Adaptive Preference Tradeoffs

Audra Christine Jenson

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts
In
Philosophy

Sukaina Hirji
Michael Moehler
Kelly G. Trogdon
Daniel Wodak

April 4th, 2018
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: political philosophy, feminist philosophy, preferences, oppression

Adaptive Preference Tradeoffs

Audra Christine Jenson

ABSTRACT

Abstract: Consider the following scenario: A mother chooses to marry off her 10 year-old daughter, not because she doesn't know the harmful effects of child marriage, nor because she thinks that it is good that her daughter marries when she is 10 years old. Rather, she is unable to feed her daughter and realizes that her daughter's survival depends upon her marrying a financially stable man. This is an apparent example of what human development practitioners and political philosophers call an adaptive preference (AP): a preference, formed under oppressive circumstances, that seems to perpetuate the agent's own oppression. Prevailing opinion is that forced tradeoffs—especially following Serene Khader's taxonomy—, like the case presented above, are a type of AP: one in which a person makes a decision because of a limited option set. In this paper I argue that no paradigm cases of forced tradeoffs should not be classified as APs. Instead, I offer a revised definition of adaptive preferences where I argue that adaptive preferences are psychological traits that cause the agent with adaptive preferences to make irrational or uninformed decisions that perpetuate their own oppression. I defend this new definition by exploring the implications of changing the definition. In particular, forced tradeoffs involve different kinds of interventions from other kinds of adaptive preferences and including forced tradeoffs risks committing testimonial injustice against those who have limited option sets.

Adaptive Preference Tradeoffs

Audra Christine Jenson

ABSTRACT

(General Audience)

Abstract: Consider the following scenario: A mother chooses to marry off her 10 year-old daughter, not because she doesn't know the harmful effects of child marriage, nor because she thinks that it is good that her daughter marries when she is 10 years old. Rather, she is unable to feed her daughter and realizes that her daughter's survival depends upon her marrying a financially stable man. Most philosophers and workers in human development think of this as an example of an adaptive preference. An adaptive preference is a preference that a person has that is formed under oppressive circumstances that seems to perpetuate that person's own oppression. In this paper I show that this is a form of a forced tradeoff adaptive preference: one in which a person makes a decision because they don't have other options. I argue that forced tradeoffs should not be considered adaptive preferences. I then offer a revised definition of adaptive preferences where I argue that adaptive preferences are psychological traits that cause the agent with adaptive preferences to make irrational or uninformed decisions that perpetuate their own oppression.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction. 1

II. History of Adaptive Preferences. 1

III. The Adaptive Preference Taxonomy. 3

IV. Forced Tradeoffs. 4

V. A Unified Account of Adaptive Preferences. 4

VI. Interventions. 6

VII. Testimonial Injustice. 8

VIII. Objections. 9

IX. Conclusion. 11

Works Cited. 12

I. INTRODUCTION

In its original conception—especially in in the work of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen on the Capabilities Approach—an adaptive preference was understood as a distorted psychological trait that was used both to explain why some people are not good judges of their own well-being (because they have inauthentic preferences) and to justify certain kinds of interventions.[1] However, recent work in the adaptive preferences literature—especially Serene Khader's *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*—has parted from this earlier theorizing by deemphasizing the psychologies of the oppressed and instead emphasizing the environments within which they make decisions. Though theorists on adaptive preferences all agree that a belief or desire that is both deprivation-perpetuating and caused by oppression counts as an adaptive preference, Khader breaks from earlier theorists like Sen and Nussbaum by including certain *behaviors* as well as beliefs in her definition of adaptive preferences. For example, on her view, someone who does not have distorted psychological traits, but "is simply making the best of a bad situation"[2] has an adaptive preference. She calls this a *forced tradeoff* adaptive preference. In this paper I argue that paradigm cases of forced tradeoffs should *not* count as adaptive preferences. I suggest an account of adaptive preferences that excludes forced tradeoffs. Instead, I argue that adaptive preferences are (1) psychological traits that are (2) formed because of oppressive circumstances and (3) are adapted in such a way that they are oppression perpetuating. Indeed, I think that removing forced tradeoffs from the concept of adaptive preferences and instead only considering psychological traits to be adaptive preferences has important theoretical and practical payoffs as it puts us in a better position to offer a unified account of adaptive preferences as well as mitigating the risks of misjudging the appropriate interventions and committing testimonial injustice.

In this paper I primarily address Khader's work on adaptive preferences as it is the most robust account of adaptive preferences and because she is the first to explicitly posit the category of forced tradeoffs in the adaptive preferences literature. However, this paper also addresses the adaptive preferences literature more broadly insofar as it helps to clarify what exactly the concept is. As will become clear, there seem to be more than one closely related but distinct concept functioning with the name of 'adaptive preferences' and a more careful analysis of one of these concepts should help clarify the broader category. After a brief introduction to the history of the concept of adaptive preferences, I review Khader's particular account, focusing on forced tradeoffs. I then sketch a positive account for adaptive preferences and give two practical and positive implications for my account.

II. HISTORY OF ADAPTIVE PREFERENCES

Our preferences adapt in various ways to changes in our circumstances. This is a phenomenon that Jon Elster captured in his book *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*. In this book he uses the la Fontaine fable of the fox and the grapes: the fox wants to eat the grapes and he thinks that his options include eating them, but eventually he comes to realize that he cannot reach them. Because he is unable to access the grapes, he subconsciously decides that he doesn't want the grapes anyway, because grapes are too sour for foxes.[3]

---

[1] See Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000).

[2] Khader (2013), 313.

[3] Elster (1985).

Following Elster, Sen[4] and Nussbaum[5] incorporated the concept of adaptive preferences into their work on the Capabilities Approach, which defines people's well-being in terms of their capability to do certain essential things. The concept of adaptive preferences presents a potential solution to the problem of why some people do not desire the central capabilities: it explains why certain people are not the best sources about their own well-being.

Disciplines outside of philosophy, especially economics and psychology, have treated the notion of *upward* preference adaptation[6]—where a person adapts their preferences due to improved circumstances or the accomplishments of peers.[7] Additionally, these disciplines do not require that preferences be internal to a person: in particular, the concept of revealed preferences in economics allows that a person's behavior can reveal their preferences even if they do not have the relevant psychological traits. Although, these kinds of preferences are often classified as adaptive preferences, they are not the kind of adaptive preference that I am primarily concerned with in this paper. The kind of adaptive preferences that this paper is concerned with are, roughly, those that are formed under oppressive circumstances and play some explanatory role in the maintenance of that person's oppression. As will become clear, I also take preferences to be internal to a person: in particular, psychological traits. It is important to note the difference between Elster's original conception of adaptive preferences and the account that Khader gives. While both use the same language and Khader is clearly influenced by Elster, they deal with closely connected but distinct concepts.

Within philosophy, following Sen and Nussbaum, various philosophers, including Susan Okin and Anita Superson have posited accounts of adaptive preferences. Like Nussbaum, all of these philosophers emphasize autonomy deficits in their accounts.[8] In *Women and Human Development,* for example, Nussbaum presents a version of adaptive preferences that is centered on a lack of self-esteem or self-worth.[9] Despite this, all of these accounts include examples of forced tradeoffs as adaptive preferences. Khader breaks from earlier accounts by arguing that autonomy conceptions of adaptive preferences deny the agency of people who have them. Instead, she emphasizes the conditions under which the agent exists. This response is made in reply to critics, including Uma Narayan and Brooke Ackerly who argue that a person can "simultaneously do the best she can to advance her interests and perpetuate her oppression."[10] For Khader, an adaptive preference is a "behavior or belief" that is deprivation-perpetuating and is formed under conditions of oppression.[11] As I will show in the following section, she thinks that there are four different kinds of behaviors or beliefs that count as adaptive preferences.

---

[4] Sen (1999), 62.

[5] Nussbaum (2000), 111.

[6] Clark (2012), 63.

[7] For example, see Brickman and Campbell's (1971) work on hedonic treadmills in which they argue that people's long-term happiness is generally less affected by major events than might have been thought.

[8] For example, Okin (2003), Superson (2009), Nussbaum (2000),

[9] Nussbaum (2000), 112.

[10] Khader (2012), 305.

[11] Khader (2013), 313.

III. THE ADAPTIVE PREFERENCE TAXONOMY

The first philosopher (and as far as I am aware, the only) to explicitly establish a taxonomy for adaptive preferences is Khader.[12] She posits four kinds: paradigmatic adaptive preferences, selective value distortion adaptive preferences, misperception of facts adaptive preferences, and forced tradeoff adaptive preferences. Although this nomenclature is not used explicitly throughout the literature, other adaptive preference theorists use the same concepts that she names.[13]

Khader's first type of adaptive preference is particularly prevalent in Nussbaum's work. Nussbaum tells the story of a woman named Jayamma who willingly accepts less pay for labor than her male counterparts. She thinks that Jayamma "seemed to lack not only the concept of herself as a person with rights that could be violated, but also the sense that what was happening to her was a wrong."[14] She thinks that Jayamma's values are so distorted that she cannot even imagine herself having rights. In her taxonomy of adaptive preferences Khader calls this type of adaptive preference a *paradigmatic* adaptive preference; it happens when a person has global value distortion, or, as Khader puts it, "thoroughgoing and uniform value distortion."[15]

The second type of adaptive preference is the *selective value distortion* adaptive preference. People with this type of adaptive preference have undistorted values in some areas of their lives and distorted values in other areas. For example, a woman might stay with her abusive husband because she doesn't think that she has the right to bodily integrity[16] but otherwise sees herself as having rights such as the right to an education or the right to a living wage.

A third type of adaptive preferences is located in a *misperception of facts*. People who have this type of adaptive preferences lack some non-normative information that causes them to make deprivation-perpetuating decisions. For example, many women who live in communities that practice severe and widespread female genital cutting just do not know that the practice causes health problems. If all the women that they know have been cut, they might assume that the health problems are a normal part of being a woman.[17]

Khader's final form of adaptive preferences is the *forced tradeoff* adaptive preference. People with this type of adaptive preference make deprivation-perpetuating decisions because of limited option sets rather than because of any value distortion or lack of knowledge. A mother who chooses to marry off her ten-year-old daughter may do so not because she does not know the harmful effects of child marriage, nor because she thinks that it is good that her daughter marries when she is ten years old. Rather, she may be unable to feed her daughter and realizes that her survival depends upon her marrying a financially stable man.

---

[12] Khader (2013)

[13] Indeed, Khader obviously took these uses seriously in her work: in response to an objection that forced tradeoffs are not preferences and thus should not be included in the taxonomy, Khader argues that they should be included because "preferences caused by poor options are frequently described as [adaptive preferences] in the literature." Khader (2012), 309.

[14] Nussbaum (2000), 113.

[15] Khader (2013), 314.

[16] Obviously there are many reasons why women stay in abusive relationships. This is not meant to be a claim about why all women, or even most women remain in abusive relationships.

[17] Again, I do not mean to imply that all cases of female genital cutting are misperception of facts adaptive preferences. Obviously, there are also cases in which women *do* know about the health risks associated with female genital cutting and choose to do so anyway.

IV. FORCED TRADEOFFS

Although I think that Khader is right that there are cases of adaptive preferences that involve forced tradeoffs, I think she is mistaken to include forced tradeoffs itself as a kind of adaptive preferences. In defense of including forced tradeoffs in her taxonomy, Khader uses a particular example that is common in the adaptive preferences literature:

> Human development practitioners establish literacy programs for impoverished adult women in Bangladesh. However, the women know that even if they were educated they would be unable to support their families. So they send their sons instead.[18]

In response she writes that the "women's choice of long-term security shows that they value financial security—even that they value it more than their literacy."[19] She takes this to be a reason for saying that the Bangladeshi women *do* have adaptive preferences: namely, the preference for financial security over education.

However, I think this is a misdiagnosis of the situation. First of all, the claim that literacy is more valuable than financial security should not be so easily accepted, especially considering the difficult circumstances of these women. However, even if Khader is right that the women should not prefer financial security to education, this is not itself evidence that forced tradeoffs are adaptive preferences. Instead, the limited option set *reveals* an underlying adaptive preference: a selective value distortion. If Khader is right that the women's priorities are misaligned, then the women value their financial security too highly and do not value their own education highly enough. Because of this value distortion, they make a decision within a limited option set that perpetuates their own oppression. However, in this case the adaptive preference would be located in the value distortion. In other words, decisions made in forced tradeoff scenarios might reveal adaptive preferences, but only because the person has an adaptive preference in the form of a paradigmatic, selective value distortion, or misperception of facts adaptive preference.

As I will argue in the next section, people who are oppressed and have limited option sets who make decisions in paradigm cases of forced tradeoffs respond to their circumstances in a reasonably informed and rational manner. If they do not make reasonably informed and rational decisions, there is good reason to think they might have an underlying adaptive preference of a different form. Categorizing forced tradeoffs as a distinct form of adaptive preference offers no significant explanatory power for these types of cases and, as I argue in sections V and VI, it also has potentially harmful consequences.

V. A UNIFIED ACCOUNT OF ADAPTIVE PREFERENCES

The concept of adaptive preferences is powerful because it can explain why some people have preferences that seem inauthentic and because it can justify psychological intervention. Khader's changes to the concept cause it to lose much of this explanatory and justificatory power. However, her work has shown that the concept of adaptive preferences, as it has been conceived in the literature, is not a unified kind because it includes such disparate kinds as psychological traits (e.g., desires, beliefs, and emotions) and social structures (e.g., poverty). In this section I offer a sketch of an account of adaptive preferences and argue that removing forced tradeoffs would unify the concept. This account is limited in that it deals solely with adaptive preferences that are caused by oppression. It is possible that being formed because of oppressive circumstances is a sufficient but not necessary part of something being an adaptive preference. Although there might be some similar kind of circumstances that serve just as well, there is a clear link between oppression and adaptive preferences and so I will refer solely to oppression here. Additionally, I think cases of oppression deserve particular attention because of their structural features that are not common across cases of adaptive preferences.

---

[18] For versions of this particular example: Nussbaum (2000), 260; Khader (2012), 309; Ackerly (2000), 106. For the origin of this example: Chen (1983).

[19] Khader (2012), 309.

The sketch of adaptive preferences is as follows: adaptive preferences are (1) psychological traits that are (2) formed because of oppressive circumstances and (3) are adapted in such a way that they are oppression perpetuating. Importantly (and most controversially), my account explicitly characterizes adaptive preferences as psychological traits. I will argue that all of these features are central to the concept and its ability both to explain inauthentic preferences and to justify psychological intervention.

The third feature of my account—that adaptive preferences perpetuate oppression—requires some further explanation. *Prima facie*, it appears obvious that the adaptive preferences must perpetuate the oppression of the person who has the adaptive preference. If this were not the case then abusive spouses, for example, might count as having adaptive preferences. However, there are clear cases of adaptive preferences in which it is not obvious that the person with the adaptive preference is perpetuating their own oppression. A mother who chooses to practice severe genital cutting on her daughters is not obviously perpetuating her own oppression but rather the oppression of her daughters. As such, I suggest that adaptive preferences must perpetuate the oppression of the person with the adaptive preference *or* perpetuate the oppression of an individual or group of individuals within an oppressed social group that the person with the adaptive preferences is also a part of.

If (3) is not a feature of an account of adaptive preferences, then *every* person in oppressive circumstances would count as having adaptive preferences. A woman who is abused by her husband might, during the time that she lives with him, come to enjoy playing the piano as an escape from the abuse. The fact that this preference is (1) a psychological trait that is (2) formed because of oppressive circumstances is clearly not enough for her preference for playing piano to count as an adaptive preference.

If (2) is not a feature of an account of adaptive preferences, then the concept captures far too many cases and also cannot justify interventions: people make deprivation-perpetuating decisions for all kinds of reasons, many of which are not adaptive preferences and do not deserve intervention. For example, a monk may be very pious and, consequently, decide to fast. In contrast, Sen writes about women who are oppressed and become malnourished because they think that their contributions to their households are not valuable and that, as a result, they deserve less food than their husbands.[20] Whereas the monk was able to make a rational and informed decision about not eating sufficient food, the women that Sen writes about are unable to make reasonably rational and/or informed decisions about their nutrition because of the distorting effect of oppression.

The first feature—that adaptive preferences are psychological traits—is more controversial. First of all, the concept of adaptive preferences must explain the intuition that some people have inauthentic preferences. In cases of paradigmatic, selective value distortion, and misperception of facts adaptive preferences, this is straightforward. Since adaptive preferences are "imposed by social conditions"[21] and people with adaptive preferences "prefer certain things that [they] would not prefer if [they] were aware of other possibilities,"[22] it seems clear that these preferences are not authentic in any strong sense of the word. People with these kinds of adaptive preferences have certain psychological traits (e.g., desires or beliefs) that cause them to act in ways that are deprivation perpetuating.

---

[20] Sen (1990), 148.

However, I think it is less clear on what basis it could be said that someone who makes a deprivation-perpetuating decision in a forced tradeoff situation has inauthentic preferences. It is certainly true that people in forced tradeoff situations make deprivation-perpetuating decisions that *prima facie* appear to be of the same kind as the deprivation-perpetuating decisions made by people with adaptive preferences. However, the important difference is that forced tradeoff decisions are made as the result of limited options sets, not as the result of distorted preferences. As I showed in the previous section, there is good reason to think that people with limited option sets who make decisions in paradigm cases of forced tradeoffs make reasonably informed and rational decisions. If they do not make reasonably informed and rational decisions, their decisions actually result from underlying adaptive preferences. Despite forcing them to make sub-optimal decisions (because of limited options) the oppressive conditions are not causing the person with a limited option set to make irrational or uninformed decisions. In contrast, people with adaptive preferences have had their desires or beliefs distorted by oppression and thus make irrational or uninformed decisions.

Secondly, psychological intervention can only be justified in cases in which people's desires or beliefs are distorted in such a way that they cannot make reasonably rational or informed decisions. The pious monk may be malnourished as a result of his decision to fast, but the fact that he is malnourished is not enough to justify an intervention. However, if a person's psychological traits have been distorted by oppression such that they come to desire their own oppression or believe that it is necessary, intervention is necessary. Indeed, because we have good reason to believe that these preferences are inauthentic, we might be justified in intervening even if the person with the adaptive preference purports to not want the intervention.

VI. INTERVENTIONS

Although the justification of some interventions is an important function of adaptive preferences, the concept should also inform the kinds of intervention that are used. Unlike the other forms of adaptive preferences, forced tradeoffs do not require psychological intervention at all—only external interventions. As I will argue, removing forced tradeoffs is one way of ensuring that practitioners carefully deliberate with oppressed people. Additionally, reserving the concept of adaptive preferences for situations in which psychological interventions are necessary would work toward the unification of the concept.

Paradigmatic adaptive preferences, selective value distortion adaptive preferences, misperception of facts adaptive preferences, and forced tradeoffs all require some kind of interventions that are external to the individual. By definition, adaptive preferences are formed under oppressive conditions. To fully deal with the adaptive preference those oppressive conditions must be adjusted. Similarly, if a person makes a forced tradeoff because of a limited option set, any intervention would have to adjust the external conditions (i.e., expand the option set). One might argue that *that* is the unifying feature: forced tradeoffs and adaptive preferences require intervention in the external circumstances of oppressed people. However, unlike cases of forced tradeoffs, paradigmatic, selective value distortion, and misperception of facts adaptive preferences also require some kind of psychological intervention. Khader's argument that psychological intervention in the case of selective value distortion and misperception of facts adaptive preferences should begin by being non-coercive—perhaps education, persuasion, or "incitement to question prevailing beliefs"—is right. However, even Khader agrees there might eventually be need for coercive psychological intervention as well, especially in the case of paradigmatic adaptive preferences.[23] Importantly, however, there is *no* need for psychological intervention of any kind (coercive or non-coercive) for people who have made forced tradeoffs that are due entirely to limited options. *Many* kinds of problems, especially problems regarding gender and poverty, require structural interventions. If the concept of adaptive preferences is used to cover these problems as well, it loses much of its conceptual power to deal with the specific kinds of interventions need when people's preferences are adapted to oppressive circumstances. Additionally, as I will address in the next section, thinking that forced tradeoff interventions require psychological intervention risks committing testimonial injustice.

---

[21] Khader (2011), 19.

[22] Narayan, D. (2005), 34.

Because of the importance of adaptive preferences for the political goals of those who use the concept, the practical implications of the term's definition is important. The concept of adaptive preferences exists, at least in part, to inform interventions—if a person is making deprivation-perpetuating decisions, then practitioners can draw on the concept of adaptive preferences to determine how to proceed. As such, the fact that different types of interventions are necessary in response to adaptive preferences and forced tradeoffs should play an important role in determining the status of forced tradeoffs. Nussbaum was the first in the adaptive preferences literature to use the example presented at the beginning of this paper about the women involved in the Bangladeshi Rural Advancement Committee. She takes the example from Martha Chen's[24] *A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh*. However, she labeled that case as a case of value distortion adaptive preferences. Not knowing *why* the women were sending their sons to the literacy programs rather than participating themselves, she explains what she took to be their motivations:

> This, of course, is not surprising, given the weight of the cultural forces pressing these women not to demand more education (and also not to feel that they want more) given, as well, the absence in their daily lives of paradigms of what education could do and be in lives similar to theirs.[25]

At the very least, Nussbaum thinks that the Bangladeshi women involved in the literacy programs have some kind of value distortion, specifically with regard to education. Since they send their sons to be educated, they obviously understand the value of education, but they do not seem to see themselves as being worth educating.

This example is particularly interesting because of the disagreement in the literature over why exactly the women sent their sons to be educated instead of themselves participating in the program. Ackerly thinks that Nussbaum misinterprets the situation. Based on her own experiences with women participating in the Bangladeshi Rural Advancement Committee programs,[26] Ackerly contends that the Bangladeshi women "see the education of their children as one of the best investments they can make for their children and for *their own well-being*."[27] This is, at least in part, because there are limited job opportunities for educated women. In contrast, their educated sons will have a much higher chance of having a stable income. Ackerly further explains that when the women in the program were consulted it was discovered that they would be better served by being provided with credit. Once they were financially stable, they began to send their daughters to school as well. Eventually the women themselves began to participate in the literacy program.[28]

---

[23] Khader (2012), 313.

[24] Chen (1983).

[25] Nussbaum (1992), 235.

No psychological intervention was necessary for the women in the Bangladeshi Rural Advancement Committee case. They knew the value of the education. Once the external conditions that were preventing them from participating were adjusted by providing them with an income via credit programs, they began to demand adult literacy programs in addition to schooling for their children. Indeed, the Bangladeshi Rural Advancement Committee wasted valuable time and resources trying to do psychological interventions in this situation, by attempting to convince or coerce the women into participating. Because of the marginalized identities of the people that the Bangladeshi Rural Advancement Committee work with, there was, as I will argue in the following section, a serious risk of committing testimonial injustice against them. But when they started listening to the women's concerns and providing credit instead of education to the women, the programs were better able to advance the interests of the most marginalized people in the communities.[29]

VII. TESTIMONIAL INJUSTICE

The people mostly likely to be described as having an adaptive preference are "disproportionately" women in the global South.[30] Alison Jaggar, for instance, argues that the concept of adaptive preferences has grown along with the Western tendency to blame the oppressive cultures of non-Western countries and thus obscures the role that poverty plays in gender inequality.[31] Worries such as these have spurred criticisms of adaptive preferences that suggest that to ascribe adaptive preferences to someone is to commit testimonial injustice against them. The notion of testimonial injustice was first introduced by Miranda Fricker in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. The idea is that there is a form of injustice, testimonial injustice, which is a "distinctively epistemic injustice" wherein someone is "wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower."[32] She thinks that the central kind of testimonial injustice involves a knower not being awarded sufficient credibility on the basis of one or more of their identities that are subject to systematic prejudice. For example, in *The Minority Body*, Elizabeth Barnes writes at length about the ways that testimonial injustice is committed against disabled people *qua* disabled people.[33] Disabled people "have a unique and vibrant culture, have strong advocacy groups, make valuable contributions to the arts (which they could not have made if not disabled), and, in the case of deaf persons, even have their own language."[34] Nevertheless, they are taken to be mistaken about their own assessment of their well-being because of the identity prejudices of non-disabled people. Because of the identities of the various kinds of people who are generally taken to have adaptive preferences—including women, disabled people, and the poor (especially in the global South)—it is particularly easy to commit testimonial injustice when dealing with adaptive preferences.

---

[26] In contrast, Nussbaum never had real experience with these women, instead relying on Martha Chen's account of the situation that is given in the book *A Quiet Revolution*.

[27] Ackerly (2000), 107. Emphasis added.

[28] Ackerly (2000), 108.

[29] Ackerly (2000), 108.

[30] Khader (2012), 304.

[31] Jaggar (2005), 75.

[32] Fricker (2007), 21.

[33] For instance, see Barnes (2016).

In order to avoid committing testimonial injustice, there must be good reason to depart from an individual's first-person testimony about their own well-being. As I have shown in this paper, there are clear cases in which people have preferences that reveal that they cannot reliably assess their own well-being. One of the advantages of the concept of adaptive preferences is that it is able to provide an explanation for why "we might be justified in departing from or criticizing some [preferences] in the name of important norms such as justice and human capability."[35] Khader clearly thinks that sometimes non-coercive psychological intervention, such as education or persuasion, is sufficient for trusting the first-person testimony of people with adaptive preferences: after all, her model is deliberative. Nevertheless, one of the motivating idea behind adaptive preferences is that those who have them have a first-person testimony that is, at least in some way, unreliable and requires intervention. But people who commit forced tradeoffs rationally assess their options and choose the best one that is available to them in the circumstances. If my account of forced tradeoffs is accurate, then, given the identities of people who are most often in such situations, not giving full credence to an individual's first-person testimony because they committed a forced tradeoff could be a case of committing testimonial injustice.

One might object that we should worry about testimonial injustice for *all* forms of adaptive preferences. Because adaptive preferences *qua* adaptive preferences are supposed to provide some account for why some preferences seem inauthentic, it seems like testimonial injustice might be a reason to reject the adaptive preference status of *all* preferences, not just of forced tradeoffs. However, I think adaptive preferences give us a good account of why some aspects of some people's first-person testimony *should* be questioned: namely, because those people have distorted values or a lack of non-normative information that causes their first-person testimony to be unreliable in certain kinds of ways. Importantly, however, their first-person testimony is not made *entirely* unreliable and should not be rejected out of hand. Testimonial injustice involves a knower not being awarded sufficient credibility *on the basis of identities that are subject to systematic prejudice*. In the cases of paradigmatic, selective value distortion, and misperception of facts adaptive preferences, knowers are not being awarded full credibility on the basis of their value distortions or their lack of information. In contrast, there is no reason to question the first-person testimony of someone who is in a forced tradeoff situation (barring underlying genuine adaptive preferences), as they are not experiencing any kind of relevant psychological distortion.

VIII. OBJECTIONS

There is a serious worry that psychologizing adaptive preferences, as I do, can cause harm by being unnecessarily coercive. Khader clearly removes the psychological aspect of the concept to ensure that her account can "focus on noncoercive intervention and on deliberative interventions."[36] One reason that she is concerned about coercive interventions is because she wants to emphasize that "a person's participation in injustice against herself does not reveal deep endorsement of it."[37] Because of these commitments, Khader includes forced tradeoffs, in part, to ensure that human development practitioners more carefully determine why a person makes deprivation-perpetuating decisions. While I certainly agree that it is important to recognize the autonomy of people who are oppressed and to deliberate with them about how to end their oppression, I do not think Khader's decision is the best response. It is true that including forced tradeoffs in the adaptive preferences taxonomy would force human development practitioners to deliberate with the person with the adaptive preference in order to determine what kind of adaptive preference they have and therefore what kind of intervention is necessary. For example, a forced tradeoff would require only a structural intervention, while a selective value distortion would require a non-coercive psychological intervention and a structural intervention. However, including forced tradeoffs is not necessary in order to get this result. Even without including forced tradeoffs in the adaptive preference taxonomy, each type of adaptive preference will require different kinds of interventions—while a selective value distortion adaptive preference might require a noncoercive psychological intervention and a structural intervention, a paradigmatic adaptive preference might require a coercive interventions. Regardless of whether forced tradeoffs count as adaptive preferences, human development practitioners can—and should—carefully assess each case to determine the underlying motivations for a deprivation-perpetuating decision before the appropriate intervention is chosen.

---

[34] Barnes (2009), 14.

[35] Nussbaum (2000), 115.

Additionally, one might worry that this sketch of an account of adaptive preferences weakens the concept because it is unable "to provide a widely applicable narrative about why actual [people] perpetuate their oppression."[38] By including forced tradeoffs in the adaptive preferences taxonomy, the concept becomes much more widely applicable. Khader consciously includes forced tradeoffs so that the concept of adaptive preferences can be used to explain *any* case of a person perpetuating their own oppression. While it is true that including forced tradeoffs broadens the scope of adaptive preferences, doing so makes the narrative applicable in too many situations. The reasons that a person makes a deprivation-perpetuating decision in a forced tradeoff case are markedly different from the reasons that a person makes a deprivation-perpetuating decision in a case in which they have distorted preferences. While the concept of adaptive preferences should tell us *why* someone who is oppressed is making deprivation-perpetuating choices, a version that includes forced tradeoffs can only tell us *that* someone is making deprivation-perpetuating choices under circumstances of oppression.

Finally, Khader argues that focusing on the psychological nature of adaptive preferences "is treating people's beliefs and attitudes—that is, their psychologies—as the proximate causes of their deprivation."[39] There are cases in which a person's beliefs and attitudes are the primary cause of their deprivation (e.g., some cases of paradigmatic adaptive preferences), cases in which a person's beliefs and attitudes are one cause of their deprivation but not the primary cause (e.g., cases of selective value distortion adaptive preferences and misperception of facts adaptive preferences), and cases in which a person's beliefs and attitudes have nothing to do with their deprivation (e.g., cases of forced tradeoffs). As such, she thinks that adaptive preferences should be framed without reference to the beliefs and attitudes that a person has. However, I worry that including cases of forced tradeoffs with cases of adaptive preferences in which a person's beliefs and attitudes are causally related to their deprivation does injustice to agents in forced tradeoffs situations. I think that putting a person in a forced tradeoff scenario—a person whose attitudes and beliefs in no way cause their deprivation—in the same category as someone whose attitudes and beliefs are a causally related to their deprivation does injustice to the person who is a victim of limited options and does not have an adaptive preference.

---

[36] Khader (2011), 33.

[37] Khader (2013), 320.

[38] Khader (2012), 302.

[39] Khader (2011), 11.

IX. CONCLUSION

There are a few conclusions to be drawn from the preceding discussion. First of all, as Barnes writes, the concept of adaptive preferences has been problematic in the past precisely because it has been used too broadly. Practitioners and philosophers alike have assigned adaptive preferences to people who were merely exhibiting alternative ways of flourishing.[40] As I have argued, I think that that the concept continues to be too broadly applied by including forced tradeoffs as a form of adaptive preferences. Autonomy conceptions of adaptive preferences that include forced tradeoffs deny agency to people within forced tradeoff situations. Khader's conception of adaptive preferences, which emphasizes the oppressive circumstances rather than autonomy or rationality, unhelpfully stretches the concept of both what it is to be a preference and what it is to be adapted.

By removing forced tradeoffs from the adaptive preference taxonomy, practitioners would be forced to more carefully determine why exactly oppressed people make the decisions that they make. Human development interventions would be forced to be oriented towards the first-person testimonies of *all* oppressed people in order to determine whether or to what extent a person has an adaptive preference, and thus to what extent that person should be included in developing a plan for their own empowerment. Indeed, not including people who *do* have preferences that track with their own basic well-being would be to risk committing testimonial injustice against them.

---

[40] See Barnes (2016) for more on this.

Works Cited

Ackerly, Brooke (2000). *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barnes, Elizabeth (2009). "Disability and Adaptive Preferences." *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23.1, 1-22.

——— (2016). *The Minority Body*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brickman, Phillip and Donald Campbell (1971). "Hedonic relativism and planning the good society," in *Adaptation-level theory: A symposium,* M. Appley (ed.), New York: Academic Press.

Chen, Martha (1983). *The Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh*, Schenkman Books.

Clark, David (2012). *Adaptation, Poverty, and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Elster, Jon (1985). *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fricker, Miranda (2009). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jaggar, Alison (2005). "Saving Amina: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue." *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19.3,55-75.

Khader, Serene (2011). *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (2012). "Must Theorising about Adaptive Preferences Deny Women's Agency?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 29.4, 302-317.

——— (2013). "Identifying adaptive preferences in practice: lessons from postcolonial feminisms." *Journal of Global Ethics*, 9.3, 311-327.

Narayan, Deepa (2005). "Conceptual frameworks and methodological challenges." *Measuring empowerment: Cross-disciplinary perspectives*. New York: World Bank Publications.

Narayan, Uma (2002). "Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices, and Other Women," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Louise M. Antony and Charlotte E. Witt (eds.), Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 418-432.

Nussbaum, Martha (1992). "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism." *Political Theory*, 20.2, 202-246.

——— (2000). *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Okin, Susan (2003). "Poverty, Well-Being, and Gender: What Counts, Who's Heard?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 31.3, 280-316.

Sen, Amartya (1990). "Gender and cooperative conflicts," in *Persistent inequalities: women and world development*, I. Tinker (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (1999). *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Superson, Anita (2005). "Deformed Desires and Informed Desire Tests." *Hypatia*, 20.4, 109-126.

——— (2009). *The Moral Skeptic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.