

2024

Affective Injustice and Responsibility for Emotion Regulation

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Recommended Citation

Villa, Katherine. 2024. "Affective Injustice and Responsibility for Emotion Regulation." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (1/2). Article 8.

Affective Injustice and Responsibility for Emotion Regulation

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the social norms that underlie our emotion regulation practices can result in further oppression of girls and women under conditions of patriarchy. One aspect of this oppression is the disproportionate responsibility for emotions that is taken on by girls and women in the wake of emotional distress caused by misogynistic aggression. I show that although emotion-regulation techniques are understood as ideal tools for enhancing agency and subjective well-being, and emotional labor is not necessarily oppressive, they may not only enable a perpetrator's ability to evade accountability but also, by outsourcing emotional regulation, allow the perpetrator to fail to cultivate emotional intelligence, which leads to a vicious cycle. In these cases, girls and women also face a double bind. If certain emotion-regulation practices succeed in aligning emotions with dominant social norms, we face emotional labor that not only benefits the regulator but feeds the cycle described above, and we face alienation from our apt feelings. If we fail to regulate our emotions by accepted standards and patriarchal entitlements, we may be outcast, pathologized, or otherwise marginalized. I argue that the consequences of this double bind constitute a site of affective injustice and expose asymmetrical relations of moral accountability in evaluations of the fittingness of emotions.

Keywords: emotion regulation, moral responsibility, oppression, social norms, affective injustice

1. Introduction

In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne (2017, 132) argues that women are seen as human “givers” rather than human beings. When girls and women fail to provide attention, care, and other female-coded services men believe they are entitled to, misogyny functions as a policing mechanism that punishes those who violate patriarchal norms and expectations (63–64, 114).¹ When we are perceived by men as trespassing patriarchal norms by failing to fulfill what men believe they are

¹ References to girls and women in this paper should be understood as inclusive, referring to both cis and trans girls and women.

entitled to, girls and women may be punished through shaming, degrading, and other abuse (68). In response to misogynistic acts, girls and women must constantly engage in emotion-regulation practices and negotiate between feeling and expressing apt emotions or regulating them for prudential reasons. We may regulate emotions both for our own benefit and for the benefit of others, and often the two overlap. In order to relieve emotional distress, we might manage situations by avoiding certain places or people that tend to provoke emotional distress or by reframing how we think about interactions that made us feel bad. Regulation strategies also dominate popular modes of discourse, such as through the culture of self-help and self-development, which is often replete with contradiction. Lisa Blackman (2004, 225) argues that within this discourse, the ideal “self-made woman” is encouraged to exercise agency by cultivating emotional detachment as a means to attain better intimate relationships, which are marked by emotional dependence. Women and girls must participate in often complex, cyclic, and taxing emotion-regulation practices to cope with living in a world shaped by norms, including emotion norms, that perpetuate a patriarchal dominant order. Within this social framework, emotion-regulation practices generate a double bind for women and girls.

Michelle Ciurria (2020b) alerts us to a flaw in our system of moral responsibility that often results in cases of “missing perpetrators.” For example, Ciurria describes how “disappearance narratives make it difficult for epistemic minorities to elicit uptake from the majority when they testify against (e.g., blame) privileged perpetrators who contribute to hierarchies of power that benefit them” (2). When feeling provoked by misogynistic aggression, it is practically difficult to achieve uptake when blaming men who commit brief, quotidian, and anonymous acts like catcalling or online trolling because they are conceived as simply part of a nebulous, inevitable “rape culture.” Instead, others feel unhappy or uncomfortable when a woman, depressed, anxious, or angered by the incident, turns down an invitation to go out or says something equally vulgar back at a harasser in public. The disapproval of her reactions results in her being blamed for being overly sensitive or hysterical.² She is made to feel bad about letting life get to her when “being happy is the best revenge.” When the victim takes full responsibility for regulating her emotions in the aftermath of the harassment, the perpetrators of misogynistic aggression that triggered the emotional distress in the first place are, for the most part, written out of the story.

² Of course, it is often right to take responsibility for our emotions and their effects on others. A recent article by Nabina Liebow and Trip Glazer (2023) offers an important account of cases where white individuals failed to regulate their emotional reactions to being called out on racist language and attitudes and how their interpersonal relations were damaged because of this.

The process that results in the oppressive double bind unfolds in the following way: girls and women are found guilty and punished through the mechanics of misogynistic policing, which, according to Manne, takes the form of harassment, trolling, belittling, and so on. As affective beings, we experience emotional distress in response to these misogynistic incidents. However, instead of the perpetrators of the harassment and aggression being sanctioned, they disappear, while women and girls become fully and disproportionately responsible for ensuring our own twisted version of restorative justice. In other words, through emotion-regulation practices and the norms that underly these practices, we tend to assume full responsibility for avoiding further sanctioning by not upsetting others through exposure to expressions of emotional distress, and part of this involves assuming responsibility for reintegrating ourselves back into the world to function socially again, which, for many, is a daily struggle. This process can also be explained using Valérie de Courville Nicol's (2011, 88) concept of "responsibilization" where "individuals are made responsible for problems that used to be taken care of by the collectivity." Our perceived sense of danger converts into a self-fear; therefore, we take individual responsibility for anything bad that happens, even if the actual cause of the setback or painful experience is provoked by a force beyond our control (90). We increasingly fear our individual capacities to transgress moral norms, and this has a civilizing effect of emotional regulation on the object of fear—that is, our own subjectivity (92, 97). Women and girls take responsibility for the external forces of misogyny, and in the aftermath, our focus turns inwards, scrutinizing our own reactions to it, determining if the reactions were appropriate, exaggerated, provocative, or problematic in some other sense. From these determinations, emotion regulation is implemented.

When women and girls do not or cannot diffuse strong emotional expressions, we are further at risk of marginalization by being pathologized if we suffer from chronic emotion dysregulation, phobias, anxiety, or depression. The expectation to jump back into the fray after a confrontation with misogyny is framed in terms of consequences. Bouncing back from the incident benefits the victim, thus making it her responsibility to produce a positive outcome, while dwelling on negative emotional reactions or letting them have some influence on her future decisions is regarded as erroneous. This belief serves to protect the emotional well-being of the people around her who avoid witnessing her "offensive" emotions, and the victim's social status and interpersonal relations are kept intact. However, this latter consequence of emotion regulation can be understood as a further injustice. Within the patriarchal normative landscape, girls and women, the "human givers," assume responsibility for globalized extrinsic management of men's emotions by upholding conditions favorable to their subjective well-being, sometimes at the expense of their own. We are responsible for maintaining men's contentment and keeping them from being set off. Women might display performative resilience or an "unbothered"

attitude, change our appearances, or pretend to be flattered by catcalling. We may simply confine ourselves to domains where we are less likely to encounter distressing situations, thus severely narrowing our spatial movement in the world. The strategy of avoidance has been theorized as a form of resistance to a hostile world, or what Susan Bordo (1989, 20) calls a “protest and retreat in the same gesture,” but this interpretation is contested. Either path leads to further oppression of girls and women.

My plan for this paper is to first present an example of this problematic process of “responsibilization” through the common case of street harassment, a practice of misogyny that is experienced by the majority of women. In these cases, a “disappearance narrative” (Ciurria 2020b) diverts moral responsibility onto victims while deflecting blame away from the misogynist aggressors. I then define emotion-regulation practices and offer examples of how each technique can be used in circumstances similar to those discussed in the first section. In the next section, I argue that these practices are influenced by emotion norms of appropriateness derived from the values of dominant groups who are protected from emotional discomfort. Since the success of emotion regulation practiced by girls and women is evaluated based on its effects, I argue that unfair emotion-regulation norms reveal a double bind. When girls and women engage in certain kinds of emotion regulation, they often assume a disproportionate amount of emotional labor. The injustice of this unequal distribution of labor derives from the fact that blame is diverted from perpetrators, which exploits the moral vulnerability of girls and women in these cases.³ Yet “failure” to regulate emotions may result in marginalization through medicalized interventions or in enabling dependency by encouraging women to stay at home or go out in public only with a companion. Using recent work on affective injustice, I argue that this double bind constitutes a case where affective goods are wrongly withheld. I conclude by discussing the concept of moral vulnerability and question how emotion regulation can be agency-enhancing in contexts where accountability relations are imbalanced.

³ The concept of moral vulnerability comes from Walker (2013, 112): “By moral vulnerability, I mean a vulnerability that inheres in our assumption that we possess a certain moral status as full participants in reciprocal accountability relations. All of us who see ourselves as possessing this status anticipate that we are rightly able to call others to account even as we ourselves are rightly liable to be called to account by others. The vulnerability in question is the potential for being exposed to the insult and additional injury, when we perceive ourselves wronged, of having our standing to call others to account denied, dismissed, or ignored in ways that call our very status as full participants into question.”

2. Missing Perpetrators in Cases of Catcalling and Street Harassment

Most girls and women are subjected to sexually motivated street harassment at some point in their lives, whether being catcalled on the street, targeted by explicit public displays, subjected to crude comments about body parts or facial expressions, or photographed without consent. Hawley Fogg-Davis (2006, 63) states, “Most girls first experience street harassment by boys and men at or even before puberty, and thus learn to see their bodies as sources of sexual danger; their sexual vulnerability to boys and men becomes an inescapable and constant condition of being female, a liability to be managed privately rather than discussed and remedied publicly.” The experience of harassment is disturbing, disgusting, and embarrassing, but the distinctly affective aftermath can be equally difficult to cope with, especially because, as Fogg-Davis notes, victims must deal with it in silence. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017, 23) describes a violation she experienced while jogging. She recalls:

A man whirled passed [*sic*] on a bike and put his hand up the back of my shorts. He did not stop; he just carried on cycling as if nothing had happened, as if he had not done anything. I stopped, shaking. I felt so sick; invaded, confused, upset, angry. I was the only witness to this event; my body its memory.

She then goes on to describe how things changed for her after the incident:

I began jogging again, but it was different: I was different. I was much more nervous. Every time someone came up behind me, I was ready, tense, waiting. I felt differently in my body, which was a different way of encountering the world.

Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight. The past becomes heavy. We all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with so many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen. (23)

While the male perpetrator Ahmed describes rode away as if nothing happened, she is left with the practical impossibility of holding him accountable. He quite literally disappeared. Yet, there is another way that perpetrators evade, or rather, displace, responsibility. Girls and women who are victims of harassment and aggression are often left with chronic emotional distress that accumulates, which Ahmed describes as a heaviness in the mind and body, which we alone are left to deal with. Although Ahmed resumed her routine of jogging outside, thus resisting the total restriction of

spatial movement such an experience could provoke, “it was different,” she says. Her perspective was permanently altered and imbued with difficult emotions. As I will later describe in terms of affective injustice, the emotional labor she had to undertake to resume her activities was unjustly augmented in these circumstances.

To illustrate how common and widespread street harassment experiences are, artist Noa Jansma posted over twenty selfies taken with catcallers over the course of one month in 2017. Her project, called “dearcatcallers,” gained three hundred thousand followers and commentators on Twitter. There have been other similar public artworks that highlight the ubiquity of street harassment. Silvia Schultermandl (2022, 188) notes, “[These] projects document instances of verbal abuse, but it is important to emphasize that verbal harassment is never just verbal: it is also somatic and visceral, linked to feelings of vulnerability and—in some cases—the anticipation of physical harm.” Racial and gender stereotypes also impact the experiences of street harassment and the dynamics of power that underly both their occurrences and consequences. Fogg-Davis (2006, 63) warns of the acute and often discounted danger posed by the street harassment and other forms of “sexual terrorism” experienced by black lesbian women who do not fit the heterosexual mold. Highlighting the case of Sakia Gunn’s murder in 2003, she describes the generational, psychological effects of damaging stereotypes:

Confronted with the relentless onslaught of messages that depict them as natural prostitutes and “breeders,” many black women adopt the defensive stereotype of the “strongblackwoman” (Morgan 2000) or “bullet-proof diva” (Jones 1997), which prevents them from seeing street harassment as a pressing political issue that harms them. Quoting Veronica Chambers, Kimberly Springer “likens Black women to magicians, ‘masters of emotional sleight of hand. The closer you get, the less you can see. It was true of my mother. It is also true of me’” (Springer 2002, 1070). (Fogg-Davis 2006, 73)

Acts of street harassment are omnipresent yet hidden in plain sight. Because much of the damage incurred is emotional, emotion-regulation practices mask its effects and facilitates perpetrators evasion of accountability.

Sandra Bartky conceptualizes catcalling in *Femininity and Domination* as a “ritual of subjugation.” She describes the phenomenon in the following way:

It is a fine spring day, and with an utter lack of self-consciousness, I am bouncing down the street. Suddenly, I hear men’s voices. Catcalls and whistles fill the air. These noises are clearly sexual in intent and they are meant for me; they come from across the street. I freeze. As Sartre

would say, I am petrified by the gaze of the Other. My face flushes and my motions become stiff and self-conscious. The body which only a moment before I inhabited with such ease now floods my consciousness. I have been made into an object. While it is true that for these men I am nothing but, let us say “a nice piece of ass,” there is more involved in this encounter than their fragmented perception of me. They could, after all, have enjoyed me in silence. Blissfully unaware, breasts bouncing, eyes on the birds in the trees, I could have passed by without having turned to stone. But I must be made to know that I am a “nice piece of ass”: I must be made to see myself as they see me. (Bartky 1990, 27)

On the other hand, Manne theorizes catcalling in terms of male entitlement rather than purely sexual objectification. According to her, it is

a male bid for women’s attention, which she is held to owe him (falsely). And he may also evince his sense of (again, illicit) entitlement to openly rank her in terms of her attractiveness and thus social status-conferring value. In other cases, this bid for her attention is more focused on her mind not being allowed to be (a) turned inward (such that she is thinking her own thoughts), (b) withheld from him via her putting up emotional “walls” (which tends to garner an epithet in the “bitch” family—is my anecdotal impression), or (c) averse to the attention that he foists on her boisterously and sometimes aggressively or threateningly. (Manne 2017, 115)

Both Bartky’s and Manne’s accounts highlight how catcalling involves dominating and policing the mental lives of girls and women. Bartky says, “*I must be made to know that I am a nice piece of ass*” and Manne states that “*her mind is not allowed to be turned inward*” and she can’t have “emotional walls” between her and the entitled male subject. It doesn’t always matter what she is wearing, as the objective of street harassment seems to be to gratuitously shock girls and women, to diminish their worlds by showing them that they exist to provide men with moments of sexual and emotional gratification and to strip away the possibility to walk and simply be, undisturbed. The damage arises from the aggressor’s ability to channel the violation to the more recalcitrant and subjective sphere of the victim’s mind, which in turn can limit her physical movement and spatiality. This inward turn is key to the process of “responsibilization” because the emotions become the source of danger rather than the uncontrollable, external force.

Bianca Fileborn and Jess Hardley's (2023, 333) investigations corroborate Bartky's description, finding that "such experiences often result in young women engaging in restrictive safety work, with the body becoming a site of 'risk' to be managed, rather than a source of agency and freedom." A young woman might self-consciously try to take up less space in her movement, feel tense and nervous where she once was at ease, or avoid public transportation and sites where she has been harassed, foregoing convenience or access to other goods. This is the paradigm picture of oppression as restriction of freedom according to Marilyn Frye's (1983, 4) definition in *The Politics of Reality*, which says, "The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction." The psychological effects of catcalling can result in physically confining women to spaces where they are unlikely to encounter or be seen by strange men, or in building protective psychological barriers, which has reverberating effects on their mental lives. Adrienne Rich describes the psychological impact on women's experiences in universities:

More subtle, more daily than rape is the verbal abuse experienced by the woman student on many campuses—Rutgers, for example—where, traversing a street lined with fraternity houses, she must run a gauntlet of male commentary and verbal assault. The undermining of self, of a woman's sense of her right to occupy space and walk freely in the world, is deeply relevant to education. The capacity to think independently, to take intellectual risks, to assert ourselves mentally, is inseparable from our physical way of being in the world, our feelings of personal integrity. If it is dangerous for me to walk home late of an evening from the library, *because I am a woman and can be raped*, how self-possessed, how exuberant can I feel as I sit working in that library? how much of my working energy is drained by the subliminal knowledge that, as a woman, I test my physical right to exist each time I go out alone? (Rich 1979, 242; emphasis in the original)⁴

Rich uses this example to show that despite the concept of "coeducation," the education of men and women is not equal, due to, among other factors, the continual reminder of her embodiment and the danger it entails (241). This constitutes an unjust psychological burden to regulate emotionally, siphoning energy away from the pursuit of other life projects such as reading and learning.

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the inclusion of this passage.

Ciurria (2020b, 2) argues that “these myths create asymmetries of power in our ‘responsibility system’ by protecting the privileged from culpability, accountability, and liability; and they unfairly inculcate the oppressed through familiar, identity-based processes of victim-blaming and scapegoating. That is, these myths both exonerate privileged perpetrators and illicitly blame members of marginalized groups.” As Ciurria describes in the example of the CDC guidelines for women and alcohol consumption, men can’t be blamed for physical injuries or unplanned pregnancy if women are the ones who took all the risks, by drinking. Another example of this occurs, Barbara Applebaum (2017, 865) argues, in cases where “white tears” deflect responsibility away from a racist act, from the perpetrator to the victim: “When white discomfort is comforted, white women are relieved from all accountability. In other words, white comforting becomes the mechanism by which white women can avoid confronting their complicity in racism and whereby power inequities in the organization can be maintained.” Likewise, in the case of emotion regulation, men who provoke emotional distress can’t be held responsible if the interaction is framed as “overly emotional” women letting themselves get upset and allowing their actions to be influenced by their emotional states. In other words, the stereotype that girls and women are too sensitive and emotional facilitates this particular “disappearance narrative,” which, as I will show, connects it to a broader system of identity-based oppression. These stereotypes come into play when girls and women seemingly fail or refuse to regulate their emotions through suppression, reappraisal, or other techniques, which I will expand on in the next section, and are sanctioned for allowing their distress to seep into their interpersonal interactions.

3. Road to Regulation: Social Norms, Aptness, and Appropriateness

Regulation is an inextricable component of experiencing emotions, and developing these techniques is essential to emotional and mental health. However, below the surface, our ability to regulate and the effects of regulation are interconnected with a host of other elements. For example, what sociocultural context enables an unequal burden of emotional labor to be shifted onto the target of misogynist aggression through emotion regulation while the perpetrator disappears from the story? We can identify two modes of deliberation that drive emotion-regulation strategies—that is, how and why we regulate emotions. One is the evaluation of an emotion itself for aptness—in other words, whether the emotion fits the reality of the situation. The other has to do not with aptness but, rather, with a fittingness condition tinged with moral value—specifically, patriarchal values. This mode of evaluation is best defined in terms of appropriateness and reflects dominant social norms.

First, I offer a more detailed account of the kinds of emotion-regulation techniques women and girls are socialized to perform when dealing with emotional distress. I then identify the dominant social norms that evaluations of appropriateness of emotions are based on to argue that even practices that produce beneficial adaptive effects rather than maladaptive outcomes are problematic and unjust because they function to reinforce the status and well-being of dominant groups, thus generating a perpetual cycle of unrecognized emotional labor.

3.A. Emotion-Regulation Techniques

A process model of emotion regulation developed by Emily Butler and James Gross (2004, 103) posits, “An emotion begins with an evaluation of emotion cues which, if attended to and evaluated in emotional terms, can trigger a coordinated set of experiential, behavioral, and physiological response tendencies.” Additionally, “according to the process model (Gross, 2015), the ER cycle begins with a discrepancy between someone’s goal state (i.e., the emotional state they desire) and the actual (or projected) state” (McRae and Gross 2020, 2). Butler and Gross (2004, 103) also state that the process model includes two categories of response tendencies: antecedent-focused strategies, which involve framing a future experience prior to being exposed to emotion cues, and response-focused strategies, which are “things we do once an emotion is already underway,” such as “expressive suppression.” We can see that the emotion regulation that girls and women engage in involves both of these categories. For example, women engage in “safety-work” to go out into public, an often-hostile landscape, and afterward process emotions that may have arisen from confrontations.

Situation selection and modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation are all “families of [emotion-regulation] strategies” (McRae and Gross 2020, 3). In response to street harassment, a woman might avoid taking public transportation alone, which is the regulation strategy “avoidance” within the situation selection family. Or she might modify the situation by asking someone to accompany her. In terms of attentional deployment, she could distract herself by wearing noise-cancelling headphones and watching a video on her phone or getting up and moving to a different part of the train after receiving unwanted attention. Cognitive-change strategies could look like reframing the situation in her mind, thinking, for example, “He was saying that to me because he probably had a repressed childhood and I feel sorry for him.” Finally, a common member of the “response modulation” family is the strategy of expressive suppression. This simply entails an action like holding back tears or maintaining a neutral facial expression despite having the desire to scowl.

Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life*, paints a picture of how many girls and women cope by engaging intrinsic emotion-regulation practices, including situation selection,

attention redirection, and cognitive-reappraisal techniques, as well as responses considered by psychologists to be maladaptive such as rumination and suppression:

Not to be assaulted: maybe you might try to close yourself off, to withdraw from proximity, from proximity to a potential. Or perhaps you try to deal with this violence by numbing your own sensations, by learning not to be affected or to be less affected. Perhaps you try to forget what happened. You might be ashamed. You might stay silent. You might not tell anyone, say anything, and burn with the sensation of a secret. It becomes another burden: that which is not revealed. Maybe you adopt for yourself a certain kind of fatalism: these things happen; what happens will happen; whatever will be, will be. (Ahmed 2017, 23–24)

As many feminist theorists have observed, under conditions of patriarchy, the norms that favor the subjective well-being of dominant groups align with those that expect girls and women to be caring, nonconfrontational, and flattered by unwanted attention, which results in exploitation.⁵ To respond to these expectations that many have been acculturated in to maintain social relations, girls and women must regulate their emotions accordingly in the ways detailed above. Dominant social norms that privilege the well-being of certain individuals are resistant to change when they are reinforced in a justificatory role and are used to measure when emotion regulation has met or failed to meet the standard of appropriateness. Under a normative context where the feelings of dominant groups were not protected at the cost of oppressed individuals, emotion-regulation practices may take a different form—for instance, emotional distress would be less likely to be suppressed; and if social sharing of emotional experiences was more widely available, rumination would be a less frequently utilized practice since it arises from suppression.⁶ On the flip side of this, some members of dominant groups benefit from having their emotions regulated by

⁵ Ciurria discusses the example of exploitation in cases of moral dialogue, where women and people of color are expected to “improve” and “educate” ignorant others; however, at the same time they are more susceptible to slurs and dialogic aggressions and thus find themselves on uneven ground and have more to lose in any given exchange. (See Ciurria 2020a, ch. 4, esp. 101–2.

⁶ “Emotion suppression has, for example, been linked with higher levels of depression (Berenbaum et al., 1999). Further, because the emotional experience is not openly attended to, it may well resurface, causing rumination (Thomsen, Tønnesvang, Schnieber, & Olesen, 2011)” (Roth, Vansteenkiste, and Ryan 2019, 947).

others; so their emotional dysregulation, most always the propellor of misogynistic incidents, is left unchecked, and they fail to develop emotional intelligence.

3.B. Emotion Norms

How are the emotion norms that structure emotion-regulation practices, whether consciously or otherwise, developed? In the first place, emotions must be understood as morally evaluable. Tom Roberts (2015, 491) argues that, “insofar as emotions are capable of reflecting a subject’s perspective qua moral agent, though, and insofar as she is a reasonable target for calls to justify her evaluative judgements, a person’s emotional states are open to moral, as well as rational, criticism.”⁷ From there an interconnectedness between moral and social norms is required. For example, Chad Van Schoelandt (2018) argues that when social norms seem mutually beneficial, have remained stable over long periods of time, and have been revised and internalized, this produces justification for using the norm to measure standards of behavior and hold people accountable for their actions. He says, “Insofar as members of the population value tradition, conformity, the way the norm reflects group membership, group expectations, or the like, these provide additional reasons to endorse these entrenched norms regardless of their particular content” (228). The problem is, as Charlie Kurth (2022, 19) notes, “our emotion norms are often unfair: they embed assumptions that subject marginalized individuals to different standards of assessment, and that single them out for harsher treatment when their feelings are deemed inappropriate.”

An injustice can aptly correspond to a strong emotional reaction, but actual practices of assigning consequences for emotions are often based on related but distinct concepts of appropriateness—namely, appropriateness under dominant social (i.e., patriarchal) conditions. Concerns for how others will react to the

⁷ Some philosophers have distinguished between different meanings of “fittingness” when it comes to assessing emotions. One mode of assessment is aptness, and the other is appropriateness; the latter mode has a distinctly moral flavor (D’Arms and Jacobsen 2000). Aptness refers to a set of conditions that determine whether an emotion aligns with the facts of a situation—i.e., you were actually wronged and are therefore justifiably angered. Srinivasan (2018) develops a set of aptness conditions for anger. But appropriateness regards whether anger should be felt considering, as many do, that it is an essentially retributive emotion. I will assume that the emotion norms that influence emotion-regulation practices I discuss often track appropriateness in the latter, moralistic sense, whereas the feelings of women and girls can be assessed separately as meeting aptness conditions. With two sets of emotion norms in use, the latter sense may problematically take precedence in deliberations regarding regulating her emotions.

expression of our emotions, especially if standards are unequal, become a central factor in how we decide to diffuse or regulate an emotion. For instance, Kelly Oliver (2004, 93) frames the idea of social norms as a “punishing superego” that is internalized by oppressed individuals whose negatively valenced emotional responses to oppression are then used as evidence of their “lack of reason.” One lesson I took from Amia Srinivasan’s (2018) *The Aptness of Anger* is that what is at stake for minoritized individuals’ expressions of emotions is not aptness in the sense that emotions fit the world by clearly appreciating salient characteristics of it, like racial injustice; rather, assessments of aptness are replaced with assessments of the consequences of the emotions—namely, whether they disrupt the dominant order of the world. If they disturb or expose an oppressive reality within which emotion norms are developed and adopted, then emotions trespass the norms, and they become targets for further sanctioning. This evaluative process is what we see being applied to girls and women who feel emotional distress due to harassment. Her emotions may fit the world, but within patriarchal conditions they trespass dominant social norms and are thus deemed inappropriate and subject to resentment and regulation.⁸

Dominant social values are enforced through applications of appropriateness norms to recalcitrant negative emotions, but do aptness conditions for whether an emotion really fits its object also perpetuate inequality of emotional labor? It would be problematic to judge as inapt the intense feelings of nervousness while jogging down the street or experiences of dread at having to take public transportation considering the fact that a misogynist incident took place only one time out of many. Fear doesn’t fit the situation and is in some sense irrational. In this case, an emotion would be not only inapt but also damaging to one’s interests. However, assessing emotions for aptness here would further alienate a victim from her reality and constitute a sort of gaslighting.⁹ The object of her fear is not a known object but a potential for pain, emotional or physical.

Feminist philosophers who are concerned about the injustices arising from applications of unfair emotion norms have proposed ways to resist norms that reinforce asymmetrical power relations and benefit already privileged groups. One recourse that has been suggested is through “burden shifting” (Kurth 2022, 7). Rather than accepting norms that encourage minoritized individuals to adjust their emotions for the benefit of members of dominant groups, we would instead call on privileged individuals to control the unpleasant feelings they may experience when confronted by their own racist or sexist biases. Consider a Starbucks employee that mistakenly

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this distinction.

⁹ This is not to say that we have “rights to feel,” full stop, for as Gallegos (2022, 196) notes, having our emotions challenged and corrected is “a central dimension of our affective education, necessary for achieving a desirable or excellent emotional life.”

misgenders someone by calling them “sir” instead of their preferred gender pronoun. The misgendered person might express frustration or anger at being called “sir,” and that in turn offends the employee. Under dominant emotion norms it becomes the trans person’s sole responsibility to protect the feelings of a cisgender heteronormative individual of a socially privileged group who misgendered them. To avoid backlash, the misgendered person suppresses their emotion by ignoring the incident or by implementing another regulation strategy. However, if we apply the “shifting burden” approach to counter unfair emotional norms, then the Starbucks worker should be the one to prevent anger at being criticized in front of his coworkers for misgendering a customer from provoking transphobic beliefs down the road. Myisha Cherry’s (2019) argument that we should develop feminist emotional intelligence to avoid perpetuating racial and gender biases when asking someone to regulate their emotions is an example of “burden shifting.” She states:

Feminist emotional intelligence, thus, is measured both by what we can do (i.e., recognize power and apply social knowledge) and what we resist doing (i.e., reinscribing racism and patriarchal norms). And the skills such as perceptual accuracy and emotional understanding are informed and strengthened by other skills such as social recognition and attunement of different kinds; social knowledge applicability; the ability to revise one’s thoughts and actions; and the resistance of destructive social norms and the social behaviors that are informed by them. (Cherry 2019, 108)

The efficacy of efforts to remediate emotion norms has not been left unquestioned. Kurth (2022) argues that cognitive science research challenges the plausibility of the burden shifting approach. He argues that a realistic view of motivation makes it unlikely that an emotionally fragile individual, like the Starbucks employee in the above example, will be able to successfully gain and retain emotion-regulation skills if he chooses to make the effort to do so at all, which is also unlikely considering people naturally do their best to avoid experiencing unpleasant feelings (8). Another worry that Kurth has for previously proposed efforts to ameliorate unfair emotional norms is that the distinct functional roles that norms play will make them resistant to change or replacement, as will the fact that certain kinds of norms are deeply enculturated in us and we default to acting on them despite best intentions to change (12). Not only is human psychology a barrier to successfully challenging emotion norms, but power dynamics also reinforce resistance to changing a system that appears to function smoothly since it benefits them particularly. Kurth’s worry, that motivation to challenge unfair social norms is thwarted by our instinctual drive to avoid discomfort, demonstrates yet another facet of unfairness. This is because

those with greater power are the ones who influence the placement of the boundaries that structure feelings of ease of staying within them and feelings of discomfort or fear of trying to cross them and the expectation of pain from doing so. This should make us quite weary of accepting motivation as merely a natural, psychological, and unavoidable influence on our behavior and therefore a reason to reject or doubt efforts to change social norms.

4. Consequences of Emotion Regulation

The idea that emotion-regulation practices are burdensome and oppressive under conditions of patriarchy seems to clash with the fact that the effects of emotion regulation can be beneficial in a variety of ways both for the individual regulator and for their interpersonal relationships. Developing emotion-regulation skills, particularly those within the “cognitive change” family of strategies, can have long-term beneficial effects, including

greater physical health (Appleton, Buka, Loucks, Gilman, & Kubzansky, 2013; Appleton, Loucks, Buka, & Kubzansky, 2014), higher academic achievement (Davis & Levine, 2013; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014), more positive social outcomes (English, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2012), greater psychological well-being, (Gross & John, 2003), and fewer symptoms of psychopathology. (McRae and Gross 2020, 3)

On the other hand, suppression techniques, although productive in certain circumstances, can produce the opposite effects and lesser well-being (McRae and Gross 2020, 3–4). Butler and Gross (2004, 105) note that “experimental evidence suggests that expressive suppression does not reduce, and may even increase, negative emotional experiences like disgust, anger, sadness and embarrassment.” Additionally, researchers have found that “meeting emotions with attempts at avoidance or control can both contribute to, and be symptomatic of, a variety of mental health issues (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013)” (Roth, Vansteenkiste, and Ryan 2019, 946). Although expressive suppression is commonly used to deal with emotional distress, anecdotal evidence from many girls and women reveals that a variety of strategies are utilized in response to confrontations with misogyny, not solely suppression.

Another counterpoint is the idea that not all emotional labor is exploitative. Olúfémí Táíwò (2020) argues that feminists often draw attention to the fact that a disproportionate amount of emotional labor is assigned to women to soothe, nurture, and express emotions on behalf of others. However, he offers an analysis of a form of prosocial emotional labor, “emotional compression” that derives from Stoic principles (5). Emotional compression is a form of emotional labor that is also readily available

to men, who are often socialized to suppress emotions in an unhealthy manner. Instead, they can achieve mastery over how one's emotions are communicated to others. He illustrates this point with the example of a "boxer who knows and respects his fear, yet not only stands his ground and keeps punching but does so without letting on that he is intimidated" (6). Emotional compression is also compatible with feminist aims toward a more equal distribution of emotional labor. Táiwò uses Shiloh Whitney's concept of "byproductive labor,"¹⁰ which involves "metabolizing" the negative emotions of others, to argue that emotional compression is prosocial because by constraining one's emotion, an individual may induce the "right" state of mind or "affective tone" in others and can mitigate "emotional contagion" of negatively valenced emotions like anger, which can impede our ability to reason (Táiwò 2020, 11–14). This all suggests that the effort regulating emotions often requires of us is itself not oppressive or harmful and serves an important role for psychological health and subjective well-being, both individually and collectively. Yet considering the many potentially positive outcomes emotion regulation can bring about, what is it that makes many cases of emotion regulation oppressive?

Importantly, the beneficial consequences of emotional regulation for the individual regulator may often be inseparable from the benefits that emotion regulator offers to others when regulation is warranted by emotions produced by a social encounter. In the case of misogynist aggressions like street harassment, the secondary beneficiary of the regulation strategy deployed by the victim to diffuse her emotional distress is the perpetrator. This undermines the agency-enhancing characteristic of regulation when the regulator does not desire that the benefits extend to the perpetrator. This suggests that the beneficial consequences of emotional work for the regulator alone do not tell the whole story. It is important to take into account the process itself, which, under the circumstances illustrated in the second section, may provoke an internal conflict that systematically undermines emotion regulation as fully autonomous action.

As Adrienne Rich says, "How much of my working energy is drained by the subliminal knowledge that, as a woman, I test my physical right to exist each time I go out alone?" While emotion regulation is agency-enhancing when we assert control over our emotional reactions to situations, girls and women are nevertheless faced with a Sisyphean burden: while the emotion regulation helps the regulator in the long-term to reintegrate herself into her life and build resilience to future confrontations, the conditions under which regulation is necessitated are doomed to repeat due to

¹⁰ Whitney (2018, 643) understands emotional labor as "not only the work of producing affects for others to consume, nor the reproductive work that rejuvenates and sustains life and labor power, but also the work of *metabolizing unwanted affects and affective byproducts.*"

the vanishing perpetrator and because it is also made psychologically taxing by the fact that it is largely done to regulate or balance the emotions of others in public. In the next section, I offer an account of the double bind that emerges despite the potentially beneficial outcomes of emotion regulation. I argue that due to appropriateness norms that underly internal and self-imposed judgments of when and how to regulate emotions, and because apt emotions are not always supported by social norms, girls and women face a distinctively “affective” injustice.

5. A Double Bind and Affective Injustice

Alfred Archer and Georgina Mills (2019, 76) argue that oppressed individuals who use intrinsic emotion-regulation strategies to deal with negative emotions engendered by prejudice are hurting their interests regardless of what they do. For example, when women or minoritized individuals are confronted by sexism or racism, they may find ways to draw their attention away and ignore it or to avoid situations where they would encounter it, such as by staying away from work-related gatherings hosted by sexist colleagues or by not residing in neighborhoods where minoritized groups stand out, which then perpetuates the marginalization of those groups by limiting certain opportunities. This argument helps to illustrate what Sukaina Hirji (2021, 654) shows constitutes the oppressive nature of double binds:

When an agent is a member of an oppressed group, the two goods at stake in their choice—their prudential good and their resistance to oppression—are bound up together. If they cooperate, they reinforce the very oppressive norm that in the long run controls their access to security and power. If they resist, they are likely to face immediate harm or sanction for stepping out of line, and in general to be put into a position where their long-term ability to resist oppression is undermined. On either option, they are forced to act against themselves, becoming a tool or mechanism in their own oppression.

In the cases I described earlier, girls and women do become inadvertently involved in their own oppression. Whether they regulate their emotions in response to routine misogynistic aggressions in the socially appropriate way or not, they face further oppression and restriction. If a woman adheres to dominant emotion norms, she must undergo extensive emotional labor that, while potentially benefitting herself, also extrinsically manages negative emotions of others including perpetrators and therefore facilitates a “disappearance narrative” (Cicurria 2020b). However,

“failing” to regulate emotions based on dominant social norms may result in her being pathologized or marginalized.¹¹

When girls and women regulate their emotions in such a way that does not suppress or recast them, such as through the regulative technique of sharing of emotions publicly, her efforts may fail to benefit perpetrators or even expose them to negative moral judgment. According to the policing mechanism of misogyny, she will be met with a range of undesirable consequences to then discredit her. The stereotype that women are overly emotional, sensitive, and hysterical may be applied to her. This stereotype can contribute to justifications for further marginalization. As Agneta Fischer and coauthors note in their study of motives for emotion regulation: “Being too frightened, too angry, or too sad is a problem not so much for our biological system, but rather for our social system. . . . Individuals who do not respond emotionally in an adequate manner may survive physically, but [they] will become social outcasts” (Fischer et al. 2004, 188). Medicalization and dependency constitute marginalization in that they grant, as Iris Marion Young (1990, 54) states, “a sufficient warrant to suspend basic rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice.” And, as Bartky (1990, 30) notes, oppression involves regarding oneself as “uniquely unable to satisfy a normal criteria of psychological health or moral adequacy.” This is not to deny that emotion dysregulation and maladaptive practices can lead someone’s life to go less well and it may be in their interest to seek resources and therapies; however, when dysregulated, or simply expressing a negative emotion, sometimes girls and women are more readily pathologized and sanctioned due to oppressive gender norms rather than supported or validated. Failures to engage in emotion regulation, particularly in ways that suppress emotion, may trigger in others what Cieurria (2023, 40) defines as the “dehumanizing attitudes” that stem from Strawson’s idea of “‘the objective attitude,’ a stance that treats its targets as objects of ‘treatment,’ ‘management,’ ‘training,’ or ‘precautionary’ accounting, not proper moral regard”; and “in asymmetrically structured societies, the objective attitude excludes and dehumanizes oppressed people.” These attitudes can also, even more problematically, be triggered within ourselves since many of the emotions such as disgust and embarrassment that arise from being harassed are associated with the repressive superego and are therefore self-punishing.

Using Francisco Gallegos’s (2022, 196) understanding of cases of affective injustice as “deprivations of the subsidiary goods that enable a person to pursue and attain subjective well-being and emotional aptness”—subsidiary goods being

¹¹ These norms may also disadvantage neurodiverse individuals who read and respond to social cues differently and practice distinct forms of expression and communication. In other words, these norms are also ableist. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

“affective freedoms, affective resources, affective opportunities, and forms of affective recognition”—I argue that this double bind constitutes an affective injustice in several ways. The first face of the double bind is marked by the transfer of a disproportionate amount of responsibility for emotional distress to girls and women. While it may seem beneficial to alleviate emotional distress or build resilience to future encounters, the fact remains that her emotional labor extends to benefit perpetrators of harassment and discourages the development of emotional intelligence in those who take advantage of outsourcing their emotional labor to her. This cycle unjustly deprives girls and women of freedom from negative emotions.

The second face of the double bind represents the deprivation of affective recognition. Denial of affective recognition, according to Gallegos (2022, 191), may be constituted by “being ignored, silenced, or sanctioned when expressing one’s emotions and emotional needs.” We see this occur when emotion norms that developed in conjunction with dominant social values make certain emotional responses to injustice appear “inapt” or, more precisely, inappropriate. Girls and women are unfairly sanctioned for emotional responses to oppression such as anger. Céline Leboeuf argues that “anger can protect members of oppressed groups from the havoc created by a dominant other’s gaze” by helping the oppressed person overcome the “body alienation” produced by the Other’s scrutiny (Leboeuf 2018, 24, 18). If we recall Bartky’s description of catcalling, under the objectifying male gaze, her body stiffened and instinctively developed a protective stance, becoming painfully aware of the body and how it is perceived by others; in other words, she experienced body alienation. The denial or reconfiguration of anger, its feeling or expression, results in the failure to utilize the psychological recourse that, Leboeuf argues, anger provides oppressed individuals to overcome alienation from their bodies. Additionally, Laura Silva (2021) argues against an understanding of anger as essentially retributive but rather reconceives of anger as a desire for perpetrators to recognize the wrongs they have committed. For example, using a woman’s apt anger as evidence of a pathology rather than the other’s wrongdoing unjustly precludes the possibility of obtaining this recognition and therefore exposes a further face of affective injustice.

6. Conclusion

While emotion regulation is a tool available to enhance the psychological well-being of oneself and others, the fact that emotion-regulation practices are often solicited by experiences of misogyny and other forms of domination, as well as influenced by problematic moralistic norms, creates a site of affective injustice. When regulators have been socialized to replace a negative emotion with a positive or pleasant one, they are unable to examine and experience negative emotions that may give them valuable insight into their situations and help others recognize wrongs

being done. Emotion influences what we focus on within a given situation (Jaggar 1989, 160). It is possible that regulating certain emotions shifts our attention away from important details. Along these lines, Archer and Mills (2019, 83) argue that suppressing apt anger by rerouting one's attention elsewhere can prevent the acquisition of "vital epistemic resources to understand, challenge and survive one's oppression."

It can be psychologically taxing to attend to these details, even if doing so is ultimately empowering. However, failure to recognize the unequal distribution of emotional labor in taking responsibility for regulating painful emotions, and everything that entails, reveals a weakness in our system of moral responsibility. Many emotion-regulation strategies are understood as idealized tools for control over our emotions and environments. In other words, they are conceived of as agency-enhancing deliberative practices. That being said, we open ourselves to judgement for our emotional reactions and expressions, based on emotion norms, yet those judgments rarely involve others taking accountability for creating the conditions that require emotion regulation in the first place. This reveals the moral vulnerability of those whose emotional expressions (or lack thereof) are under assessment.

The concept of moral vulnerability, developed by Margaret Urban Walker (2013), describes how victims must come to terms with the realization that they do not possess equal standing with the wrongdoers to demand accountability for the wrong committed. She says, "The vulnerability in question is the potential for being exposed to the insult and additional injury, when we perceive ourselves wronged, of having our standing to call others to account denied, dismissed, or ignored in ways that call our very status as full participants into question" (Walker 2013, 112). We have seen that in cases of emotional distress caused by misogyny, an imbalance in accountability for emotions emerges. Emotions do not form in a vacuum, and our experiences of them "reflect prevailing forms of social life" (Jaggar 1989, 157). While emotion regulation exposes our moral vulnerability, in that we may be judged for our emotions while being denied the chance to call for the accountability of others involved, emotion regulation is also an essential capability for self-determination and subjective well-being (Roth, Vansteenkiste, and Ryan 2019, 945). Figuring out how to regulate emotions involves negotiating between processing our emotions and maintaining interpersonal cooperation with others, but it is imperative to understand that situated in nonideal contexts, the process of emotion regulation can become a means to perpetuate injustice.

Acknowledgments

I would like to especially thank Dr. Aleksandra Hernandez for her feedback and support as I worked on this paper. I also wish to acknowledge the helpful comments

from two anonymous reviewers. Finally, many thanks to Mich Cieurria and the *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* editorial team for all their work on this special issue.

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