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Feminism Part 3: The Dominance Approach

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Editor's Note: This essay is the third in a three-part series on the topic of philosophical feminism. The first two parts, on the Sameness Approach to feminism and the Difference Approach to feminism, are by Annaleigh Curtis; this third part, on the Dominance Approach, is by Chelsea Haramia. The first essay can be viewed [here](#) and the second [here](#).

Here is a common stereotype about women: "Women are less rational and more emotional."

Two questions immediately arise: Less rational than *what*? And more emotional than *what*?

The straightforward answer is *men*.^[1] A related answer is that women are less rational and more emotional *than they should be*.

Putting these answers together, we discover certain assumptions in the original statement—that men are superior, and that men are the standard against which women are measured.^[2] These assumptions of masculine superiority and feminine inferiority may be reinforced through stereotypes, even when these stereotypes don't explicitly assert a hierarchy between men and women.^[3]

Proponents of the *dominance* approach to feminism argue that injustice consists in unjust social relations of domination and subordination. Unjust power relations have been fundamental to the way that our discourse, our relations, and our institutions have been created and maintained. They have allowed the dominant group—men—to structure society and the very discussions we use to critique it in ways that maintain and reinforce the power they hold over subordinated groups and individuals. In sum, the

dominance approach targets unequal power relations as the source of gender injustice.

Not all unequal power relations are unjust. Parents commonly stand in an unequal yet just power relation to their children, for example.

However, instances of gendered oppression also involve unequal power relations, and they involve not only the abuse of power but also the devaluation—and often dehumanization—of those who deviate from the dominant standard.

As we saw in Part 2 of this series, the *difference* approach to feminism takes the existing conditions and tries to achieve justice *within* them.^[4] So, one might respond to the above stereotype by arguing that emotions and emotional thinking are actually quite valuable, and that women's purported emotional maturity is an asset.

The dominance theorist would reply that women should not be trying to prove to men that they are valuable.^[5] This tacitly reinforces a system that assumes that dominant men should be the ones to decide who's valuable in the first place, thereby reinforcing the power that the dominant have to make such determinations.

The dominance approach instead criticizes the structures and conditions themselves, arguing that they are created and maintained by the powerful, viz., dominant men. Tacit and explicit assumptions about superiority and inferiority must be rejected in order to attain gender justice. Highlighting the value of stereotypically feminine traits fails to expose the fact that merely being-a-woman connotes inferiority.

So, for the dominance theorist, it's not a question of how *valuable* stereotypically feminine characteristics are; it's a question of how power and domination are already *built into our assumptions* about sex and gender differences. If these assumptions form the basis for our everyday discussions, then, as Marilyn Frye observes, "the powerful normally determine what is said and sayable."^[6]

This kind of dominance arguably exists not only in discourse but also in the systems and institutions that structure our lives. If socially constructed sex and gender differences enforce the perceived inferiority of women, then this could require a "shift in perspective from gender as difference to gender as dominance."^[7]

For example, Catherine MacKinnon criticizes the legal system as constructed from the point of view of the dominant, noting, for example, the fact that female rape victims do not have a say in what is considered rape because “rape is defined according to what men think violates women.”^[8] The legal system’s past stance on marital rape supports this idea. It wasn’t until 1993 that it became legally possible in all 50 states for a man to rape his wife. Before that, a man could rape his wife, and the legal system would deem it neither rape nor a crime.

Or, consider something as seemingly benign and generic as automobile safety and design. Crash test dummies are typically made based on the average male body, and this body falsely represents the average American person. The result is a disproportionate number of women suffering injury or death in automobile accidents simply because they are women.^[9]

The crash test dummy is a material manifestation of what Audre Lorde calls the “mythical norm.”^[10] However, Lorde extends dominance concerns beyond simple sex hierarchies and brings these considerations to bear on power relations based on age, race, class, sexuality, and other defining characteristics. She says “[i]n america, this [mythical] norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, [and] Christian.”^[11] Her goal is not to identify differences per se; it is to identify when difference is presented as inferiority, and then to notice that this purported inferiority is used to devalue and dehumanize subordinated human beings.

When this power results in the dehumanization of the subordinated, it is powerful enough to dictate who lives and who dies. It determines whose lives are prioritized and whose lives are considered discardable by the very institutions that structure and design society. This explains why many women face an undue risk of death from automobile accidents. And it explains why domination often entails physical violation for members of subordinated groups—as can be seen from the high risk of violence that trans women of color face, which is arguably compounded by their membership in multiple subordinated groups.^[12]

If the domination of women and other subordinated groups renders them powerless in an important sense, then one might worry that the dominance approach implies that the subordinated are

hopelessly oppressed.^[13] To teach others that their oppression is the result of powerful, systemic forces that are beyond their control can itself be disempowering. Empowering the oppressed is an important part of fighting oppression, but this also raises questions of whether and when the oppressed themselves should expend the time and energy required to fight to have their humanity respected, and of what role privileged and powerful individuals should play in the fight against oppression.^[14]

In sum, the *sameness* approach prioritizes gender equality, the *difference* approach aims to elevate feminine attributes, and the *dominance* approach targets the structures and systems that maintain the subordination of women and others.

Notes

[1] In step with Annaleigh Curtis’s caveat in Parts 1 & 2 of this series, I pause here to note the following: I write about men and women in this essay as if those categories were real and exhausted the gendered possibility space. I do this mostly because the thinkers I discuss tended to do so. However, most feminists today accept that there is no hard and fast biological or social binary with men on one hand and women on the other. For an overview of ways in which sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation come apart, see here.

[2] De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex (Introduction)* in Hackett, Elizabeth, and Sally Haslanger. *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[3] Haslanger, Sally. “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground” in Haslanger, Sally. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[4] And as we also saw in Part 2, this same critique can be leveled at the sameness approach outlined in Part 1.

[5] MacKinnon, Catharine. “Difference and Domination: On Sex Discrimination” in Hackett, Elizabeth, and Sally Haslanger. *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[6] Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. California: The Crossing Press, 1983, p. 105. This means that the dominant create and impose definitions and thereby determine our discourse according to their standards. In this same work, Frye gives an example of the dominant controlling the discourse, noting that “when the

Secretary of Defense calls something a peace negotiation...then whatever it is that he called a peace negotiation is an instance of negotiating peace” (p. 105). These issues are now known as instances of *epistemic injustice*: for an introduction, see [Epistemic Injustice](#) by Huzeyfe Demirtas.

[7] MacKinnon, Catharine. “Difference and Domination: On Sex Discrimination” in Hackett, Elizabeth, and Sally Haslanger. *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 251.

[8] MacKinnon, Catharine. “Desire and Power” and “Sex and Violence: A Perspective” in Hackett, Elizabeth, and Sally Haslanger. *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 267.

[9] According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2019, a female wearing a seat belt had a 73% greater chance of being seriously injured in a frontal crash than a male involved in the same kind and severity of crash. See also: Criado-Perez, Caroline. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. New York: Abrams Press, 2019 or overview of the issues in: Criado-Perez, Caroline. “The deadly truth about a world built for men – from stab vests to car crashes.” *The Guardian*. February 23, 2019. Arguably, the dominant group’s interests are routinely prioritized, often at the cost of the bodily integrity of the subordinated, because the dominant group holds a vast amount of decision-making power in society.

[10] Lorde, Audre. “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in Hackett, Elizabeth, and Sally Haslanger. *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 293. By “mythical” Lorde does not mean that this norm is not real. While it is a myth that this idealized person accurately represents the human norm, the norm and its oppressive effects are nonetheless very real.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Barrouquere, Brett. “Under Attack” in *Intelligence Report* published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, Spring Issue, Feb. 20, 2019.

[13] Judith Butler levels this kind of criticism against Catherine MacKinnon in Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

[14] Lorde, Audre. “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in Hackett, Elizabeth, and

Sally Haslanger. *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

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Related Essays

[Feminism Part 1: The Sameness Approach](#) by Annaleigh Curtis

[Feminism Part 2: The Difference Approach](#) by Annaleigh Curtis

[Epistemic Injustice](#) by Huzeyfe Demirtas

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