

Meta Double Binds and Fragmentation

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I. Preliminaries

Consider the following:

WOMAN: In mainstream society, a black woman is presented with a choice regarding her emotional vulnerability. If she hides her struggles and acts invulnerable, she faces a racialized penalty where her pain is ignored and she is expected to endure hardship without support. If she expresses vulnerability and asks for help, she is censured as "needy" or "incapable". Regardless of the choice she makes, her behavior is weaponized against her and reinforces her subordination. (Collins 2000)

IMMIGRANT: In mainstream society, an immigrant is presented with a choice regarding their cultural assimilation. If they assimilate, then they count as cultural infiltrators or "intruders". If they fail to assimilate, then they count as culturally deficient. Regardless of the choice they make, their behavior is weaponized against them and reinforces their subordination. (Tuan 1998)

TRANS: In mainstream society, a trans person is presented with a choice regarding their gender presentation. If they cis-pass, they risk exposure and being labelled a "deceiver". If they fail to cis-pass, they face censure and are mocked as "pretenders" or "make-believers". Regardless of the choice they make, their behavior is weaponized against them and reinforces their subordination. (Bettcher 2007, 2025)

WOMAN, IMMIGRANT, and TRANS are all **double binds**: they are situations where an agent's available options expose them to penalty regardless of choice, ultimately reinforcing their own oppression.

e.g., "damned if you do, damned if you don't!"

Much work has been done articulating various kinds of *particular* (oppressive) double binds.

Little has been said on the *nature* of double binds themselves.

Hirji (2021): All double binds are "imperfect choices" that limit an individuals' agency while leaving their autonomy intact.

Crenshaw (1989): Some double binds are intersectional double binds, or double binds that cannot be disaggregated into additive, single-axis penalties.

Reveals the inseparability of intersecting social identities.

Claim: Some double binds are meta double binds, or double binds constituted by other double binds which are themselves generated by distinct, mutually exclusive ideologies.

Claim: Reveals the seeming-contradictoriness of fragmented social identities.

The Plan:

- A. Provide a rough (toy model) metaphysics of double binds.
- B. Examine intersectional double binds and their explanatory usefulness.
- C. Present meta double binds and argue for their explanatory usefulness.

II. Double Binds & Intersectionality

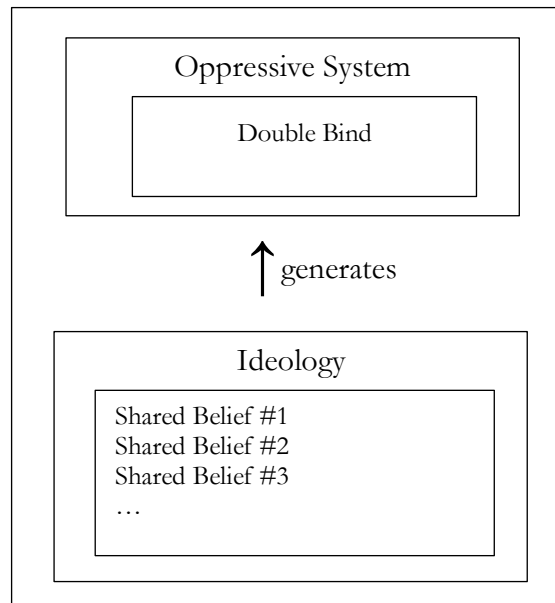
What are double binds?

Recall:

Double binds: situations where an agent's available options expose them to penalty regardless of choice, ultimately reinforcing their own oppression. (Frye 1983)

Hirji (2021): situations where an individual's agency presents them with an “imperfect choice”, where whatever one does one necessarily undermines their own objective interests.

A (rough) metaphysical framework (Shelby 2003, 2014, Srinivasan 2020, Dror forthcoming):



Takeaways:

NOT-NEC-OPP: Double binds are *not* a necessary condition of oppression.

Dilemmatic scenarios vs. Coercive treatment

TRIADIC+: There can be triadic, polyadic (n-ary) etc, binds.

OPPRESSION-REINFORCING: They're not mere dilemmatic scenarios—the *reinforcing* of one's own oppression is a necessary condition.

Recall: Frye (1983): they're a hallmark of oppression.

EPISTEMIC USEFULNESS: they provide hermeneutical resources to identify the covert “logic” of oppressive ideologies.

EXPLANATORY USEFULNESS: Part of what it is to be an F (in c) is to (at least partially) experience double bind D (in c). (Åsta 2018)

Double binds are *explanatorily useful*—they explain the kinds of social beings we are.

e.g., what it is to be trans in dominant gender contexts is (at least partially) to be a sex-deceiver/sex-make-believer. (Bettcher 2007, Åsta 2018)

I focus on EXPLANATORY USEFULNESS, insofar as that makes us the kinds of beings we are.

Intersectional Double Binds

Intersectionality: axes of oppression intersect (Crenshaw 1989, Collins 2000), intermesh (Lugones 1994, Garry 2011), are non-additive/inseparable/cross-constitutive (Lugones 2007, Bernstein 2020, Jenkins 2020, Dembroff 2023).

Recall WOMAN:

Hyper-Resilient, Emotionally Burdensome Double Bind (Vulnerability-DB): Black women either count as hyper-resilient by successfully masking their vulnerability, or they count as emotionally burdensome by failing to mask their vulnerability.

Observation: Coinciding (racist and sexist) ideologies (in c) generate (Vulnerability-DB) (in c).
This demonstrates the inseparability of race and sex (ibid.).

According to (Vulnerability-DB), the kind of treatment black women face is a product of coinciding ideologies that are not separable into the treatment they face as black people and the treatment they face as women.

So, Intersectional Double Bindings are explanatorily useful: they help explain *why* intersectional identities are inseparable.

They're a hallmark of intersectionality.

Claim: Meta Double Bindings are explanatorily useful: they help explain *why* fragmented identities are seemingly contradictory.

They're a hallmark of fragmentation.

III. Meta Double Bindings

What is a Meta Double Bind?

Claim: Some double binds are meta double binds, or double binds constituted by other double binds which are themselves generated by distinct, mutually exclusive ideologies.

[alternative terminology:

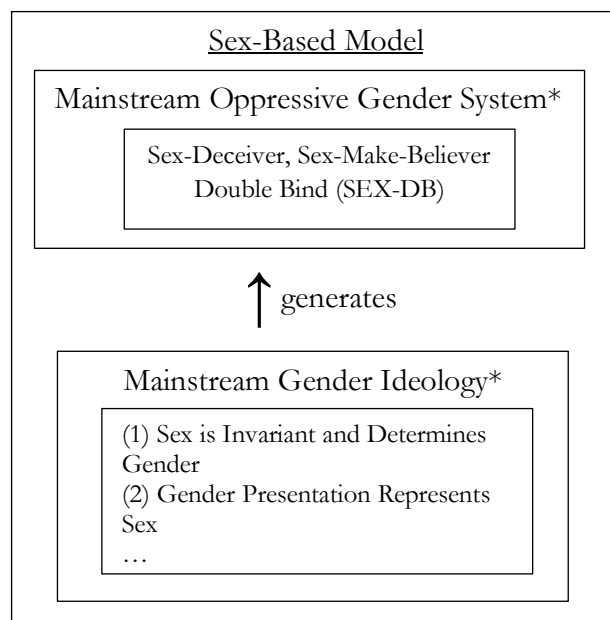
Meta Double Bind (MDB): DB constituted by DBs

Fragmented Double Bind: MDB+]

Recall TRANS.

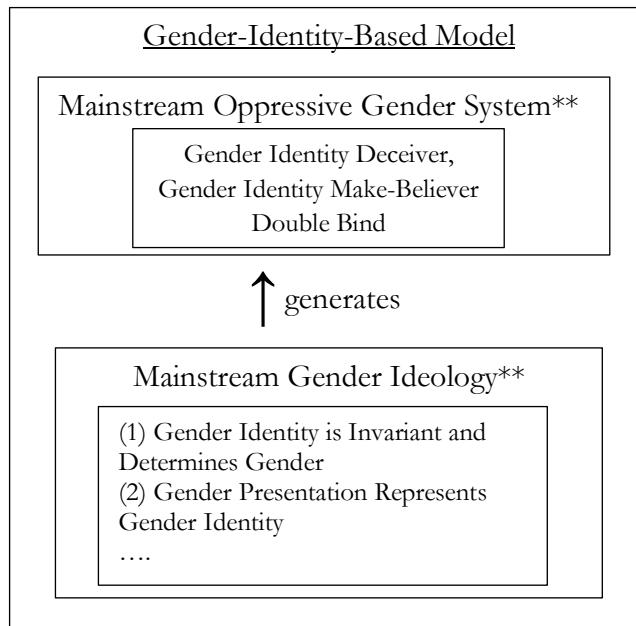
(SEX-DB) Sex-Deceiver, Sex-Make-Believer Double Bind: trans people either count as sex deceivers by successfully misrepresenting their sex via their gender presentation, or they count as sex make-believers by failing to misrepresent their sex via their gender presentation.

Trans people face (SEX-DB) in (many) mainstream contexts.



However, (some) people have changed! In some contexts, gender presentation doesn't indicate an invariant sex that determines gender status, but rather it indicates an invariant gender identity (Parker, Horowitz, and Brown 2022).

(GI-DB) Gender Identity-Deceiver, Gender Identity-Make-Believer Double Bind: trans people either count as gender identity deceivers by successfully misrepresenting their gender identity via their gender presentation, or they count as gender identity make-believers by failing to misrepresent their gender identity via their gender presentation.



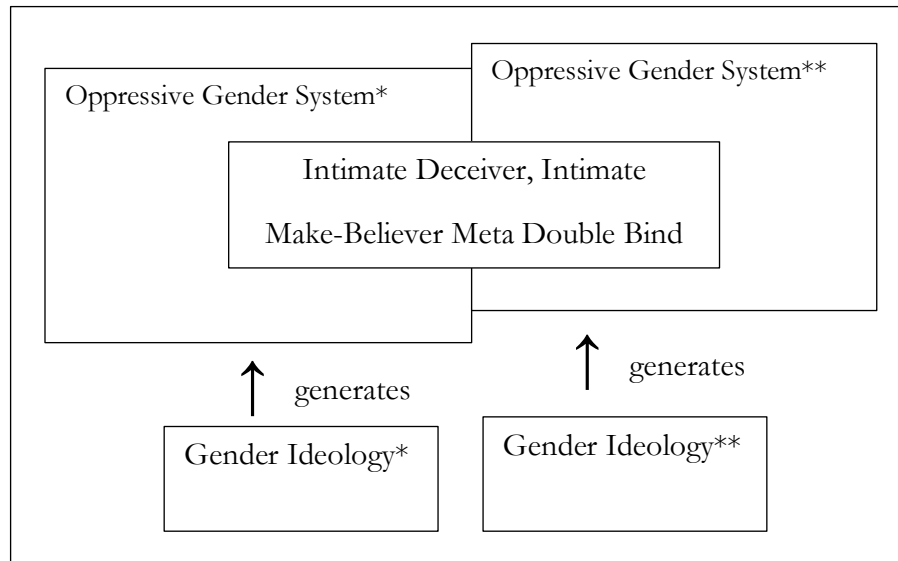
Observation: you can be conferred a particular deceiver/make-believer property in one context and yet lack it in another.

Observation: (SEX-DB) and (GI-DB) are products of distinct, mutually exclusive (gender) ideologies, generated within distinct oppressive (gender) systems.

(note: we already accept that overarching ideologies (e.g., patriarchy) can manifest in mutually exclusive, highly localized ways without violating intersectionality.)

However: trans people clearly experience both (SEX-DB) and (GI-DB) *writ large* (across contexts):

Claim: trans people face an *Intimate-Deceiver, Intimate-Make-Believer Meta Double Bind* (Intimacy-MDB): trans people either count as intimate deceivers by successfully misrepresenting either their sex or gender identity via their gender presentation, or they count as intimate make-believers by failing to misrepresent either their sex or gender identity via their gender presentation.



On (Intimacy-MDB):

- these ideologies/systems are not exhaustive: they can be subsumed under larger ideologies/systems.
- (Intimacy-MDB) is not constituted by *any* two double binds: (SEX-DB) and (GI-DB) are mutually exclusive.
- What it is to be trans across (dominant) contexts is to experience (Intimacy-MDB): cross-contextually, trans people count as intimate deceivers or make-believers—as *artificers*.

So, (Intimacy-MDB) is explanatorily useful: it explains the seemingly-contradictory treatment of trans people cross-contextually.

So, (Intimacy-MDB) demonstrates the *fragmentation* of (transgender) identities.

e.g., Explains how one can be categorized as ‘trans-deceiver’ but also categorized as ‘not-trans-deceiver’: a trans-intimate-deceiver can be categorized as ‘trans-sex-deceiver’ and a ‘trans-identity-deceiver’.

IV. Multiplicity, Polarization, and Fragmentation

Three arguments in favor of taking meta double binds seriously:

1. Actual (& perhaps pervasive)

Actual: (Intimacy-MDB), (Culture-MDB).

Perhaps Pervasive: the background conditions for MDBs rely on ideological polarization.

The social world is becoming increasingly polarized (Sunstein 2017, Lynch 2019, Nguyen 2020).

Expected under pluralism about social contexts/kinds/categories (Åsta 2018)

2. Explanatorily Useful

A difficulty when talking about pluralism about social identities/kinds/context is being able to make substantive cross-contextual claims—often, the lesson from ontological pluralism/ists is that this is theoretically unhelpful.

However, MDBs give us a way to make a principled, substantive cross-contextual claim about social identities/kinds/context.

3. Multiplicity & Fragmentation

Helps capture the Lugonian (& Anzalduan) concept of fragmentation. (sort of.)*

Lugones: the (dominant) mainstream aims to fragment our various identities. If the social world had its way, we'd be merely fragmented beings. However, we resist by (i) recognizing our multiplicity (ii) world-travelling to resistant contexts, and (iii) enacting practical syllogisms in the dominant world. (1990, 1994)

Lugones: Fragmentation leads us to instantiate (seemingly) contradictory social properties.

Me: MDBs explain this aspect of fragmentation. So, we should theorize with MDBs. (recall: because intersectional double binds explain inseparability of intersectional identities, we therefore should theorize with intersectional double binds.)

*Important: Lugones/Anzaldua focus on **inter**-identity fragmentation (splitting apart different intersecting identities), whereas MDBs focus on **intra**-identity fragmentation (fracturing of a single identity from within).

Objection: But Lugones (& Anzaldua) said we should be theorizing multiplicity in our resistant politics, not fragmentation!

Response: agreed! I'm not claiming that we should accept/welcome fragmentation, but rather that we need to fully understand it to best resist it.

In a sense, I'm giving a metaphysics of oppression under a *polarized* mainstream.

Increasing mainstream polarization = intra-identity fragmentation.

So, MDBs are a hallmark of fragmentation.

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Bonus Case

Recall IMMIGRANT:

(ASSIMILATION-DB) Assimilation-Intrusive, Assimilation-Deficient Double Bind: Immigrants either count as assimilation-intrusive by successfully asserting their host-nation assimilation via their cultural performance, or they count as assimilation-deficient by failing to assert their host-nation assimilation via their cultural performance.

However, (some) people have changed! In some (progressive multicultural) contexts, cultural performance doesn't indicate cultural assimilation that determines cultural status, but rather cultural authenticity.

(AUTHENTICITY DB) Authenticity-Intrusive, Authenticity-Deficient Double Bind: immigrants either count as authenticity-intrusive by successfully asserting ethnic authenticity via their cultural performance, or they count as authenticity-deficient by failing to assert their ethnic authenticity.

Observation: (ASSIMILATION-DB) and (AUTHENTICITY-DB) are products of distinct, mutually exclusive (culture) ideologies, generated within distinct oppressive (culture) systems.

However: immigrants clearly experience both (ASSIMILATION-DB) and (AUTHENTICITY-DB) *writ large* (across contexts):

(Culture-MDB) Many immigrants face a *Cultural-Intrusive, Cultural-Deficient Meta Double Bind*: immigrants either count as culturally intrusive by successfully asserting either their host-nation assimilation or ethnic authenticity via their cultural performance, or they count as culturally deficient by failing to assert their host-nation assimilation or ethnic authenticity via their cultural performance.

Claim: Cross-contextually, immigrants count as culturally intrusive or culturally deficient—as *interlopers*.

So, (Culture-MDB) is explanatorily useful: it explains the seemingly-contradictory treatment of immigrants cross-contextually.