

# Epistemic Vices: Should Members of Oppressed Groups Vice-Charge?

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## Abstract

Epistemic vices, such as arrogance or closed-mindedness, are vices of an intellectual kind that can affect our belief-forming processes in a self-concealing manner. Such vices are sometimes undetectable to their possessor, meaning that other members of an epistemic community may be better positioned to address them. Ian Kidd outlines vice-charging as a process whereby individuals or groups can collaborate to address epistemically vicious behaviour. This paper discusses whether members of oppressed groups should vice-charge. I propose that (1) members of oppressed groups have good reasons not to engage in what I call perpetrator-focussed vice-charging, but (2) have good reasons to engage in what I call victim-focussed vice-charging. I label Kidd's theory as perpetrator-focussed, because on this approach, a charge is successful insofar as it ameliorates the perpetrator's vice. Members of oppressed groups have good reasons not to conduct perpetrator-focused charges, because by doing so, they risk suffering from what Nora Beranstein calls epistemic exploitation. Such agents do, however, have good reason to make victim-focussed charges. Victim-focussed charges involve a victim of a vice  $V$  signalling her condemnation of  $V$  to other potential victims of  $V$  for the purpose of collectivising. Vice-charging for this function sidesteps the problem that afflicts a perpetrator-focussed practice, while also yielding additional benefits.

## 1. Vice-charging & its Risks

### 1.1 Rhetorical and Robust Charges

Ian Kidd outlines two forms that vice-charges might take: *rhetorical* and *robust*. In this section, I define each of these forms of vice-charging and when they might be used, so that we can get clear on how vice-charging works.

Rhetorical charges are defined as an expression of disapproval or negative attitude. A charger who makes a rhetorical charge might do so through an eye-roll, sigh, head shake, terse remark, and so on. These sorts of charges communicate the charger's disapproval in a reactionary way that does not involve communicating the reason for

the charge to the charged.<sup>1</sup> So, if P has vice x, and V decides to charge P with x, the charge would be rhetorical so long as V does not communicate the reason for the charge to P. Because it does not involve a communicated justification, a rhetorical charge simply hints at “certain allegiances, sympathies, values, rather than to try to compel anyone else to adopt them”.<sup>2</sup> Their lack of communicated justification means that rhetorical charges require a low degree of effort to conduct.

The second kind of charge is a *robust charge*, which are based on robust justifications that are *communicated to the charged* and are therefore different from rhetorical charges.<sup>3</sup> The requirement of communicated justification means that robust charges are costlier to carry out for the charger, but more likely to be effective in alleviating the vice. If we can give the vicious person a story about why we are charging them, Kidd thinks they will be more receptive to the charge we are making. As such, robust charges are the most effective kinds of charges, but also the most taxing charge for a charger to make.

### 1.2 Risks of Vice-Charging

Kidd identifies some risks that can arise in the practices of both rhetorical and robust charging. Recall that Kidd takes the sole purpose of vice-charging to be vice-amelioration. For this reason, the risks he outlines for vice-charging are considered as such because they impede the amelioration process: a charge is risky if it has a low chance of ameliorating the intended vice.<sup>4</sup>

Firstly, rhetorical charges are risky because the charger does not communicate reasons for the charge to the vicious person. Because they are non-justified, they have the potential to make no impact at all, or worse, inflame the vice. For instance, suppose I roll my eyes at someone’s arrogant remark. My eye-roll would probably have no effect if he saw it, given his arrogance. Alternatively, he might ask me to explain why I rolled my eyes. If I decide that it is not worth explaining myself and refuse to do so, he might believe that those who disagree with him are misinformed. If he does not think there was any reason behind the charge, the charge can rebound back onto me and the charged may become even more confident in his beliefs.<sup>5</sup> While the lack of communicated justification makes rhetorical charges cheap to make, this feature also makes them prone to being ineffective in alleviating the targeted vice.

Recall that robust charges involve a communicated justification. Because of this, they do not run the risk of inflaming vices in the same way that rhetorical charges do. However, there are risks that arise when this justification process fails. Kidd outlines *the problem of consensus* as one way that this might happen. The problem of consensus arises when the vicious agent lacks the requisite shared meanings to make sense of what the charger is attempting to communicate. This can arise when agents have divergent hermeneutical resources. Hermeneutical resources refer to the interpretive

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<sup>1</sup> Kidd 2016, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

tools, such as language or concepts, that are available to make sense of one's experiences.<sup>6</sup> In the same way that hermeneutical resources are needed to make sense of experiences, the experiences available to a knower largely influence what hermeneutical resources they are likely to have.<sup>7</sup> When a hearer and speaker have different hermeneutical resources, it is largely because they occupy different social positions and have different experiences relative to those positions.<sup>8</sup> When someone from a marginalised social position tries to communicate something to a dominantly situated person, their efforts might be thwarted because the dominantly situated person lacks the hermeneutical resources to accurately interpret the oppressed person's testimony. To illustrate how different ways of knowing stem from different social groups in ways that impede communication, consider the following testimony

*Paranoid*

As a perpetual outsider, in virtue of my brown immigrant body, my accent, mannerisms, and the assumptions about my affinities and motivations, I have encountered what are termed as microaggressions both within the classroom and in context of presenting my research. There are countless such incidences, and they still occur every semester without fail. And even within these blatant instances of racism, there have been allies, who not only failed to understand the experience, but charged me with being overly-sensitive (paranoid). Thankfully, today's social media exposes me to the experiences of other women of color and I can receive validation of my reality from them.<sup>9</sup>

In this excerpt, Saba Fatima explains how even those whom she considered allies dismissed her experiences as nothing but a consequence of paranoia. Their failure to understand the experience might arise from their inability to have the experience, or properly listen to those who have the experience, seeing as they do not occupy the same social position that Fatima does as a woman of colour. The difference in opportunities and experiences that are relative to each group manifests in their different conceptual repertoire. Because of this, when people from marginalised groups explain their experiences of oppression to the dominant group, the dominant group often fail to understand. This can lead to injustices of an epistemic kind that occur on the basis of someone having their experiences rendered unintelligible, or having their testimony unfairly dismissed or given a low degree of credibility.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of vice-charging, vicious people might not have the hermeneutical resources available to receive the charge that is made against them. If a vicious person does not experience what it is like to be on the receiving end of the vice, they may not have the resources necessary to understand why their behaviour is being charged as vicious. If they do not share an understanding of the vice that the charger is invoking, it is unlikely that they will be receptive to the charge that is made against it.<sup>11</sup> The problem

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<sup>6</sup> Fricker 2007, pp. 147-69.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Pohlhaus 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Fatima 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of epistemic injustice, see Fricker 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Kidd 2016, p. 192.

of consensus refers to the problems of interpretation that arise because of lacunas in shared interpretive resources. It is a problem for vice-charging because it creates divergent understandings of viciousness and hinders attempts to charge vicious behaviour, seeing as cooperative charging practices are unlikely to occur without some shared conceptions of viciousness to appeal to.

In the next section, I argue that Kidd's conception of risk is determined in terms of efficacy and so fails to capture potential harms that oppressed people face when they vice-charge. I argue for an understanding of the risks of vice-charging in a way that is sensitive to harms that are unique to members of oppressed groups, which persist *even when* the charge successfully ameliorates the vice it is aimed at ameliorating and sidesteps the aforementioned problems.

## 2. Perpetrator-Focussed Charges & Epistemic Exploitation

Because Kidd's model of vice-charging is committed to alleviating vices, the risks that he outlines for vice-charges are framed in terms of their efficacy: a charge is risky if it has a low chance of ameliorating the vice. As seen above, rhetorical charges might go wrong when the vice becomes inflamed, rather than ameliorated; and robust charges might go wrong when the justification for the charge cannot be communicated, meaning that the vice cannot be ameliorated. Due to amelioration of the perpetrator's vice being the intended goal, I will characterise Kidd's approach as *perpetrator-focussed*:

*Perpetrator-focussed* charges occur when someone distributes a vice-charge to the perpetrator of a vicious act with the intention of encouraging them to revise their vicious behaviour.

In this section, I argue that perpetrator-focussed charges can be too risky for members of marginalised groups to engage in. I argue that making the perpetrator the intended beneficiary and determining risks in terms of whether the perpetrator changes their vicious behaviour fails to capture risks that oppressed people face when they charge. I illuminate these risks with reference to the theory of *epistemic exploitation*, which occurs when "privileged persons compel marginalised persons to educate them about their oppression".<sup>12</sup> I argue that risks of epistemic exploitation persist in vice-charging practices regardless of whether the charge is ameliorative or not. This means that (a) judging the effectiveness of charges in terms of vice amelioration obscures some of the dangers oppressed people face when they vice-charge and (b) members of oppressed groups have particular reasons, other than those based on potential ineffectiveness, not to engage in perpetrator-focussed charges.

### 2.1 Epistemic Exploitation

Recall the earlier discussion about how different groups are conversant in different epistemic resources. Because of this, when someone is a member of an oppressed

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<sup>12</sup> Berenstain 2016, p. 569.

group, they are uniquely positioned to speak about their oppression. Berenstain's theory of *epistemic exploitation* argues that when oppressed people are compelled to educate their oppressors about these experiences of oppression, this becomes epistemically exploitative.<sup>2</sup> Educating becomes harmful when the oppressed person educates their oppressor about their experiences of oppression because explaining one's experiences of oppression can be emotionally taxing, sometimes traumatic, and often undermined by the dominantly situated hearer's default scepticism.<sup>13</sup> The educating process is exploitative because the oppressed person is *compelled* to directly confront and educate their oppressor, and hence run the risk of suffering the aforementioned harms, by virtue of the fact that they are in a double-bind. Namely, they are compelled to engage in risky practices because if they do not, they will continue to suffer the other harms that occur beneath existing social structures. To see how epistemic exploitation occurs, consider the following testimony cited by Berenstain:

*Not My Job*

Let me tell you what it feels like to stand in front of a white man and explain privilege to him. It hurts. It makes you tired. Sometimes it makes you want to cry. Sometimes it is exhilarating. Every single time it is hard. Every single time I get angry that I have to do this, that this is my job, that this shouldn't be my job. Every single time I am proud of myself that I've been able to say these things because I used to not be able to and because some days I just don't want to.<sup>14</sup>

In this excerpt, Manissa McCleave Maharawal, an oppressed person, educates her oppressors; she suffers emotional harms in doing so; and she is compelled to do so, even on days when she does not want to, because if she does not she will continue to suffer beneath existing structures. Maharawal does not comment on whether the white men she is educating are receptive or not to her message, because that is beside the point. The exploitation occurs regardless of the outcome of the educating process because the double-bind compels her to undertake this confrontation. Consequently, when members of oppressed groups are compelled to educate their oppressors, they face harms that persist even in instances where the educating process achieves its intended outcome.

Perpetrator-focussed vice-charging results in epistemic exploitation. By focussing on the outcome of the charge, a perpetrator-focussed theory overlooks the harms that are implicit in the practice. In *Not My Job*, epistemic exploitation occurs because an oppressed person is compelled to engage in emotionally laborious educative processes in order to alleviate other aspects of her oppression. When a victim of a vice is expected to call out the perpetrator of the vice, the same thing is going on. Being a victim of a vice compels the victim to challenge the vice in order to ameliorate the forces that are harming them. This is exploitative because oppressed peoples must either: ignore the compulsion to charge, and hence suffer the oppressive vices; or, act

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 571.

<sup>14</sup> Maharawal 2011.

on the compulsion to charge, hence undergoing emotional labour and running the risk of their oppressor retaliating. Consequently, members of oppressed groups who are compelled to vice-charge by virtue of being a victim of the vice suffer particular kinds of harms that persist regardless of their charge's efficacy in alleviating the targeted vice. Kidd's perpetrator-focussed project of vice-charging obscures these harms, seeing as they endure in instances when the vice has been ameliorated. As such, members of oppressed groups have good reason not to engage in perpetrator-focussed vice-charges.

### 3. Redirecting Vice-Charging

So far, we have seen that the emphasis that perpetrator-focussed charges place on vice amelioration obscures the harms of epistemic exploitation that members of oppressed groups suffer. Seeing as these harms occur even in instances when the charge ameliorates the vice it intends to, I concluded that members of oppressed groups have good reason not to conduct perpetrator-focussed charges. Do these risks mean that the oppressed never have good reasons to engage in vice-charging? For the remainder of this paper, I argue that the answer is no. I argue this on the basis that vice-charging could be used as a signalling function for the oppressed to collectivise, which can then allow them to challenge the forces that oppress them in a less risky way. To reap these benefits, the intention of the charge must be *victim-focussed*, rather than perpetrator-focussed:

*Victim-focussed charges* occur when someone who is a victim of a vice distributes a vice-charge with the intention of communicating the charge to other potential victims of the vice.

Notice that this definition directs charges immediately towards victims of the vice as opposed to possessors of the vice. If P possesses vice  $x$  of which V is a victim, V should charge P with  $x$  via signalling to other victims of  $x$ , rather than for the purpose of communicating it to P. By shifting vice-charges so that they are victim-focussed, the victims become the intended beneficiaries of the initial charge. When the perpetrator is no longer the intended beneficiary, the risks of charging are no longer determined in terms of vice amelioration. Further, this kind of practice does not involve the kind of confrontation of one's oppressor that constitutes the morally objectionable double-bind in epistemically exploitative cases. As such, there are reasons to think that the aforementioned reasons not to vice-charge are absent from a victim-focussed practice.

It is worth distinguishing victim-focussed charges from both kinds of charging that Kidd outlined. Recall that rhetorical charges are not aimed at compelling others to adopt the reasons for the charge. Because victim-focussed charges are directed at common victims of the vice for the function of collectivising, they fail to meet this criterion. Further, victim-focussed charges are not robust, in that they do not aim to provide the justification of the charge to the charged. Accordingly, victim-focussed charging is a novel addition to Kidd's taxonomy.

### 3.1 Signalling for Collectivisation

Individuals can take steps to challenge cases of injustice by collectivising. Collectivising occurs when previously disorganised individuals come together to form a collective agent. Collectivising provides a way for disparate and disaffected individuals to come together and challenge the reason for their disaffection. The role of collectivising, and the definition I will make use of throughout this paper, is to make a collective agent out of individuals with the view that members of a collective can act to reach intended outcomes in more effective ways. The potential for change to occur is increased through collectivisation, as pressure against the injustice mounts by combining individual goals into a joint effort and distributing roles to members in order to achieve these goals.<sup>15</sup> For example, suppose that there are a number of individuals who think that the large-scale enterprise of 'fast fashion' is unjust and should be challenged. If they remain as a disorganised set of individuals, they can make efforts to boycott particular brands and support ethical ones instead. These efforts might make some dint, but their potential is limited. Conversely, when individuals are brought together by an interest in securing common goals, they can form a collective agent by securing common goals and bearing obligations to pursue these goals.<sup>16</sup> When they fulfil these roles, the likelihood of achieving their goals is increased.

Whilst collectivising is an effective way to challenge structural injustices, sometimes the injustices might obscure the tools necessary to collectivise in the first place. For example, if a city is totally inundated with 'fast fashion' brands, a consumer who feels uneasy with the enterprise might struggle to come into contact with those who share her reservations. If there are no pre-existing alternatives to locate like-minded individuals and collectivise with them, the agent can take a step towards collectivising through other means. For example, our concerned shopper might make her reservations known to others, with the hope of accruing support from like-minded individuals, through a process of *signalling*. Signalling acts as a way for individuals to communicate to others that they are not unwilling to challenge the injustice.<sup>17</sup> In the face of seemingly insurmountable and pervasive injustices, such as those associated with large-scale enterprises, signalling might take the form of a boycott, consumption of more sustainably sourced products, or even a protest. The concerned shopper might ask a shop attendant at a fast fashion store what the ethical standards of the brand are. By asking this question in front of others, she signals that she is potentially willing to challenge the unethical enterprise of fast fashion. This acts as a step towards collectivisation as it lets others know that challenging the unjust structure is an option. Consequently, signalling is an effective way to challenge injustices because it begins to shift individuals' ideas about what positions are available to them and which of these positions best aligns with their values.

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<sup>15</sup> Lawford-Smith 2015, p. 321.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

### 3.2 Charging as Signalling

As we have seen, signalling acts as a way for individuals to take steps towards collectivising against unjust practices or institutions. A vice-charging practice that is victim-focussed might take the form of signalling, whereby to signal means to signal willingness to collectivise. To illustrate, consider:

*MAP*

Ellie and Gen are the only women in their philosophy class. Ellie has recently come across the organisation Minorities and Philosophy (MAP). She saw that MAP chapters address issues of minority representation in university settings but was not sure if that was something that really affected her. In class, Ellie notices that Gen consistently gets interrupted by one of their male classmates. Ellie also notices that this does not happen when any of the males speak. When Gen is interrupted again, Ellie makes an effort to shake her head to let Gen know that what's going on is wrong. After class, Gen approaches Ellie to ask her why she shook her head. Ellie explains what she read about MAP and gender dynamics in philosophy, and that women's contributions are more likely to be met with closed-mindedness. Together, they collectivise to establish a MAP chapter at their university. Once collectivised, they create things like information sheets to inform others about classroom dynamics to address the combative elements that they have found harmful to them.

In this case, Ellie makes a kind of charge by shaking her head. Whilst her head shake is not likely or intended to influence the males who inspired it at the moment of charging, it signals to Gen that Ellie thinks that the male's sense of arrogance is wrong. Through making the signal, Ellie and Gen took a step towards collectivisation to challenge the structures that caused them harm.

Ellie did not engage in a dialogue with the vicious classmate, but her approach to dealing with it was effective for different reasons. Namely, her charge of the male's arrogance situated Gen as the intended audience and allowed Gen to feel as if the problems that she faced were indeed problems. By signalling that these dynamics were wrong, Gen and Ellie took a step towards collectivising, as they became aware of each other's potential willingness to address the injustice. Victim-focussed charges are more reliable for members of oppressed groups, because if Ellie had made her charge directly to the male, she risked being on the receiving end of retaliation.

Additionally, by focussing her charge to someone from the same social group, the problem of consensus was not a problem for Ellie. Recall that the problem of consensus arises when the vice-charge is being communicated to someone who does not possess the requisite hermeneutical resources to make sense of it. Because members of oppressed groups often share experiences, the likelihood of hermeneutic barriers existing between them is low. This was reflected in the *MAP* case, as Gen and Ellie's shared experiences meant that they could signal to each other easily, given they could both recognise the source of their harm. This was also reflected in *Paranoid*, as Fatima was able to find validation and understanding of her experiences with other



women of colour online. By finding others who shared her identity, she was better able to communicate her experiences without having them disregarded and misunderstood. If the chance of miscommunication is low, that means the chance of wasting energy on failed attempts at educating is also low. By avoiding situations where the oppressed must directly educate their oppressors, victim-focussed vice-charges avoid the harms associated with the perpetrator-focussed charges. They also have the additional benefits of helping distribute the labour of resistance in a way that is more likely to succeed in challenging the oppressor. As such, the problems associated with perpetrator-focussed charges are absent from victim-focussed charges, and benefits that were not available in perpetrator-focussed charges become available in victim-focussed charges through the prospect of collectivisation.

#### 4. Do Victim-Focussed Charges Still Exploit?

Above, I made the case that epistemic exploitation occurs when oppressed people are compelled to educate their oppressors. I demonstrated this through *Not My Job*, which reflected the asymmetrical and persistent harms that are involved when oppressed people are compelled to educate their oppressors. The alternative vision of vice-charging that I proposed, victim-focussed charging, might be thought to run into the same problems. In taking steps to challenge dominant social narratives, it still seems as if oppressed people are compelled to do the legwork to alleviate their own oppression. An important part of epistemic exploitation is that oppressed people feel compelled to do it on the basis that if they do not, they continue to suffer the oppression. In *MAP*, members of a marginalised group are compelled to mobilise their knowledge of oppression in order to educate their oppressors because they are under pressure to alleviate their own oppression. It seems like vice-charging for signalling will therefore still involve an exploitative element.

I spend the remainder of this section pushing back against the worry that victim-focussed charges still oppress on two fronts: (1) In perpetrator-focussed charges, the agent does not act within the same double-bind that we see in paradigm cases of epistemic exploitation; and a large part of this is because (2) signalling for collectivisation is safer for oppressed people because it increases the chance of them realising their intended outcomes. In paradigm cases, individuals put in a high degree of effort for very little or no pay-off, and they do so because they are compelled by virtue of a double-bind. It is these components of a marginalised person putting herself in a risky position by confronting her oppressor and doing so because she will be continuing to suffer if she does not, that strikes us as so morally objectionable. Both of these components are less severe in a victim-focussed practice.

First, the double-bind that oppressed individuals find themselves in when making perpetrator-focussed charges does not motivate victim-focussed charges. Recall the earlier discussion of how the double-bind compels a marginalised person to either: stay silent and continue suffering harms relating to the vice of which they are a victim; or, charge the vicious person, and hence undergo emotional labour and risk retaliation. For victim-focussed charges, the same kind of emotional labour will not be

involved, in that fellow victims of the vice will be much more likely to share a conceptualisation of the vice on the basis of their shared experience. Further, the risk of retaliation is absent, in that the charge is not directed at the perpetrator, and so there is no confrontation. As such, the double-bind that is characteristic of epistemic exploitation is weakened significantly in a perpetrator-focussed practice, seeing as the element of being forced to explain one's oppression to her oppressor, and run the risk of retaliation for doing so, is absent.

In addition to weakening the double-bind, perpetrator-focussed charges have a better chance of achieving the intended goal of a vice-charge. This is because, as shown in the previous section, collectivisation helps to tackle injustice by distributing roles in order to achieve intended goals with greater probability. Additionally, collectivisation amplifies the voices of marginalised people. This itself constitutes a kind of alleviation of injustice, as it challenges the existing structures that silence marginalised people and inhibit their goals from being realised.<sup>18</sup> This helps to further reduce the double-bind that may compel a marginalised person to enter into an epistemically exploitative exchange, seeing as it provides an alternative way to have her interests met that does not involve confronting her oppressor.

Subsequently, even if it is not guaranteed that victim-focussed charges have no exploitative features, they will be markedly less risky than perpetrator-focussed ones, meaning that they are a better option for members of oppressed groups.

## 5. Conclusion

I addressed the question of whether members of marginalised groups should vice-charge. The framework offered by Kidd acted as a useful way to consider how vice-charging works, and Berenstain's notion of epistemic exploitation helped to identify why his approach may involve risks involved for marginalised people. I made the case that Kidd's theory is unable to make sense of these risks because it is perpetrator-focussed. From there, I moved on to consider whether there could be a victim-focussed practice of charging that would be beneficial to marginalised people. Signalling for the purpose of collectivisation is one such way that this could occur. Signalling avoids the problems associated with perpetrator-focussed vice-charging, as well as reaping additional benefits that allow marginalised people to challenge the forces that oppress them. Whilst the threat of epistemic exploitation may still arise in victim-focussed charges, the double-bind is not a compelling feature of this practice and the chance of pay-off is much higher, which therefore distinguishes the practice from paradigm cases of morally objectionable exploitation. As such, members of marginalised groups have good reason to conduct victim-focussed vice-charges.

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<sup>18</sup> Kolers 2014.

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