

**HOW DOES OPPRESSION TWIST OUR AGENCY?**  
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**Question:** How does oppression affect our specific abilities?

**A familiar answer:** *Denials of uptake* affect oppressed persons' specific abilities.

**My answer:** Sometimes, oppressed person's specific abilities are affected when and because of what's *socially intelligible* for "people like that" to do "like that."

## 1. The uptake denial model

### 1.1. Examples:

*Refusal:* A woman attempts to refuse sex. Due indirectly to the proliferation of violent pornography in her society, the man she's with declines to give her behavior (saying "no") uptake as an act of refusal. As a result, she doesn't refuse: "Sometimes 'no,' when spoken by a woman, does not *count* as the act of refusal" (Langton 1993, 321).

*Expression of Affection:* In Western societies, men and women are offered distinct "normative vehicles for expressing heterosexual affection": a man "may express his affection by wrapping his arm around his lover, or by leading her on the dance floor", since he is understood to be her "protector and leader" (Anderson 1993, 18). In heteronormative contexts, a woman may not be able to express affection by leading her partner onto the dance floor.

*Sex:* In certain contexts, understandings of sex are deeply imbued with phallic, heterosexist content. Despite engaging in bodily movements and enjoying physical sensations that they experience as sexual, some lesbians recognize that such movements and sensations – when only experienced between women – will sometimes not count as having sex at all. Some conclude that they "quit having sex years ago"; after all, "by the criteria [...] most of the heterosexual people used to count 'times,' lesbians don't have sex at all. No male orgasms, no 'times'" (Frye 1990, 307-309).

*The uptake denial model:* Oppression deprives oppressed persons of specific abilities when uptakers deny them the cooperative treatment that would allow their agential contribution to come off as the intended act.

- 1.2. Three ingredients of the simple uptake denial model:
  - 1.2.1. Agential injustice involves some kind of “interactive failure”.
  - 1.2.2. The interactive failure is explained by an agential audience’s decline to provide uptake.
  - 1.2.3. Those who decline to provide uptake are culprits of agential injustice.
- 1.3. My claim: None of these features are essential to agential injustice.

## 2. The agential contribution model

*The agential contribution model:* Oppression *twists* specific abilities when members of oppressed groups are required to perform more (or, more demanding) more-basic actions than their dominantly-situated counterparts to perform the same nonbasic action.

- 2.1. Example: forgiving
  - 2.1.1. Forgiveness is a nonbasic action performed via more-basic acts (e.g., overcoming negative emotions, forswearing overt responses to the forgiven wrong, explicitly stating one’s forgiveness, etc.)
  - 2.1.2. Women as relationship managers, conversation planners, emotional laborers *par excellence*
  - 2.1.3. Conjecture: women may only be able to perform the complex act of *forgiving* by performing *more* (or more demanding) more-basic actions than their male counterparts
- 2.2. Such cases are not captured on the simple uptake denial model:
  - 2.2.1. When ideology is internalized by all, no interactive failure.
  - 2.2.2. Uptake does not need to be denied.
  - 2.2.3. Unclear who the “culprit” is when all perpetuate familiar interactive norms to roughly the same degree.

### 2.3. Lessons:

2.3.1. The uptake denial model is extensionally inadequate.

2.3.2. Agential injustice is sometimes a matter of *bad contexts for behavior* and not (only) *bad behavior*.

## 3. A more complex uptake denial model?

3.1. Attempt #1: “Uptake-denying structures” are reducible to patterns of actual uptake.

3.1.1. ...But very few acts require *actual* uptake from others.

3.2. Attempt #2: “Uptake denying structures” are a matter of representative uptake.

3.2.1. ...But whether  $\phi$ -ing is a behavioral “type of doing” is prior to (and different from) the existence of any good representatives who reliably, cooperatively receive other’s actions as instances of  $\phi$ -ing.

### 3.3. Lessons:

3.3.1. The uptake denial model’s extensional inadequacy is underwritten by an explanatory inadequacy.

3.3.2. “Uptake” captures the social construction of token actions; we are interested in the social construction of *act-types* themselves.

## 4. Socially intelligible agency

### 4.1. Four kinds of agential failures:

1) Source failures: our behaviors fail to emerge from the right sources (intentions, plans, other mental states)

I am surprised to observe my hand reaching for a fry on another person’s plate (e.g., Velleman 2004).

2) Production failures: our behaviors fail to produce the intended effects in the world (see discussion in Schapiro 2001).

I kick the ball but it doesn’t end up in the goal.

3) Responsiveness failures: our behaviors don’t properly respond to our situations (e.g., Muñoz 2021).

I think I’m dribbling, scoring a goal but it turns out I’m wearing a convincing VR headset.

4) Type-instantiation failures: our behaviors don’t constitute the right “type of doing” when our participation in some activity is threatened.

I kick the ball into the net but fail to thereby *score a goal* because I’m not a player (e.g., Rawls 1955, Schapiro 2001, Schapiro 2003).

- 4.2. “Uptake denial” helps capture oppressed persons’ systematic vulnerability to productive failures.
- 4.3. “Social intelligibility” captures their systematic vulnerability to type-instantiation failures.
  - 4.3.1. Abilities to  $\phi$  in socially intelligible ways (“SI-abilities”) are threatened when the “rules” of interactive activities (conversation, sex, moral repair) mean that we cannot intelligibly instantiate “types” through the same behaviors as others.
- 4.4. Reducing social intelligibility to “likelihood of getting uptake” = describing a type-instantiation failure as a production failure.
  - 4.4.1. ...Fails to include cases in which there is no imposed causal inefficacy.
  - 4.4.2. ...Fails to distinguish different kinds of agential failures/successes.
  - 4.4.3. ... Sometimes gets the explanation for why failures have occurred backwards.  
(Victims of oppression fail to make the right kind of difference in the world *because they fail to make sense.*)

## 5. Rescuing uptake

- 5.1. Two roles for uptake:
  - 5.1.1. Uptake can constitute the productive success of my action.
  - 5.1.2. Uptake can involve the reparative, creative work of *making sense of* my (yet unintelligible) agential contribution and so allowing it to insatiate the relevant type.