjective meanings by showing that this case is not well-explained just in terms of material constraints or internalized meanings. I argue that neither adequately captures the central role that interpersonal relationships play in oppressive social practices like the one described in §1. In §3 I elucidate the concept of intersubjective meanings to bring out the robustly social character of oppressive meanings. Expressed through rules that construct relationships between agents, as well as forms of mutual action, intersubjective meanings compel agents to relate to others in prescribed ways. Understanding oppressive meanings as intersubjective, I argue, reveals one reason such meanings are often difficult to dislodge. If agents uphold oppressive meanings through the relationships into which they are conscripted by a practice, and if such relationships are sources of recognition, agents may be reluctant to abandon even practices they recognize as wrong.

A preliminary caveat regarding scope: this paper focuses on an oppressive social practice driven by struggles for recognition. The analysis I develop will not, therefore, directly or comprehensively apply to *all* cases of structural oppression: economic exploitation, for example, involves other structural factors. However, my hope is that the analysis sheds light not just on cases similar to the critical case I analyze, but on the oft-overlooked intersubjective dimension of cases in which other factors are more immediately salient.

1. What is an oppressive social practice?

To introduce the basic notion of a social practice, I begin with an example. C. J. Pascoe introduces the concept of the "fag discourse" in her ethnographic study of the way high-school boys reproduce dominant ideas of masculinity (Pascoe 2012). The concept refers to the many interactions between the boys in which the titular slur was used as an insult or in service of "humorous imitation" (Pascoe 2012, 60).[6] While one might assume its pervasiveness was due to widespread homophobia, Pascoe argues, this cannot explain why the slur was used to target non-sexual behavior or why it was not applied to lesbians or openly gay boys who conformed to stereotypical masculinity. To grasp the usage and meaning of the slur, it must be understood primarily as "a symbol around which contests for masculinity took place" (Pascoe 2012, 82). The boys used the slur to stigmatize what Pascoe describes as "failures of masculinity" or "fag behavior," a social category that

[6]Although all groups of boys at the school, except Mormon students, used the slur as a way to denote an emasculated status, Pascoe observes that the specter of the fag was racialized. She writes, "Precisely because African American men are so hypersexualized in the United States, white men are, by default, feminized, so *white* was a stand-in for *fag* among many of the African American boys at River High" (Pascoe 2012, 71). Moreover, she observes, clean clothing and dancing were two qualities that could put a white boy in the "fag" position, but they carried positive connotations for African American boys at the school in virtue of their connection to hip hop culture. See further Pascoe 2012, 71–77.

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included shows of same-sex affection, walking in an "effeminate" way, showing concern about style or cleanliness, or displaying even minute forms of incompetence. Behavior that fell into this category was seen to violate a specific ideal of masculinity: one that prized self-control, the exertion of sexualized dominance over others, and the concealment of perceived weakness.

The slur had the power to symbolically transform a boy into "the fag," a figure who appeared in the collective imagination as "simultaneously predatory and passive and ... at all costs, to be avoided" (Pascoe 2012, 53). The "fag" was a "fluid" identity all sought to avoid, and one "most boys could escape, usually by engaging in some sort of discursive contest to turn another boy into a fag ... One off the best ways to move out of the fag position was to thrust another boy into that position" (Pascoe 2012, 61). Hence the "fag discourse" was like a game of "hot potato" (Pascoe 2012, 60): the boys became hyper-vigilant about ensuring that they exhibited no signs of "fag behavior" and, as deflection was an advantage, hyper-alert to others' lapses. Moreover, because what counted as "fag behavior" was not made explicit and could be expanded with novel uses of the slur, the boys could never be sure they would not be targeted. Consequently, the practice created an anxiety-ridden environment that pressured boys to conform to a stereotypical masculine ideal and punished those who failed.

The example of the "fag discourse" illustrates basic features of a social practice. First, as is well-known, practices are made up of rules that are constitutive. Constitutive rules do not regulate an activity that could be carried out in their absence, but establish the conditions under which a behavior counts *as* a specific kind of action, thereby enabling a practice to be carried out in the first place. Classic examples include rules of baseball and chess, but those unspoken rules that governed the "fag discourse" may also be understood in this vein.[7] Now, the boys did not necessarily recognize this as an activity with rules: one boy reported to Pascoe that one could be called the slur for "'anything ... literally anything'" (Pascoe 2012, 57), which suggests he perceived the activity as arbitrary. The myriad rules that were in effect, however, established the conditions under which certain behaviors would count *as* "fag behavior." Insofar as the point of the practice was to identify "real masculinity" and distinguish it from "failed masculinity," the rules that rendered these categories meaningful also made it possible for the practice to be carried out in the first place. The slur was, then, not just a tool with which the boys condemned "fag behavior," but one with which they reproduced this as an intelligible and significant social category.

Practices are constituted by "resources." William Sewell, drawing on Giddens, defines these as anything an agent can use to exercise power and specifies that they can fall into two camps (Sewell 1992, 9). "Nonhuman" resources include "animinate or inanimate" (9) objects, while "human" resources include capacities like physical strength, knowledge, or emotional skills that can be used to enhance one's power. I shall return to the role of material resources shortly. At this point, however, it is sufficient to observe that resources shape how, and to whom, the rules of a practice apply. One can imagine, for instance, that a greater share of "human" resources, like physical strength or

[7]The rules of baseball, for example, establish what counts as a home run, and so make it possible to play the game at all (Searle 1995, 27-29; cf. the "practice conception of rules" in Rawls 1955, 22–29). Some argue that talk of "rules" is misleading when applied to informal activities; William Sewell and Haslanger have, for instance, suggested that "rules" be replaced by "schemas." I retain the language of constitutive rules, however, because I think it can usefully call attention to the way ostensibly informal contexts can, in fact, be rigidly structured. See Sewell 1992 and Giddens's discussion in Giddens 1984, 19–21.

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charisma, would have made boys in the critical case less vulnerable to the slur or more easily able to repudiate it. To fully grasp how a practice structures a given social context, the practice must be understood as composed of rules *and* resources, as rules shape the resources in a practice and vice versa.[8]

What makes a practice oppressive? Joining this sketch of practices to the initial definition of oppression, one can say that social practices are oppressive when their rules and resources undermine the conditions agents need to engage in self-development and self-determination. Consider, for example, a recent civil rights investigation that sought to uncover whether a Mississippi Sheriff's Office had engaged in a "pattern or *practice* of 'systematically violat[ing] people's constitutional rights through excessive use of force; unlawful stops, searches, and arrests; and discriminatory policing'" (Kim 2024, my emphasis). Oppression, in this case, consisted in wrongs like violence, degradation, and the violation of constitutional rights to which law enforcement subjected black citizens. What made the *practice* of policing oppressive, however, was the fact that its rules and resources—its structure—created conditions that made these wrongs a likely outcome, systematically undermining the ability of black citizens to exercise self-development and self-determination. The relevant rules and resources may have included ideas about what counted as good policing or who counted as a criminal, or the increased militarization of American police departments (Balko 2013).

This approach highlights the way a practice's structure incentivizes agents to act, such that oppression does not appear as a result of "a few bad apples" but of rules and resources that can recur across otherwise distinct practices. Indeed, if one can show similarities between the structure of policing and that of other practices, one can articulate the systemic character of racism. Moreover, by focusing on the structure of practices one can bring out the oppressive dimension of practices that may not appear to be oppressive in a clear-cut way. The "fag discourse," for example, involves some ambiguity insofar as it blurs the line between perpetrators and victims: it's true that some boys were targeted more intensively than others, but all were conscripted into using the slur and were its potential targets. Considering the connection between its rules and resources and conditions for self-development, however, reveals a sense in which it counts as an oppressive social practice. The practice as a whole defined "real masculinity" in terms of heterosexuality, proof of which was demonstrated through sexualized aggression. Hence, the practice created conditions that undermined the ability of gay male students and female students to gain the respect they needed to exercise self-development, unhindered. The practice meant that gay male students were accepted on the condition of social invisibility, and that female students were frequently subject to sexual harassment.[9]

[8]I sideline important conceptual questions this raises, such as how "rules and resources" are supposed to relate to one another, and whether one dimension should be understood as primary. Both Sewell and Haslanger argue for the significance of "resources" in understanding social practices, for instance. For Sewell's critique of Giddens's formulation of "rules and resources" see Sewell 1992.

[9]Does this practice oppress straight male students? Marilyn Frye argues that while everyone faces limitations and restrictions, identifying a limitation as oppressive requires that we ask: "Who gets what out of the practice of those disciplines, and who imposes what penalties for improper relaxations of them? What are the rewards of this self-discipline?" (Frye 1983, 14). This practice, I would argue, *harms* straight male students as it limits their capacity for self-expression. But, following Frye, the claim that this constitutes oppression would overextend the concept, especially as the practice rewards traits that aid the boys' self-esteem and their acceptance by other boys.

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2. Schematic materiality and internalization

With this brief sketch of an oppressive social practice in view, I turn now to the way such an account can capture the dynamics of structural oppression. Sally Haslanger's influential account of social practices is useful in this regard as it is explicitly oriented toward the question of why oppression persists or changes. This section shows the limits of understanding the critical case from §1 in terms of one of her proposals, on which oppressive meanings are instantiated in the material world, and the limits of a second proposal, in which individuals internalize oppressive meanings. The shortcomings of these proposals will motivate the turn, in §3, to intersubjective meanings as a necessary component of a practice-based social ontology that sheds light on oppression.

For Haslanger, social practices are composed of "schemas," or collective meanings and norms, and "resources," or material elements like objects, the built environment, and power. Social practices also set up the "nodes," or social roles and positions, agents occupy, as well as relationships between them. By Haslanger's lights, the concept of a practice furnishes a robustly social account that can explain how it is possible for oppression to "push back" (Haslanger 2012, 415) on agents—that is, compel agents to act in ways that might conflict with their own beliefs, attitudes, and desires. This, in turn, promises to explain oppression's "sticky" character, or the way it can persist despite the beliefs, attitudes, or desires of those who uphold it. Philosophically, the task is as follows: (1) to develop an account of oppression that counts as robustly social insofar as it invokes something *other* than mental states of individuals as part of oppression's socio-ontological foundations; (2) to show, on the basis of this account, how oppression can compel agents to act in ways that come apart from their own beliefs, attitudes, or desires; (3) and so, to explain why it is that social transformation cannot be *solely* a matter of changing the minds of individuals.

Haslanger's first proposal invokes "schematic materiality" (Haslanger 2012, 417), or the interdependence of schemas and resources in practices. One can think, for example, of the way that wheelchair ramps in a city are shaped by schemas about who is thought to belong in a community, while also reinforcing those schemas. What makes this a robustly social account of oppressive meanings is that one has to point to the material world itself, not just the mental states of individuals, in order to capture the socio-ontological foundations of those meanings. Consequently it sheds light on the way schemas "push back" on agents in virtue of their instantiation in the material world. I may, for example, be adamantly opposed to car-centric infrastructure and the individualistic ethos to which it gives rise, and yet end up sustaining this ethos if the only way I can get to work is on the highway. The concept of schematic materiality clarifies, then, why social transformation requires a change to material dimensions of the social world. It is clear that, in order to undermine an individualistic ethos, one cannot change individual attitudes alone, but must also take aim at the built environment in which such an ethos is embodied.

But not all oppressive meanings are mediated through the material world in this way, as Haslanger observes. What description can we give of these other cases that meets the philosophical challenge outlined above? Grappling with this question, Haslanger initially proposes that oppressive schemas can be "internalized" and "guide behavior" (Haslanger 2016, 126). And yet, she recognizes, this does not meet the desideratum that the account be robustly social. As she writes, if "schemas are internalized and govern action through individual psychology … again we seem to be left with familiar individualistic explanation" (Haslanger 2016, 127). In response, she suggests, psychological

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facts can "trigger" action but structural constraints "set limits, organize thought and communication, create a choice architecture; in short, they structure the possibility space for agency" (127). More broadly, while agents do internalize oppressive meanings, invoking such internalized states alone conceals other, structural factors that shape what agents do. It may be true, for example, that women take on an unequal share of domestic labor in virtue of internalized gender norms, but this alone is insufficient as an explanation as it occludes the role of factors like workplace and governmental policies.

Against this conceptual backdrop, how are we to make sense of the critical case from §1? On the one hand, schematic materiality is not entirely apt. For although the oppressive meanings in the practice were surely embodied in some material objects—the kind of clothing marketed to boys for instance—this was not the primary form these meanings took. The two even came into conflict: changing rooms at the school went unused because changing clothes after shop class was deemed "fag behavior." On the other hand, an appeal to internalized meanings and norms is not entirely satisfactory either. This may seem to be a more apt account, as the "fag discourse" did not involve paradigmatically structural constraints of, say, an economic or political character. But even in this case, I shall argue, appealing to internalization obscures more than it illuminates in ways that highlight the need for an intersubjective approach.

In order to bring this into view, let us work backwards from Haslanger's claim that internalization accounts conceal the social factors that "structure the possibility space for agency." I would argue that the relevant factors in the critical case are interpersonal interactions. Consider the frequency with which the boys lobbed the slur at one another, the punishing attention they paid to even trivial "transgressions," and the occasional confusion the boys betrayed about what, exactly, this practice demanded of them.[10] These features of the practice suggest that there was a need for the "rules of gender" to be perpetually reasserted and policed. Although the boys surely had internalized ideas about what it meant to be a man, taking this to be a sufficient explanation of their participation conceals the central role such interpersonal interactions played. Moreover, it shapes how one perceives the boys' activity. If one understands the boys' activity to have been primarily driven by an internal sense that certain behaviors were shameful or unmanly, it is hard to bring this activity's "other-directed" character into view. By "other-directed," I mean the way this activity was driven by desires to be seen or not seen in a certain light by others and, more broadly, a heightened consciousness of the way one appeared in the eyes of others.

Of course, focusing on internalized meanings and norms, on the one hand, and interpersonal interactions, on the other hand, are not mutually opposed. But, as a practice approach aims to highlight the social processes through which oppression is reproduced, it is especially important to bring out the inner dynamics of the processes by which the boys internalize dominant ideas about masculinity, which here crucially involve interpersonal interactions. Such internalization may be an outcome of these

[10]I focus on a case in which interpersonal interactions play a central role, but the other factors Haslanger describes as contributing to a "choice architecture" are important for making sense of other cases of structural oppression: our agency is certainly channeled by economic imperatives, laws, and the structure of formal institutions. Focusing on the role that interpersonal interactions play in these other cases can be helpful: in the case of the unequal division of domestic labor, for instance, we should pay attention not just to internalized gendered meanings or governmental policies, but to the way gendered meanings constitute relationships between men and women in a household. Thank you to the anonymous referee who pushed me to clarify this point.

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social processes; our theoretical frameworks, however, should give us the tools to talk about these processes themselves and not just their end result.[11]

If this is the case, one might wonder why internalization-talk is common in explanations of oppression's persistence? Revealing here is Haslanger's remark that if a set of oppressive meanings is to "push back" on agents, there must exist "an actualization of it in the world ... that involves something material" (Haslanger 2012, 415). One might imagine, for instance, that ideas about what it is to be a man can exist *in* the social world only by being embodied in something material. As a corollary, it may seem that the only other place such ideas can be "located" is "embodied in individuals" (415): not external, but internal to individuals. One point of a practice-based social ontology, however, is to challenge this conceptual topography and the dualism on which it rests, and to make space for a third possibility, on which meanings emerge out of relationships between agents. One lesson to draw from Haslanger's critique of internalization is that we need to think about the social ontology of oppressive meanings in a way that is neither just material nor just in the minds of individual agents, but in a way that captures their robustly intersubjective character. The subsequent section develops such an account and show how it responds to the challenge laid out at the start of §2.

3. An intersubjective account of oppressive meanings

In this section, I introduce the concept of intersubjective meanings and show how it applies to oppression in a way that meets the three desiderata laid out at the start of §2. I conclude with some remarks about its implications for social change.[12]

The concept of intersubjective meanings is most closely associated with Taylor's discussion of social practices, where he defines intersubjective meanings as a "vision of the agent and his relation to others and to society" (Taylor 1985, 35) that is "not just in the minds of the actors but ... *out there in the practices themselves*, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action" (Taylor 1985, 36). In what sense are intersubjective meanings "out there in the practices themselves"? As a first step, consider the way intersubjective meanings are instantiated in the rules of a practice as a whole: a vision of democratic citizenship that prizes individual autonomy is not just expressed through one rule but through a whole host of rules that, taken together, establish how agents must relate to others to successfully perform the practice. Voters must, for instance, cast private ballots, and campaigners must remain at a distance from the voting site. The relationships these rules establish express, and indeed actualize, the idea that autonomy is a key component of democratic citizenship.

Intersubjective meanings are also grounded in modes of mutual action: an action, like teaching, whose successful performance requires multiple agents to play distinct roles. Such meanings necessarily require, therefore, more than one agent to sustain them. A society that highly prizes civic responsibility in its conception of democratic

[11]For instance, a woman may have internalized shame about her body in virtue of the way others perceive her, but a practice approach should bring into theoretical view the activities and reactions of others through which she came to grasp what counted *as* shameful in the first place.

[12]While others, including Haslanger and Gooding-Williams, observe that practices involve social roles and relationships, my account focuses on the way oppressive meanings constitute the relationships in oppressive practices, and the implications this has for the dynamics of social change. For a complementary discussion of the "robustly relative" nature of social inequalities, see Neuhouser 2022.

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citizenship may implement a public defense in which voters must articulate reasons for their vote before a group of fellow citizens to successfully cast a ballot.[13] Successfully casting a vote, in this case, requires two parties to play their respective roles: whether articulating reasons or attending to the reasons given by others. The public defense also establishes a specific kind of social relationship between its participants that differs from the one that exists in the case of the private ballot: in order to engage in the give-and-take of reasons it demands, I have to orient myself toward others not as if to a stranger or a friend but to a fellow citizen to whom I have a distinctive kind of responsibility.

Intersubjective meanings are robustly social insofar as they "do not bring together two free subjectivities, but two partners who must do different things and whose roles or statuses are determined by an established rule" (Descombes 2014, 301), as Descombes observes. While a group of agents might share the same set of beliefs about what, say, democratic citizenship means, this alone does not give this vision social reality.[14] Intersubjective meanings are robustly social not in virtue of "a certain intellectual content . . . simultaneously present in the minds of individuals" (Descombes 1994, 104), but in virtue of the way they structure relationships between agents in a practice. Looking solely at the beliefs and attitudes of participants in a practice may not, therefore, permit the intersubjective meanings in that practice to come fully into view as these can come apart. Perhaps I participate in the practice of voting with all kinds of beliefs about the merits of different candidates or the political process itself and yet, to paraphrase Taylor, what I do not bring with me is the vision of democratic citizenship that underpins the social practice. This vision is, rather, embedded in how I must relate to others in order to cast my ballot.

It is in virtue of their robustly social character that intersubjective meanings can constrain agents. They do so in two interrelated ways. First, as is true of practices generally, the rules through which intersubjective meanings get expressed have an independent, "stage-setting" quality: they set out how one must relate to others in order to participate, they apply to *anyone* who wants to do so, and they cannot be changed by individuals at will. If I want to vote, I must participate in the public defense; to refuse to do so because "that's not how *I* vote" would be both nonsensical and result in a failure to vote at all. Second, because intersubjective meanings are grounded in forms of mutual action, we need others' cooperation in order to uphold them; conversely, others may

[13]I thank Robert Gooding-Williams for drawing my attention to this example.

[14]How, one might wonder, does this differ from approaches that focuses on collective intentionality? Appealing to intersubjective meanings is not necessarily incompatible with approaches that invoke collective intentionality. Generally, however, it differs in two ways from some versions of the collective intentionality approach. On Searle's influential account, for example, social facts are constructed out of what he calls "we-intentions," intentional states that are not singular but plural in nature. An intersubjective approach departs from this one in two ways. The first is methodological: rather than begin with the "building blocks" of collective intentions that "'set up" social facts, this approach begins from the social practices in which agents are already engaged; forms of collective intentionally would emerge out of and reinforce their participation in such practices. Second, as Descombes's remark suggests, what makes intersubjective meanings social is not a property of intentional states, even if those states are collective, but the way they structure relationships between agents. This differs from Searle's approach on which intentional states can construct a *social* world in virtue of their collective character; hence, his central disagreement is with those who think collective intentionality can be built out of individual intentions (e.g., Bratman 1999). See Searle 1995 and Searle 2010. For an alternative account that attends to the role of practices, see Kern and Moll 2017, 315–33; for an account that focuses on why this is important for understanding oppression, see Chelstrom 2018, 241–64; for a general discussion, see Pettit 1996. Thank you to the referee who pushed me to clarify the relationship between these two approaches.

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conscript us into upholding intersubjective meanings. If I want to actualize the idea that education consists in the unhindered pursuit of curiosity but students treat me as a "sage on the stage" and themselves as passive consumers, my vision of education will be frustrated. I may find myself upholding a set of meanings that I do not personally endorse. Agents actively uphold intersubjective meanings, but they do not do so as "free subjectivities" insofar as their capacity to do so depends on established relationships to others.

This concept of intersubjective meanings better illuminates the robustly social character of oppressive meanings.[15] Consider what it means to be a "real man" in the "fag discourse." On this account, we can see this idea as grounded in the myriad rules of the practice as a whole, rules that govern how one should move, dress, show affection, enjoy, and so forth. These rules establish how the boys must relate to others—the forms of mutual action in which they must engage—to achieve the esteemed status of a "real man." To achieve this esteemed status or to avoid the "fag" status, they must construct and come to stand in a hierarchical relationship to another boy who is devalued. Multiple agents have to "play their part" in a way that does not involve others' cooperation as much as it does their forceful conscription into the "fag" status. Just as the public defense aims as the successful performance of voting, this mutual action aims, in some sense, at the successful performance of masculinity as well as at the achievement of status, esteem, and recognition, and the avoidance of social devaluation.

Agents uphold oppressive meanings through their relationships to others, the forms of which are not entirely up to them as individuals. Understanding oppressive meanings as intersubjective allows us to see one sense in which such meanings acquire an independent social reality, which sheds light in turn on how even agents who disagree with oppressive meanings may be complicit in their perpetuation. Consider, as an example of this, that despite the boys' enthusiastic participation in the "fag discourse," many disavowed homophobia when Pascoe asked them about their own beliefs and attitudes. One might wish to attribute this to a desire to avoid the appearance of bigotry, but the possible conflict between oppressive social meanings and the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of individuals is a broader phenomenon, as Young's description of structural oppression as grounded in the "everyday practices of a *well-intentioned* liberal society" (Young 1990, 41, emphasis my own) indicates.

If the oppressive meanings in the practice are grounded in hierarchical relationships, however, it is more evident how agents can be motivated to uphold them, regardless of their individual beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. Oppressive meanings in the "fag discourse" establish how the boys must relate to others in order to gain status, esteem, and recognition, and so they have a powerful motivation to participate: to achieve an esteemed status or avoid the painful experience of being degraded. Regardless of whether they object or remain indifferent to the ideas the practice expresses, it is hard to resist being drawn into it or to opt out. For one thing, because one had to stand in the right relationship to a devalued other in order to achieve the esteemed status, any boy was likely to find himself conscripted as an unwilling partner into someone else's bid for status at some point. For another, because the rules governing these relationships had a public and independent

[15]For a philosophical treatment of the moral, social, and political importance of intersubjectivity and recognition, see Honneth 2012 and Honneth 1995. Honneth emphasizes the way we develop a relation-to-self through recognitive relationships to others, which provides a way to think about the sense in which intersubjective meanings are *intersubjective:* namely, insofar as they establish the structure of the relationships through which we come to understand ourselves.

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character, he *had* to redirect the slur or risk his standing in the eyes of others. He might have objected to the practice and what it expresses, but there were no socially legible ways to challenge it that would not simply appear to be an acceptance of the devalued status—and so failure by the lights of the practice. It is not that individuals can *never* resist oppressive meanings; indeed, Pascoe observes some of the ways male students did transgress the ideas about masculinity embedded in the "fag discourse."[16] Without recognizing how oppressive meanings can be embedded in intersubjective relationships, however, we will struggle to see the *social* obstacles that make it difficult for even those opposed to oppressive meanings to resist them.

The philosophical task outlined at the start of §2 had three desiderata. We sought, first, a robustly social account of oppression that would chart a path between prioritizing material aspects of the world and internalized states and, second, to explain how oppression "pushes back" on agents. On an intersubjective approach, oppressive meanings are instantiated in the rules that establish how agents must relate to others to perform a practice properly or, more specifically, to acquire the status, recognition, and esteem the practice makes possible. Because of the independent character of these rules, and because oppressive meanings depend on forms of mutual action, agents can be conscripted into perpetuating oppressive meanings even if they disagree with them. But what does this approach suggest about the third and final task—that of bringing out the possibilities for social transformation? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this task in full, I shall draw out two implications by way of conclusion. The first is quite general. The above account suggests that social theorists should devote greater attention to the way practices structure relationships between agents, especially relationships through which agents seek social goods of recognition, esteem, and status. The second implication concerns the difficulty of social change. When oppressive meanings structure recognitive relationships in this way, agents may be shaped by these meanings in ways that come apart from the recognition they are consciously seeking. Even if the boys were not aware of the wider meanings in the practice, their pursuit of esteem acculturates them into these meanings. For they do not need to comprehend the practice's underlying principles to participate, but just have to "do the right thing in the right context" where this means observing how others use the slur, attempting to use it correctly themselves, and assessing their relative success or failure by gauging the reactions of others.[17] Similarly, a boy who is labelled a "fag" does not need to grasp what his "failure" consists in or why it counts as a failure to get that *something* about who he is or what he has done counts as "wrong." It is through this process that the boys acquire a tacit and primarily non-discursive grasp of gender and sexuality that manifests in a sense of the shameful or admirable, or what is disgusting or arousing. By pursuing relational goods in oppressive contexts, agents can become acculturated into intersubjective meanings in ways that are hard to eradicate.

[16]This was not common, as the "fag discourse" pervaded most areas of life at the school. However, Pascoe does discuss the experience of Ricky, a student who transgressed norms of sexual and gender identity. Notably, his transgression was not taken up as a successful challenge to prevailing meanings in the "fag discourse"; rather, others sought to reinforce these meanings by subjecting Ricky to severe and ongoing harassment. Compare this to another example Pascoe discusses: drama performances, in which the "fag discourse" did not apply and in which there was a more playful atmosphere around gender and sexuality. This strikes me less as an act of individual resistance to the "fag discourse," and more as a space in which it did not permeate, such that a different set of practices could emerge. See Pascoe 2012, 65–71 and 78–81.

[17]Compare Pitkin 1972, 44–45 on "learning as training."

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Social ontology shapes the diagnosis we give of what drives oppression and how it can be remedied. Many forms of oppression concern unequal relationships of power, esteem, or status. Yet even social ontologies that aim to capture the dynamics of oppression do not always foreground the relational sphere. As a result, it becomes difficult to theoretically articulate central drivers of oppression, or how it can be addressed. My aim in this paper has been to show that practice-based social ontologies can better explain some forms of structural oppression by appealing to the concept of intersubjective meanings. Understanding how oppressive meanings structure relationships permits a clearer vision of the social barriers that exist to changing an oppressive social world.

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