A social account of the wrongs of racist and sexist reasoning

AK Flowerree, amy.flowerree@ttu.edu

**Overview**:

* My topic is Objectionable Reasoning: Objectionable reasoning is reasoning that goes through epistemically reliable but problematic racial or gendered generalizations.
* Defenders of Moral Encroachment (ME) provide a theoretical characterization of Objectionable Reasoning according to which ordinary statistical reasoning risks moral wrong. On the ME view, the conclusions of Objectionable Reasoning **doxastically wrong** the referent in the belief. Thus, the risk of wronging someone in a racialized (or gendered) group generates a duty to have different or more secure evidence when drawing conclusions about a member of the group. As a result, the seemingly well-justified conclusion is epistemically unjustified.
* My Task: examine Objectionable Reasoning, offer a better theoretical characterization, and an alternative diagnosis of what has gone wrong.

**I. The ME version of the story**

*Cosmos Club:* The evening before he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, John Hope Franklin hosted a dinner party at his upscale club, the Cosmos Club. As he was waiting for his friends, an elderly woman handed him her coat check and demanded he get her coat. He replied that all the staff are in uniform, and if she handed her card to someone in uniform they would certainly get her coat.

*Moral Encroachment characterization of Objectionable Reasoning:*

1. (Background awareness) The staff are black, and the guests are white
2. There is a black man
3. So, that man (JHF) is staff

Diagnosis: The judgment “that man is staff” doxastically wrongs JHP, making it a morally risky bit of reasoning. The moral risk generates moral stakes, which means that the woman would need more or better evidence in order to be epistemically justified in her conclusion that that man (JHF) is staff.

Similar generalizations that risk doxastic wronging when reasoning to an existential generalization

1. At this club, Black people are staff
2. Asians are bad tippers
3. Women are more nurturing than men
4. In a corporate world, women are secretaries

**II. An Alternative Account**

Repugnant Generalizations:

1. Black people ought to be subservient and submissive
2. Women ought to serve Chad
3. Black people are morally, socially, and politically inferior
4. It is impermissible for women to hold positions of leadership over men.

CLAIM 1: They are repugnant because they contain *objectionable normative content.*

CLAIM 2: the repugnance of (1) – (4) is actually just like the repugnance of (5) – (8). In (1) – (4), there is suppressed objectionable normative content.

* Descriptive claims are often descriptive shorthand to refer to complex social reality that is rife with normative commitments.
* As descriptive shorthand, (1) – (4) could be seen as expressing
	+ (1) At this club, it is right/fitting/appropriate for black people to be in subservient roles
	+ (2) Asians fail to properly value the service they receive; they are niggardly.
	+ (3) women ought to be nurturing
	+ (4) In the corporate world, women are better suited to being secretaries.
* Social Scripts and Schemas are the mechanism by which Objectionable Reasoning takes place
1. **Seeing as:** a schema contains open variables that are bound by objects within the person’s experience.
2. **Background assumptions**: it will prime the person to hold fixed a range of background assumptions.
3. **Probability space**: it will make salient a range of empirical predictions, relevant alternatives, and probability relations
4. **Normative expectations**: it will make salient a range of normative expectations about how other agents should act or feel.
5. **Reactive attitudes**: it would make salient which reactive attitudes are appropriate when agents meet or fail to meet the normative expectations given by the schema.

**Summary:** Schemas represent complex social realities that use descriptive shorthand yet contain normative content. Schemas provide the cognitive underpinnings of social cognition and (depending on your view) social reality. Schemas are at work in the cases of Objectionable Reasoning.

The linguistic representation of the reasoning is by way of normative generics, “black people are staff.”

CLAIM 2b: We can see the suppressed normative content is responsible for the repugnance of the judgments by holding fixed the descriptive components and toggling the normative expectations of the schemas.

A student from china who is not familiar with American class and race hierarchies or history arrives in the Cosmos Club. He is told “staff tend to be black, guests are white.” He sees JHF and forms the belief “that man is staff.” This student’s script for interacting with staff is to be respectful and kind, since he has also worked as staff.

**III. Upshots**