

Internalized Oppression and Its Varied Moral Harms: Self-Perceptions of Reduced Agency and Criminality

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The dominant view in the philosophical literature contends that internalized oppression, especially that experienced in virtue of one's womanhood, reduces one's sense of agency. Here, I extend these arguments and suggest a more nuanced account. In particular, I argue that internalized oppression can cause a person to conceive of herself as a deviant agent as well as a reduced one. This self-conception is also damaging to one's moral identity and creates challenges that are not captured by merely analyzing a reduced sense of agency. To help illustrate this claim, I consider experiences of people of color who internalize stereotypes regarding criminality and moral deviance. With these examples in mind, I show that internalized prejudices regarding criminality can cause people of color (men and women) to view themselves as outlaws in the moral community, that is, as wrongdoers. This conclusion helps give voice to some of the challenges that women of color who experience multiple sorts of internalized prejudices often face. To conclude, I discuss one strategy for empowerment that women of color have used when confronted with multiple forms of internalized oppression.

"Internalized oppression" refers to a psychological phenomenon that occurs when a person comes to internalize oppressive prejudices and biases about the identity group(s) to which he or she belongs (David 2013, 8). Sometimes referred to as "infiltrated consciousness" or "psychological oppression," researchers have linked internalized oppression to many kinds of harm (Bartky 1990; Nelson 2001a; 2001b; Cudd 2006). For instance, it can lead to physical violence, depression, and intragroup discrimination (Poupart 2003; Pyke and Dang 2003; David 2013). Since those who have internalized oppressive prejudices often engage in behavior that further perpetuates these biases, internalized oppression is not only a symptom of an oppressive social climate, but it also represents a mechanism for its continued existence (David 2013). But these are not the only harms of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression can

also harm a person by damaging one's view of the self as a moral agent. It is this sort of harm that I discuss here.

Feminist theorists have defended the notion that internalized oppression can negatively affect a person's sense of agency (Bartky 1990; Benson 1994; Benson 2000; Nelson 2001a; 2001b; Anderson 2002; Charles 2010; Hay 2013). However, this phenomenon remains undertheorized. First, not enough has been done to discuss how this threat plays out when it comes to a diverse range of identities. Instead, feminists have restricted focus on internalized oppression that exists in virtue of one's identity as a woman; theorists have not sufficiently taken into account multiple or intersecting identities. This narrow focus has resulted in the dominant view that internalized oppression, especially that experienced in virtue of one's womanhood, *reduces* one's sense of agency.¹ Here, I extend these claims by taking intersecting identities into account. In particular, I contend that internalized oppression can cause a person to conceive of herself as a *deviant* agent as well as a reduced one.² This self-conception creates challenges that are not captured merely by analyzing a reduced sense of agency.

To make my argument, I discuss experiences of people of color who internalize stereotypes regarding criminality and moral deviance (Eberhardt et al. 2004).³ With these examples in mind, it becomes apparent that internalized oppression can damage one's identity as a moral agent in more ways than simply reducing one's sense of agency. Specifically, internalized prejudices regarding criminality can cause people of color (men *and* women) to view themselves as outlaws in the moral community, that is, as wrongdoers.

This conclusion helps give voice to some of the challenges that women of color who experience multiple sorts of internalized prejudices often face. I discuss how viewing oneself as a deviant member of the moral community can make a person feel capable and strong if the alternative is viewing the self as a reduced agent. Similarly, viewing oneself as a diminished agent can feel safe and nonthreatening in contrast to viewing oneself as morally deviant.

With this in mind, I caution that any feelings of empowerment that might come from playing multiple types of internalized oppression off one another are often achieved at the expense of reinforcing oppressive systems of power. It is my hope that making explicit the tensions and intersections that exist between different kinds of internalized oppression can help women of color and others to continue working toward cultivating and promoting healthier moral identities.

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION CAN LEAD TO A REDUCED SENSE OF AGENCY

Feminist theorists have argued that internalized oppression harms women by causing them to feel as though they lack agency and thus the capacity for moral responsibility (Bartky 1990; Benson 1994; Nelson 2001a; 2001b). For example, Hilde Lindemann Nelson states:

The connection between identity and agency is an internal one, for my actions disclose not only who I am but who I am taken—or take myself—to be, which directly affects how freely I may act If my own conception of who I am keeps me from trusting my own moral judgments, I will treat myself as a moral incompetent. This is the harm of infiltrated consciousness. Both others' recognition that I am a morally responsible person and my own sense of myself as a morally responsible person, then, are necessary for the free exercise of moral agency. (Nelson 2001a, 51)

Here, Nelson's use of the term "infiltrated consciousness" refers to how others' perception of us "contributes to our own self understanding" (50). The use of "infiltrated consciousness" thus maps closely onto the notion of internalized oppression.

If women are surrounded by people who view them as subordinate, incapable, or lacking control over their actions, women are likely to come to understand themselves in a similar way, even if subconsciously. Often, a person needs to feel as if she has the ability to take control of her projects, her second-order desires, and motivations in order to feel that she can be appropriately held morally responsible. Feeling that you have agency is thus an important part of feeling that you can be held morally responsible. For this reason, a person's sense of her own responsibility for some action will be diminished if she lacks the feeling that she is able to act freely or autonomously.⁴ Feeling as though one lacks this capacity for agency can therefore seriously threaten one's view of the self as a capable moral agent.

Sandra Bartky's account of psychological oppression also supports the trend in feminist literature to link internalized oppression with a reduced sense of agency. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's explanation of psychic alienation experienced by black men in colonial contexts, Bartky traces three distinct modes by which women come to see themselves as lacking agency: stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification (Fanon 1967; Bartky 1990). She argues, "White women, at least, are psychologically conditioned not to pursue the kind of autonomous development that is held by the culture to be a constitutive feature of male masculinity" (Bartky 1990, 25). For example, take stereotypes that support the idea that women are submissive and lack rationality. Exposure to these sorts of stereotypes can cause women to internalize these ideas and believe them, both consciously and unconsciously. In this way, these stereotypes become incorporated into the psyche so that women eventually come to feel as though they "cannot be autonomous, as men are thought to be autonomous, without in some sense ceasing to be women" (Bartky 1990, 24).

In a similar process, messages from the dominant culture about women's inferiority also make their way into the minds of women. For example, the fact that women are seldom observed in positions of power is taken, often subconsciously, as proof that women are "unable to participate" in such positions (Bartky 1990, 26). A culture that is built around sexist institutions and practices implicitly confers the message that women are inferior. This message, in turn, is taken up by women who often come to view themselves as such.

Sexual objectification is the last mode of internalized inferiority that Bartky discusses. To sexually objectify someone is to regard her as nothing more than a source of sexual pleasure. Instead of being seen as a full person with emotions, ideas, desires, and projects, women become seen solely as the means for sexual gratification. Being treated in this way can cause one to conceive of oneself as a sexual object with reduced agency.

For each of these modes of psychological oppression, Bartky explains how women's psyches become *fragmented*. When it comes to objectification, women come to see themselves as they imagine men see them: as a "nice piece of ass" (Bartky 1990, 27). Or, as in the case of stereotyping, women come to view themselves as submissive or inferior. This view of the self is often in tension with a simultaneous view of the self as a capable agent. Fragmentation therefore occurs when women begin to imagine themselves in different, often contradictory, lights. Psychological oppression involves a particular type of fragmentation in which subjects incorporate a view of themselves as reduced agents into their repertoire of self-understandings.

Even more troubling is the fact that the cultural processes that lead to this sort of fragmentation are often hidden from the subject. Instead of understanding their fragmentation as a response to problematic stereotypes, cultural domination, and sexual objectification, women "locate the cause squarely within" themselves as a "character flaw, an 'inferiority complex,' or a neurosis" (Bartky 1990, 30). Mystification refers to this "double bind of a society which both affirms" one's "human status and at the same time bars" women "from the exercise of many of those typically human functions that bestow this status" (31). In other words, mystification refers to a person's inability to see her damaged, fragmented psyche as anything other than an idiosyncratic fluke or, at worst and perhaps typically, as her fault.

Bartky argues that subjects who are exposed to this mixture of stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification often undergo the process of fragmentation and mystification and are thus psychologically oppressed. The "nature of psychological oppression," she argues,

is such that the oppressor and the oppressed alike come to doubt the oppressed have the capacity to do the sorts of things that only persons can do, to be what persons, in the fullest sense of the term, can be. The possession of autonomy, for example, is widely thought to distinguish persons from nonpersons; but some female stereotypes, as we have seen, threaten the autonomy of women. Oppressed people might or might not be in a position to exercise their autonomy, but the psychologically oppressed may come to believe that they lack the capacity to be autonomous whatever their position. (Bartky 1990, 29–30)

Bartky thus stresses that internalized oppression can reduce a person's sense of agency.

Feminists like Bartky have therefore helped to explain one of the ways that internalized oppression can be harmful and, in particular, harmful to a person's moral relationship with the self; namely, internalized oppression can lead to a person's

diminished sense of agency. This analysis, however, has been made largely with attention to prejudices and biases regarding women, and, specifically, white women. In what follows, I extend Bartky's account by offering an intersectional analysis to help illuminate other ways that psychological oppression can be damaging to a person's moral relationship with the self.

PERCEPTIONS OF CRIMINALITY AND MORAL DEVIANCE

Feminist accounts have focused mainly on the experience of white women, but it seems likely that internalized oppression can also result in a lack of perceived agency when it comes to women of color as well as men of color and people oppressed in other ways, such as those with disabilities. However, we should not assume that internalized oppression poses a *singular* threat with regard to people's moral identities. In this section I begin to motivate the claim that internalized oppression can harm one's moral identity in more ways than simply by reducing one's sense of agency. To make this case, I discuss the psychological phenomenon experienced by many racial minorities in the US: the process by which black and brown people internalize stereotypes that link them with criminality and moral deviance.

In "Some Thoughts on Mercy," Ross Gay offers an elegant phenomenological account of what it is like to internalize stereotypes about criminality (Gay 2013). He illustrates the ways in which being suspected of criminal activity can damage one's psyche and imagination. Specifically, the subject begins to view himself with the same suspicion and fear with which he perceives others to regard him. This phenomenon of coming to view oneself as a criminal maps closely onto Bartky's explanation of psychological oppression. This should not be surprising, since Bartky's analysis is based on Fanon's concepts that are meant to capture the experience of men of color in racist settings.

For example, exposure to stereotypes about people of color and criminality can cause black and brown people to internalize messages about criminality. In Gay's words:

I've been afraid walking through the alarm gate at the store that maybe something's fallen into my pockets, or that I've unconsciously stuffed something in them; I've felt panic that the light skinned black man who mugged our elderly former neighbors was actually me, and I worried that my parents, with whom I watched the newscast, suspected the same; and nearly every time I've been pulled over, I've prayed there were no drugs in my car, despite the fact that I don't use drugs; I don't even smoke pot. That's to say the story I have all my life heard about black people—criminal, criminal, criminal—I have started to suspect of myself. (Gay 2013)

These internalized suspicions and fears about the self are often manifested due to repeated exposure to stereotypes and biases. Take, for instance, stereotypes about black people and shoplifting. These stereotypes often lead store patrons to be

particularly suspicious of black customers. Gay describes his experience: "I remember being thirteen and walking into a clothing store at the mall with a white pal. As we perused the racks, it didn't take long for me to realize the security guard was following me and was oblivious to my friend" (Gay 2013). Experiences with being stereotyped in this way can lead a person to internalize these stereotypes so that they "take up residence in our bodies" (Gay 2013).

Gay explains that the belief that people of color are likely to be criminals was reflected in the dominant culture when he was growing up:

There were the Central Park Five, a group of black and Latino teens falsely accused of raping a white jogger, and that strange new word *wilding*, supposedly used by the suspects for their nonexistent crime spree. And there was the fact that nearly every criminal on the news—rapist, murderer, burglar, drug dealer—was black. Even if I wasn't consciously aware of it, I got the message. (Gay 2013)

The fact that the dominant culture was, and still is, supersaturated with images and stories that link black and brown people with unlawfulness makes it easy for people of color to unconsciously internalize these notions of criminality. Instead of viewing oneself as a law-abiding and productive citizen, one begins to treat oneself as an object of fear and distrust. As Gay states, it becomes a "gargantuan task not to imagine that everyone is imagining us as criminal" (Gay 2013). The fragmentation thus occurs when a person begins to suspect himself of being a criminal, despite the fact that he knows he hasn't done anything wrong—for example, to suspect oneself of possessing drugs despite the fact that one, as in Gay's case, doesn't "even smoke pot" (Gay 2013).

Furthermore, the subject often perceives this fragmentation as paranoia or a psychological hang-up of his own. Mystification makes opaque the knowledge that one is *systematically* made to distrust oneself via stereotyping, cultural dominance, and objectification. When one unconsciously internalizes messages of criminality and then gets pulled over by a police officer who makes no mention of race, it's easy to feel paranoid and invalidated when you begin to suspect that the officer is treating you the way she is because of your race:

I'm behaving in response to what I *imagine* other people are thinking. After all, the janitor and the antique-shop clerk didn't say anything to me about the color of my skin. Just as the cop didn't say, "Since you appear to be of some African extraction, I would like to ask you if you have any drugs or weapons in the car." (Gay 2013)

The result is a double bind: People of color are told that they are treated in a "color-blind" way when instead they experience just the opposite; it feels as if every action is racially charged and motivated.

Stereotypes about criminality, and, in particular, about shoplifting, gang activity, and narcotic sales, are frequently associated with black and Latino men, but these associations are also often made about black and Latina women. In addition to these

stereotypes, this link between women of color and moral deviance gets reinforced in many other ways.

To take one example, in the US, biases regarding people of color (of all genders) and belonging are pervasive and widespread. The presumption that “foreign” people of color are interlopers and trespassers on land that “isn’t their own” reinforces the stereotype that many people of color are morally deviant and criminal. Just by existing, living, and operating in a Western context, people of color are perceived as occupying space that is not theirs to take. This presumption of not belonging is often communicated to people of color through repeated questions such as “but where are you *really* from?” “are you ever going back to your homeland?” and “are you an American?” (Ong et al. 2013). The fact that people of color are often treated, both implicitly and explicitly, as trespassers who wrongfully occupy space that does not belong to them can lead many to internalize these stereotypes and view themselves as trespassers or outlaws.

When these messages become internalized, they can cause intragroup conflict:

I often hear Latina/o students comment on how undocumented immigrants abuse U.S. social systems. They believe that undocumented immigrants come to this country to take away jobs meant for Americans and to live off welfare and food stamps. They say things like, “We work hard and pay taxes to pay for these people’s medical bills and food stamps.” Some students also believe that undocumented immigrants are able to go to college because they get more financial aid compared to U.S. citizens. Others have also used the term “anchor babies” to describe illegal immigrants who come to the United States only to have their child be born here and to take advantage of the social systems. (Hipolito-Delgado, Payan, and Baca 2014, 122)

Even if one is not an undocumented immigrant oneself, a fear often exists that others will perceive one as such. Stereotypes that perpetuate the idea that people of color do not deserve the benefits that they have “stolen” from the government, private institutions, white people, or “model minorities” reinforce self-conceptions of criminality.

The combined ideas that people of color are “trespassers” and are “undeserving of social benefits” are often simultaneously deployed to further reinforce stereotypes that are specifically about *women* of color and criminality. Natalie Cisneros quotes Tennessee state lawmaker Curry Todd, whose comments suggest that “the ‘pregnant alien subject’ [is] a contaminating and criminal threat to national well-being who, if left unchecked, will ‘go out there like [a] rat and multiply’” (Cisneros 2013, 292). This attitude reveals the underlying belief that women of color are illegitimate recipients of space and resources. Women of color are thus linked to criminality merely by their perceived ability to reproduce, which is fundamentally tied to their sex. Female bodies of color are often, from the outset, linked with criminality in deeply rooted, embodied ways that are difficult to escape.

This phenomenon is also familiar to black women who may not be perceived as “foreign” in the same way that, say, Asians or Latinas are, but are, nonetheless,

conceived as deviant sexualized bodies. Often, black femininity and sexuality is constructed as, in and of itself, *deviant*. By examining the life and treatment of Saartjie Baartman or the “Hottentot Venus,” Janell Hobson chronicles how the black female body has come to be perceived “with an emphasis on the rear end as a signifier of deviant sexuality. As a result, such associations of the black female rear end with hypersexuality and animalistic characteristics emerge not just in pseudoscientific studies of human anatomy but also in popular culture” (Hobson 2003, 92). The widespread construction of black female bodies as promiscuous and hypersexual supports the association between women of color and moral deviance.

To take another example, stereotypes about the so-called “welfare queen” also work to situate women of color as morally deviant and criminal. These stereotypes and tropes convey the idea that women of color tend to receive benefits that they have stolen from those more deserving. President Ronald Regan solidified the image of the “welfare queen” into the public imagination with his speeches in which he

repeatedly invoked a story of a “Chicago welfare queen” with “eighty names, thirty addresses, [and] twelve Social Security cards [who] is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over \$150,000.” Often, Reagan placed his mythical welfare queen behind the wheel of a Cadillac, tooling around in flashy splendor . . . propagating the stereotypical image of a lazy, larcenous black woman ripping off society’s generosity without remorse. (Haney-Lopez 2014, 58)

This stereotype positions black women as cheats and thieves who are not only stealing from hard-working (white) Americans, but who are also morally deviant enough to do so “without remorse.” The image of the welfare queen situates black women as threats to the economic and political security of the state, since they come to represent drains on taxpayer money and an expansion of government (Collins 2000, 80). Stereotypes such as “the welfare queen” have thus worked to firmly situate black women as criminals who take what is not theirs at the expense of the innocent and thereby undermine security and safety for non-black citizens.

Collins contrasts the image of the welfare queen with that of the “black lady”—the middle-class, professional black woman:

Via affirmative action, Black ladies allegedly take jobs that should go to more worthy Whites, especially U.S. White men. Given a political climate in the 1980s and 1990s that reinterpreted antidiscrimination and affirmative action programs as examples of an unfair “reverse racism,” no matter how highly educated or demonstrably competent Black ladies may be, their accomplishments remain questionable. (Collins 2000, 81)

Here, again, black women are cast as taking what does not belong to them. As with the welfare queen, any perceived financial success seen in black women is viewed as undeserved and stolen from its “legitimate” and “rightful” owners. Black women are

thus taken to represent theft and criminality when they are impoverished as well as when they achieve academic and employment success. Because of this, it is therefore extremely difficult for women of color to escape stereotypes that link them with criminality.

Given the abundance of stereotypes and biases that exist in the public imagination regarding women of color and criminality, women of color have many opportunities to internalize stereotypes about moral deviance. In the US, behavior aside, the mere fact that someone is a woman of color is enough to lead others to associate her with theft, trespassing, cheating, sexual deviance, and criminality. Of course, the strength of these associations and links will vary depending on the specific social context in which a woman finds herself. Yet the fact remains that women of color internalize stereotypes about moral deviance and criminality in many ways.

Just as internalized stereotypes about femininity can damage a person's moral identity, internalized stereotypes about criminality can also damage one's self-conception as a moral agent. However, there is an important difference between the sort of moral damage that occurs with regard to internalized notions of criminality and the kind present in feminist accounts regarding internalized oppression. Specifically, internalized oppression for feminists is tied to the idea that the subject views herself as a reduced agent or as incapable of participating in the moral community as a full-fledged member (Bartky 1990; Benson 1994; Nelson 2001a; 2001b; Charles 2010). But this is not the whole story when it comes to women of color. Instead of experiencing the self as merely a reduced member of the moral community, women of color can also come to view the self as a *deviant* member of the moral community, that is, as a wrongdoer. This poses a unique harm to one's moral identity that differs from that which results from viewing the self as a reduced agent.

THE UNIQUE HARM OF INTERNALIZED STEREOTYPES REGARDING CRIMINALITY

As Gay's narrative highlights, internalizing stereotypes about criminality and moral deviance can lead to a pervasive feeling of *guilt* that can make it difficult to function in a variety of everyday situations such as walking past police officers, going through metal detectors, or, even, shopping for groceries. Persistent feelings of guilt can result in mental-health setbacks such as depression (Bybee et al. 2009). Additionally, repeated exposure to guilt and similar feelings has been linked with a range of health challenges such as "dysfunctional coping, abdominal obesity, and glucose intolerance complicit in the development of Type 2 diabetes" (Bailey, Williams, and Favors 2014, 149). On top of mental- and physical-health obstacles, an internalized feeling of guilt can also result in a damaged moral identity.

This conclusion might come as a surprise to some. After all, in the literature, moral emotions such as guilt have been understood to motivate and promote behavior associated with repairing damaged moral relationships (Teroni and Bruun 2011). In other words, feeling guilty can often spur a person to do things such as apologize, change future behavior, or engage in steps needed to strengthen a moral relationship.

Yet in cases where people of color feel guilt due to internalized stereotypes about criminality or moral deviance, the upshot of these emotions is seldom a repaired moral relationship. This is because the fact that the individual is feeling guilt in the first place is a “misfire.” Often, the agents experiencing guilt did not actually do anything wrong that warrants their emotional experience; there is nothing that needs amending.

Internalizing stereotypes about criminality that lead to persistent feelings of guilt is particularly harmful, then, because of the limited redemptive strategies available. Typically, guilt is the result of a failure to meet obligations to others and can be relieved once the “price is paid”—one apologizes, makes amends, or somehow addresses the wrong that she or he has committed (Morris 1976, 61). But in these cases, there is no “price to pay” and, as such, it is difficult to escape feeling that you are morally deficient or unworthy when you have internalized stereotypes about criminality or moral deviance.

Similarly, it is also difficult to escape feeling like a reduced agent when it comes to internalized stereotypes about femininity. Even if one acts as a full agent would—with purpose, intent, control, and a sense of power—internalized stereotypes about femininity might prevent one from feeling like one is a fully reliable agent. For example, a woman might capably tackle her job, child-rearing, house projects, cooking, and elder-care. She could make important decisions and keep a family together and her job running smoothly, all by willfully exerting her leadership skills and capabilities as a reliable agent. Yet, at the end of the day, she might view herself as a less capable agent than her husband and defer to him or regard him as somehow more trustworthy when it comes to making important decisions. In this way, internalized stereotypes regarding both criminality and femininity might be difficult to escape.

Despite these similarities, there are some important differences between the challenges that internalized stereotypes about criminality and femininity pose. Part of the difference lies in the fact that viewing oneself as a reduced agent positions one’s self-conception as existing *within* the moral community, that is, as aligned with moral normativity, whereas viewing oneself as a criminal positions one’s self-conception as antithetical to the moral community and as incongruous with moral normativity.

Recognizing this difference helps to illuminate some of the ways that those with a reduced sense of agency can, nonetheless, cultivate a relationship with the self that is, though not ideal, grounded in a sense of self-worth and belonging within the moral community. By conforming to internalized stereotypes about femininity, a woman can meet gender-specific standards and expectations, that is, she is able to be a “good woman.” For instance, by deferring to their husbands or fathers, agreeing to have sex when their male partners desire it, upholding feminine beauty norms, and putting others’ needs first, women can gain a sort of moral high ground, despite reduced agency, in which they are praised and rewarded for their adherence to the stereotypes regarding femininity and womanhood. By being a “good woman” (or—as is perhaps more commonly said and indicative of the ways in which women’s agency is often reduced—a “good girl”) women are thus able to maintain a view of the self as normative and as fundamentally good, even if this view of the self is fraught and

tied to pernicious stereotypes. In other words, it's possible to view oneself as a reduced agent and, in doing so, feel a sense of self-worth, self-praise, and belonging within the moral community.

The same is not true when it comes to internalized stereotypes regarding criminality because these stereotypes force one to view the self as existing *outside* of the moral community and as *opposed* to it. Whereas a white housewife can gain a sense of moral competence and belonging within the moral community by submitting to her husband and being an excellent homemaker, Ross Gay cannot gain a sense of moral competence or belonging within the moral community via shoplifting. Even more troubling, acting on internalized stereotypes regarding criminality not only fails as a redemptive strategy when it comes to internalized stereotypes regarding criminality, it will *further distance* and more deeply entrench one's view of the self as alienated from the moral community. This is because actually engaging in criminal activity only solidifies one as outside of and in opposition to the moral community. In this way, internalized oppression that forms in response to stereotypes about criminality poses particular challenges when it comes to cultivating a positive self-image and moral identity that internalized oppression regarding the uptake of sexist norms regarding femininity does not.

In some cases, internalized stereotypes regarding femininity can lead one to view the self as existing outside of the moral community. In particular, when women depart from the stereotypes and feminine norms, they are often construed as "rule breakers" or "outlaws." Take, for example, the woman who rejects child-rearing responsibilities in order to pursue a career or who rejects feminine beauty norms and, say, wears "men's" clothing or sports a "man's" hairstyle (Benson 2000). By cutting against and resisting feminine norms, others might come to view these women as "crazy," incompetent as moral reasoners, and, furthermore, as existing outside of the moral community. Women might in turn come to doubt their own moral capacities and place within the moral community via an internalization of these perceptions (Benson 2000).

Yet the harm of internalizing stereotypes about criminality for people of color is fundamentally different from the harm associated with internalizing feminine stereotypes, because the former positions agents to view themselves as existing outside of the moral community and provides few entry points back into the moral fold. As we have seen, if a white woman views herself as a reduced agent, she might also come to view herself as existing outside of the moral community if she pushes against the stereotypes she has internalized. However, by conforming to the stereotypes in question, she is still able to hold onto a somewhat positive moral identity. In contrast, the redemptive strategies open to people of color who are viewed by others and often by themselves as morally deviant are less abundant. Challenging stereotypes by not stealing or breaking the law isn't enough to make one's persistent distrust of the self disappear. Resisting stereotypes thus is often not a useful redemptive strategy—after all, Ross Gay radically distrusts the fact he is innocent in spite of his clean record. In the same way, fulfilling these stereotypes further pushes someone outside of the moral fold and intensifies one's damaged moral identity. The harms that internalized

oppression can impose on one's moral identity are therefore closely related but also unique.⁵

SUBJECT-BASED STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERMENT

Recognizing that internalized oppression can be damaging to one's moral identity in multiple ways depending on its specific content is a valuable insight in and of itself. However, it is also noteworthy insofar as it can help give voice to some of the challenges that women of color often face as they experience *multiple* sorts of internalized oppression. In this final section I discuss one possible pragmatic strategy for empowerment that women of color have used to help navigate the varied ways that internalized oppression can damage one's moral identity. Yet, although this strategy can help alleviate some of the negative effects of internalized oppression, it does so at a cost: by reinstating other forms of internalized oppression.

The strategy that I have in mind involves appealing to the autonomy of women of color as a way to escape some of the harms of internalized oppression. As the discussion so far has highlighted, the views of the self that women of color internalize are often in tension with one another. To say that one is a criminal or a threat to the moral community involves recognizing that person as an agent, capable of acting dangerously in a way that invites blame, sanctions, or punishments. To be a criminal, then, is to exist as an agent, albeit one who works and operates outside of the moral community. In contrast, viewing oneself as a sex object or as inferior to men involves possessing a reduced sense of agency while still residing within the moral community. Viewing oneself as a deviant member of the moral community can make a person feel capable and strong if this self-understanding is contrasted with viewing the self as a reduced agent. Similarly, viewing oneself as a diminished agent can feel safe and nonthreatening in contrast to viewing oneself as morally deviant. In both cases, women of color are able to strategically use different sets of prejudices and stereotypes in pragmatically advantageous ways.

One can thus play these two views of the self against each other, thereby harnessing the power that resides in each domain of self-understanding. Put differently, a woman can adopt a view of the self and the sorts of actions that are associated with one set of stereotypes, either criminal or reduced agent, to successfully bring about desired states of affairs. This can be as simple as flaunting one's "feminine charms" when eyed suspiciously by a security guard, or as acting more aggressively and challenging rules and norms when not being taken seriously as an agent; for example, when being ignored at a restaurant, "threatening" to call the manager or to cut ahead in line. In this way, one can pass through a store without being hassled by security, or will be given the attention that a white customer would be given, but at the expense of reinforcing pernicious views about women of color. That is to say, one gets folded into the moral community by acting out the role of the reduced agent or one gets uptake as an agent by positioning oneself as in opposition to the moral community.

To help make this strategy more concrete, I offer two examples. First, take scholar and activist Angela Davis who writes about being perceived by the public as a criminal. This perceived criminality was tied to her blackness, and she reflects about this experience in her piece called “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia”:

A cycle of terror was initiated by the decision of the FBI to declare me one of the country’s ten most wanted criminals. Although I had been underground for over a month before I actually saw the photographs the FBI had decided to use on the poster, I had to picture how they might portray me as I attempted to create for myself an appearance that would be markedly different from the one defined as armed and dangerous. The props I used consisted of a wig with straight black hair, long false lashes, and more eyeshadow, liner, and blush than I had ever before imagined wearing in public. Never having seriously attempted to present myself as glamorous, it seemed to me that glamor was the only look that might annul the likelihood of being perceived as a revolutionary. (Davis 1994, 39–40)

By presenting as more “feminine” and also as “whiter”—the two concepts are intertwined in many ways—Davis sought to avoid coming across as threatening. The example here is a very public example, but it captures what goes on at a more personal level for many women of color. The idea is that, when one feels like a criminal or worries that others will think of her as such, women often fall back on a different set of internalized prejudices about femininity and act these out both publicly and privately to avoid feeling like a moral deviant or being perceived as such.

Similarly, when women of color are made to feel like sex objects, like children, or otherwise lacking autonomy, it can be pragmatically useful to draw on or act out stereotypes about criminality. Take Rihanna’s 2011 song and music video “Man Down” in which she shoots and kills a man who violates her autonomy by raping her (Crunk Feminist Collective 2015). Throughout the video, Rihanna’s character adheres to feminine stereotypes; her clothes and her dancing position her as a sex object, ready to submit to men. However, after she is raped, she challenges the view of herself as a “jezebel”—as incapable of being raped due to her “excessive sexual appetite” and status as an object—by shooting her rapist in a calm, cool, and calculated manner (Collins 2000, 81). This intentional, purposive, and controlled act repositions the character in Rihanna’s video as an agent. She thereby subverts feminine stereotypes by depicting herself as a criminal who operates as a full agent. Of course, despite her ability to subvert these norms on some levels, she is ultimately constrained and oppressed by white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal systems of power that render her actions intelligible only through paradigms such as the jezebel and/or the criminal. However, by playing these different modes of internalized oppression off each other, she is nonetheless able to undermine and cut against some of the norms and biases that oppress her.

This approach thus theorizes resistance “*through* the subject’s . . . exercise of their own volition, power, or agency” (Lugones 2003, 53). This strategy gives voice to the

fact that, despite internalized oppression's damaging effect on one's moral identity, it does not necessarily involve a total erasure or annihilation of one's ability to act autonomously and strategically (Lugones 2003, 53; Baber 2007). However, despite this ability to act autonomously, women of color are simultaneously constrained by oppressive systems of power. This recognition helps situate this strategy as an example of what Alisa Bierria terms "insurgent agency":⁶ "Insurgent agency is employed by subjects who intentionally act in unstable and precarious circumstances that are difficult to escape or alter, who craft provisional and makeshift practices of opposition that subvert, but still remain defined by, conditions of power" (Bierria 2014, 140). Davis's decision to look more "glamorous" (more feminine and whiter) is "makeshift" in the sense that it is outside of her usual routine and is adopted as an intentional strategy to try to escape a view of the self as a criminal. However, her approach—an adherence to beauty norms—is defined by the complex power structures that oppress her in the first place.

The strategy that I have highlighted can be pragmatically useful and can help women of color navigate oppressive social conditions. However, it is important to remember that this strategy necessitates that women of color take up and embody stereotypes that are damaging to their moral identity and that uphold and sustain oppressive systems of power. The short-term benefits of navigating a particular social interaction can therefore often be overshadowed by the long-term costs this strategy generates.

I have suggested that internalized oppression can damage a person's moral relationship with the self in multiple ways. I do not mean to suggest that the two ways I focus on here—a reduced sense of agency and the view of oneself as a moral deviant—represent an exhaustive list of the harms generated by internalized oppression. In contrast, I hope this analysis encourages further exploration into the varied moral harms of internalized oppression and how it affects people who are multiply oppressed. Finally, although internalized oppression can be quite damaging to one's moral identity, let us not forget the resilience of women of color and other oppressed persons who have harnessed strategies for empowerment through their agency and self-awareness.

NOTES

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1. The main focus here is on one's *perception* of her own agency, as opposed to on her actual capacities as an agent. The literature on adaptive preference discusses the relationship between oppression and agentic capacities (Nussbaum 2001; Narayan 2002; Baber 2007; Khader 2011).

2. I do not claim that the effects of internalized oppression can be summed up as either a reduced sense of agency or a deviant view of the self. In contrast, I expect that

internalized oppression can harm one's moral identity in a number of other ways as well. In this article, however, I focus on just these two kinds of harm.

3. It should be noted that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are frequently associated with criminality and sexual deviance. Although I will not discuss internalized oppression in the context of queerness, many of the arguments made here can also apply to those of all races and genders who identify as queer.

4. Notice that I'm not arguing that a person must actually possess this sort of autonomous control to be legitimately held morally responsible. Instead, I'm arguing that to *feel* that you can be held legitimately morally responsible, you also need to *feel* that you have control and agency.

5. Although I distinguish between viewing oneself as a reduced agent and as a moral deviant and argue that each poses unique moral harms, there is an important sense in which they are similar. Specifically, both phenomena could be described as instances of compromised self-respect. See Dillon 1992 for a rich discussion of the many varieties of self-respect (and how each can be damaged or lacking) that centrally involves one's relationship with the moral community.

6. Uma Narayan's idea of "bargaining with patriarchy" also maps closely onto the kind of strategy I have in mind here. Narayan is careful to highlight the exercise of agency often involved in negotiating oppressive norms: "There is active agency involved in women's compliance with patriarchal structures, even when the stakes involved in non-compliance and the pressures that enjoin compliance are very high, the idea of 'bargaining with patriarchy' allows us to keep this consideration in mind" (Narayan 2002, 422).

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