

The Multiplicity of Oppression: Young's Five Faces Explored Through Luke's Dimensions of Power

Nika Evenson

This paper critically analyzes Iris Young's evaluative framework of oppression in conversation with Steven Lukes' three-dimensional power philosophy. Young's approach, centered around the Five Faces of Oppression and the recognition of systemic constraints, represents a departure from traditional notions of overt tyranny and domination. By emphasizing structural phenomena, she brings attention to the hidden and insidious aspects of oppression often overlooked in our awareness.

However, this paper argues that Young's framework, while valuable, has limitations in its rigid categorization, which appears through its use of structural phenomena. The introduction of Steven Lukes's Dimensional Powers offers an alternative perspective that accommodates the fluid and dynamic nature of oppression. Lukes's three dimensions — overt power, shaping political discourse, and subtle influence — provide a nuanced understanding of varying levels of oppression and account for individual experience.

The analysis suggests that Lukes's dimensional power approach may offer a more comprehensive and adaptable framework for understanding oppression. It allows individuals to pinpoint where and how they experience oppression and recognizes the importance of addressing covert forms that influence beliefs. While Young's framework is accessible, Lukes's perspective provides a greater exploration of oppression's complexity, encouraging a more just and equitable society by addressing diverse experiences of oppression. In conclusion, both contribute valuable insights, but Luke's dimensional power approach appears more comprehensive for understanding and addressing oppression in society.

1. Introduction

Iris Young's Five Faces of Oppression provides a contemporary understanding of oppression that transcends previously conceived notions of its kind within political philosophy. Following a demonstration of the discrepancies within methodological individualism¹⁶² and structural phenomena¹⁶³, she provides several descriptive forms that a collective might experience when oppressed.¹⁶⁴ The five forms — exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence — work as a foundation for the classification of oppression under her framework. Through an evaluation of her reasoning, I argue that in analyzing oppression using structural phenomena, as Young does, we risk fostering a framework that does not fully reflect the varying levels of oppression within society. This perspective is substantiated through an exploration of Stephen Lukes's Dimensional Powers, which I believe provides a more comprehensive understanding of oppression without attempting to fit a multiplicity of experiences into a set of descriptive forms. I claim that Luke supplies a framework where oppression can fluctuate in severity according to individual or collective experience through the employment of systematic levels. Furthermore, Lukes observes oppression through a lens that does not focus solely on structural phenomena, opening itself to a larger variety of events. When put into conversation with Young's faces, Young's framework starts to function instead as more

¹⁶² Methodological individualism provides a framework for understanding social phenomena that occurs through an exploration of individuals that incites society as the outcome of their actions and intentions.

¹⁶³ Structural phenomenon, according to Young, refers to institutional rules or regulations that immobilize or diminish a social group.

¹⁶⁴ Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," 40.

accessible examples of Lukes's dimensions, aiding individuals to better understand the circumstances and effects of their oppression and not as a framework in and of itself.

Young begins her paper with an explanation regarding the definition of oppression, discussing how the term "oppression" has been reinterpreted to encompass more phenomena within the last century. Originally, the term was used to describe events such as apartheid where tyranny and domination were blatantly visible, leading many individuals to believe that oppression is no longer relevant in our society.¹⁶⁵ Young discusses how these individuals view oppression as something that would be inflicted upon them by an outside entity, such as a foreign power and not by their community or government. Within much of western society there are no outside powers that dominate its citizens or their rights and freedoms; therefore, they are theoretically free of oppression. However, many are forced to acknowledge the active nature of oppression within their society through personal experiences or second-hand accounts. Whether due to religion, ethnicity, or gender, Young suggests that oppression should be understood as systemic constraints on various groups.¹⁶⁶ This leads oppression to be entrenched in the structural foundations of many institutional rules, and as a result, the norms, beliefs, and values of those that follow them.¹⁶⁷ Individuals who perpetrate this type of structurally embedded oppression often do not see themselves as agents of oppression and are instead unaware of the harm they may inflict upon other groups.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 40.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 41.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Before defining her five categories of oppression, Young first describes what makes an individual inherently part of a social group (thus applicable for evaluation), a term which she differentiates from an aggregate or association. An aggregate is a simple classification that relates to a visible attribute such as eye color, but also gender, skin color, and age. The phenomenon that separates an aggregate from a social group is that in an aggregate, the individual exists prior to the collective. In other words, the classifications are not a necessary part of their identity. For example, the classification of an individual through an external or accidental attribute like eye color, would not reflect their internal disposition, personality, or outlook on society.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, an association is understood as a “...formally organized institution...”¹⁶⁹ which would entail voluntary participation in entities such as clubs, corporations, political parties, or churches. Through the lens of these two terms, Young defines social groups by their direct connection to the identity of the individual, which distinguishes them from other collectives due to culture, religion, or way of life. Furthermore, social groups and their identities exist “...in the encounter and interaction between social collectives,”¹⁷⁰ more specifically, they exist due to the differences between individuals who consider themselves a part of the same society. These definitions are necessary because they outline the reasons why multiple groups can be evaluated as oppressed while existing within the same public sphere. In

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 44.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 43.

looking at other ways of grouping individuals, there is a noticeable variation in the effect of separation due to identity and its importance to who a person is and not simply how they appear.

The forms of oppression that Young has defined within her Five Faces of Oppression are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The foundation of exploitation is that oppression occurs when one social group benefits from the labor of another social group, which has been steadily transferred to them over a period of time.¹⁷¹ This is employed structurally through a systematic process that is consistently maintained in order to ensure the power, status and wealth of the benefitting social group.¹⁷² The next form, marginalization, is understood as a deprivation of material items through distribution injustice while also implying a “deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions”¹⁷³ that do not allow the marginal to utilize their capacities to achieve recognition and interaction. Powerlessness defines those who lack authority, particularly in the division of labor, which results in them having to take orders without any creative or meditative autonomy.¹⁷⁴ This form of oppression is easily visible in capitalist countries, such as the United States, where workplaces function under hierarchical systems that do not allow most individuals to contribute in decision making.¹⁷⁵ The fourth form of oppression that Young describes is cultural imperialism, which is defined as a universalization of a dominant group’s culture and its establishment as the norm for

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 49.

¹⁷² Ibid, 50.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 55.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 56.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

all groups within that society.¹⁷⁶ The final form of oppression is violence, which includes “harassment, intimidation or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating or stigmatizing group members.”¹⁷⁷ The reason that Young provides this as a notion of oppression is due to the structural and social setting that has allowed violence to go unchecked and in some cases be found acceptable in society.

Lukes’ framework highlights levels of power that do not rely on the various descriptions of oppression Young defines within her forms. In this regard, Young’s faces of oppression allow Luke’s dimensions the possibility to be explored through accessible definitions, such as cultural imperialism, which provide groups and individuals a starting point to explore their oppression. Beginning with one-dimensional power, defined as “overt power”¹⁷⁸ meaning that this power is observable and mainly related to active political agents and organizations, which may refer to ‘violence’. Two-dimensional power is then understood as power that shapes the political sphere by deciding what can and cannot be discussed by indirectly influencing what options may even be considered structurally, potentially encompassing ‘powerlessness’. Finally, three-dimensional power is noticeably more latent, as its power operates by defining people’s interests primarily by subtly manipulating an individual’s value system and beliefs, as illustrated by Young’s concept of ‘cultural imperialism.’ Furthermore, due to its nature as a covert conflict, many individuals who have succumbed to its influence are unaware that their preferences have been shifted.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 59.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 61.

¹⁷⁸ Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 4.

Through an observation of Lukes's framework, we can see there are areas of overlap within Young's classes, particularly in how each criterion can be encapsulated within one of Lukes's dimensions. For example, exploitation, which focuses on the unlawful utilization of another's physical or metaphysical labor, can be considered one-dimensional due to the direct presence of power over a group, two-dimensional if it pertains to exploitative rules and regulations, or three-dimensional if the subjugated individual is unaware of their exploitation. Moreover, a category such as powerlessness could be considered primarily two-dimensional as it is typically systematic, as found within regulations and guidelines that aim to restrict the power of another group. However, powerlessness can pertain to the first and third levels as well, should an individual be defenseless against another's actions or theoretically to the point in which they are conditioned to accept their position. This is different from marginalization, as this form of powerlessness is likely to occur in a smaller setting, potentially a romantic relationship where an individual is unable to change their circumstances. This individual is still oppressed as any social group may be, but its classification under Young would be overlooked due to its singular nature regardless of how many individuals suffer from the same situation. Violence is another example, as under Young's description, it fits largely into one-dimensional power. Nevertheless, a closer examination can isolate violence into at least three separate areas that highlight its physical, manipulative, or psychological nature. Physical violence would still likely fall under the first dimension, as it is visible power exerted over another individual, though if it was allowed due to manipulative tactics such as propaganda or gaslighting, it could be considered within the second

dimension. Psychological violence would likely be entrenched in a value or belief system, such as religion where their belief in their god is tied to their acceptance of violence against them.

Each facet of oppression that Young presents can fit into Luke's already diverse system of dimensional power that does not necessitate categorization. This is one reason it may provide a more illuminating way to analyze oppression. For instance, Young claims that "applying these five criteria to the situation of groups makes it possible to compare oppressions without reducing them to a common essence or claiming that one is more fundamental than another."¹⁷⁹ However, as I discussed previously, each criteria has an inclination for a certain dimension of power. Young's notion evidently does not imply fundamentality or commonality, but nonetheless, dimensional powers are able to provide a more in-depth and cohesive understanding of oppression, where further interpretation can occur. They are not simply providing an area for the evaluation of oppression under descriptive terms in a large-scale society as Young does, but they truly create the evaluation and exploration of oppression in a fluid manner. Luke establishes a notion of varying levels of oppression that coincide with an individual's overall freedom in its most specific forms. In other words, Luke puts into words how even isolated cases of oppression are brought about without relying on specific descriptive criteria. Moreover, Young utilizes descriptors such as violence and exploitation, and requires that the social groups fit into one of forms to be evaluated as oppressed. On the other hand, Luke employs open and

¹⁷⁹ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," 64.

non-specific criteria in his framework as he is discussing forms of power, which only implies that power of some type must be exerted.

In creating these categories, Young creates boundaries between the various types of oppression experienced by collectives, while leaving isolated cases overlooked. She discusses the categories as if they are “multiple, cross-cutting, fluid and shifting”¹⁸⁰ but discusses the requirement of one of her Five Faces of Oppression for a social group to be evaluated as oppressed. She explains how group differentiation is not necessarily oppressive¹⁸¹ but does so by providing the decline of parochial attachments¹⁸² as a reason for the position, which I believe to be particularly outdated. In this context, I believe Young is implying that group differences are not as inherently oppressive in present-day society due to globalization. As individuals are less likely to be confined to small communities where being perceived as ‘different’ may have resulted in them being oppressed. Furthermore, Young considers how markets and social administration have caused an increased global social interdependency¹⁸³, whereas I believe she does not consider the popularity of social media, which has transcended traditionally aggregated social groups and boundaries. These social groups formed with the help of social media can no longer be defined by external attributes or location because they cannot be found in one specific society. Social media has led to an interconnectedness where a group such as this does not

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 48.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 47.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

interact within any systemic space that would lead to them being oppressed under Young's forms. I make this argument because if a group is marginalized on a social media platform due to their values or culture, they are likely experiencing real-world marginalization as well.

Nonetheless, the systemic results of oppression vary considering the location of a group due to the institutions, laws, and regulations that are applicable. Therefore, if social media is used to instigate one of Young's forms of oppression in a circumstance that does not already pertain to any real-world instances of oppression for that individual or group, then it cannot be evaluated through the framework. Consequently, even if social media falls under the descriptive category of oppression presented by Young, it cannot be contained within structural phenomena and systematic setting that Young has set as her foundation. I do, however, acknowledge that Young formed this notion before the conception of modern social media, making it significantly more applicable in the past. Nevertheless, I provide this as an example of how a Lukesian three-dimensional approach to oppression provides a more universally relevant form of evaluation.

Lukes's approach is able to observe occurrences, such as social media, on a variety of nuanced levels, as the primary focus of his work is power. Power has yet to be defined under a single description, as Lukes suggests power can be polysemic, meaning that its definition shifts according to what is most appropriate in that context.¹⁸⁴ Power could fall under what Wittgenstein refers to as a 'family resemblance,' implying that it has no common substance, or

¹⁸⁴ Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 61.

potentially power is dependent on local ‘language games.’¹⁸⁵ In any debate, argument or dialogue, power could be employed and understood in a multitude of ways according to the desires of the individual, the location, political beliefs, age, gender, what have you. Therefore, Lukes explores power as a ‘dispositional concept’, which entails a “conjunction of conditional or hypothetical statement[s]” that identifies the possible situations in which power is or could be employed.¹⁸⁶ In this regard, when Young utilizes structural phenomena as a foundation for her five faces, she limits her forms of oppression to a structurally physical environment where institutions and social groups interact under the same regulations. Conversely, Lukes’s notion of power operates using the “abilit[ies] or capacit[ies] of an agent or agents,” regardless of whether they actively use these capacities.¹⁸⁷ When considering social media’s immaterial nature, a systematic approach of oppression cannot be implemented on a global level, at the very least not currently, whereas a dispositional power approach is able to account for the various differences across societies and continents.

Lukes’s dimensions of power can provide an individual with the understanding of how and where within a system they are being oppressed, while also providing insight into what properties are being affected. For example, by employing powerlessness on a religious minority, they would theoretically be excluded from decision-making. Whereas, the dominant religious social group would be able to create laws and regulations that could make it easier for them to

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 61-2.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 63.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

practice, wear their religious symbols openly, express their views while making it more difficult for the religious minority to do so. Eventually, the religious minority becomes aware of their powerlessness; however, they have been effectively marginalized and are now dependent on the state. The religious minority is able to evaluate their situation by exploring oppression through powerlessness and marginalization within Young's framework. However, it is increasingly unlikely that any minority is simply oppressed through one or two systemic factors as the religious minority had been. Oppression does not only exist in structural phenomena, as there are individual, ideological, and social factors that are necessary to consider. However, they are not encapsulated within the systematic basis of Young's Faces of Oppression. Young's goal was to evaluate oppression on an institutional level which is meant to be accessible to social groups while not providing a framework that ranks the forms of oppression experienced by these groups. This reality does not lessen the usefulness of Young's forms; it simply highlights areas in which improvement and innovation is necessary. By combining Lukes's and Young's approaches to power and oppression, there is an opportunity to implicate structural oppression and dimensional powers within the same framework. This approach would be able to encompass the common forms of oppression that Young presents, while being able to observe and evaluate oppression on a smaller scale than social groups and in a non-structural setting. Lukes's dimensional powers were shown to be able to categorize oppression that occurs on social media, while Young's failed to do so. However, Lukesian methodology is difficult to understand without explicit knowledge of one's situation. Therefore, through an amalgamation of both works in which Lukes's

dimensional powers provide the foundation of the framework and Young's faces of oppression provide accessible explanations and descriptive criteria, it is likely that a more globally applicable structure for evaluating and explaining oppression may be found.

Iris Young's evaluative framework of oppression in dialogue with Steven Lukes' three-dimensional power philosophy provides further insight into the complex nature of negative societal constraints. Young's notion of oppression is understood primarily as structural constraints through her Five Faces of Oppression, which marks a significant departure from traditional notions of tyranny and domination. Her focus on structural phenomena brings awareness to the hidden and insidious characteristics of oppression that often elude our awareness. Lukes's three dimensions of power offers an alternative approach that more easily accommodates the fluid and dynamic nature of oppression through the introduction of a more systematic approach. The notion of dimensional power establishes the opportunity for a more nuanced and flexible understanding of oppression, allowing individuals to pinpoint where and how they are oppressed and what aspects of their freedom are directly affected outside of social groups. It underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing covert forms of oppression, which often render large collectives' agents unaware of their own subjugation. However, it is likely that Young can provide a more easily accessible approach to oppression, as Luke's framework may be difficult to understand if an individual is not actively aware of their society and their relation to different social groups. In this case, Young's Five Faces of Oppression may be used to explore oppression and where it may fall within Lukes's framework.

In essence, while both Young's and Lukes's perspectives offer valuable insights into oppression, the discussion here suggests that the dimensional power approach might provide a more comprehensive and adaptable framework for understanding and addressing the diverse experiences of oppression in a society. It encourages us to not only be aware of large-scale oppression and the overt constraints of a system but also individual experience and the subtler influences that shape our preferences and beliefs, ultimately moving us closer to a more just and equitable society.

Works Cited

Lukes, Stephen. *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd Ed. (Macmillan 2005), 14-107.

Young, Iris Marion. "Five Faces of Oppression," *The Philosophical Forum* 19,4 (1988), 39-65.