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Responsibly Navigating Social Practices

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1 | Introduction

The literature on moral responsibility and moral appraisals is moving beyond a focus on blame that characterized much of the late 20th Century and early 21st Century debates (e.g., Wallace 1994; Scanlon 2008). Persons can be responsible without being blameworthy (Pickard 2011; Lacey and Pickard 2018). Persons can be responsible and liable to a range of different moral responses, ranging from moral disappointment (Fricker 2010) to appreciation (Calhoun 2021) or praise (Telech 2021, 2022).

Cheshire Calhoun (2024) has recently made an exciting contribution, and one which more fully develops an expanded picture of the morally responsible person. This picture focuses not only on the capacities needed to be accountable for violations of moral norms—as has been the focus of much of the literature on moral responsibility. Rather, Calhoun argues, we ought to consider also what capacities are needed to be fluent operators in social practices, in a way that enables others to form predictive expectations (what Calhoun calls “compliance responsibility”). And we ought to consider what capacities agents have such that they are sometimes able to promote values and go above and beyond what is required of them (what Calhoun calls “taking responsibility”). This picture helps us to see what is valuable about being a responsible person; why it is a status that matters to us. It is a picture truer to the Strawsonian ambition of taking seriously the practices in which we engage with each other as responsible; and one which should “remind [us] of the much richer, more complexly three-dimensional conception of responsible persons that ordinary people in ordinary social life have” (2024, 14).

Our intervention focuses on Calhoun’s notion of compliance responsibility, and the question of what capacities are involved in the navigation of social practices. Our contention is that

Calhoun’s notion of “compliance responsibility” is ultimately insufficient to capture the responsibility-relevant capacities presupposed by social practices as we know them. We reach this conclusion by illustrating that the capacities that are salient in a model of the responsible person depend on the model of social practices we articulate, and the features of those practices brought into view. We will survey three models of social practices—each model involves different idealisations and abstractions, and so brings into focus different features of our practices, and we argue, each one brings different capacities into view. Ultimately we will argue that, at least sometimes, a model which brings a richer and more complex notion of practices, and the corresponding set of capacities into view, is desirable. But our argument is intended as a constructive modification of, rather than a rival, to Calhoun’s picture.

We proceed as follows. In each section, we present a different model of social practices and show how different responsibility-relevant capacities and attitudes are brought into focus. In Section 2, we set out Calhoun’s picture of social practices; in Section 3, we attend to Karen Stohr’s (2019) model; in Section 4, we articulate Sally Haslanger’s (2018) account of social practices. In Section 5, we present two examples of social practices, surrounding eating and drinking, and toilet use. The first extends existing literature on food-related social practices, focusing on the potentially conflicting norms of dinner parties. The second examines the exclusionary (binary) practices of bathroom usage. We argue that these examples illustrate that compliance with norms is sometimes neither possible nor desirable. This may be because the practices are hostile or oppressive, as with binary bathrooms; but it need not be, as the dinner party example shows. It is simply a function of our complex social worlds. Rather than Calhoun’s notion of compliance responsibility, we argue for a model of norm-responsive responsibility.

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This responsiveness may generate compliance; but may sometimes promote resistance.

2 | Calhoun: Compliance Responsibility and Social Practices

There is extensive philosophical literature articulating what it takes to be a responsible person. But, Calhoun argues, the model of the responsible person developed in much of the literature to date is limited, as a result of authors focusing on what it takes for people to avoid acting wrongfully, or for it to be apt to hold them accountable for such wrongful actions. A very different picture emerges, Calhoun argues, if we instead focus on what it is to take responsibility, or what it takes to be a member of minimally functioning social practices—practices that depend upon participants complying with norms, and sometimes volunteering to promote the valuable aspects of those practices. We focus in detail on the model of social practices that Calhoun has in mind, and the picture of the compliance responsible person that emerges. For, as we will argue, by elaborating a different model of social practices, different features of the social environment and different capacities become significant for responsible persons who operate within, and sometimes challenge, those social practices.

Being responsible in the sense of accountable requires not merely having a suitably developed capacity to respond to normative considerations, but also having a developable capacity—such that if we are not presently sensitive (due to unfamiliarity with the local norms, perhaps), we could in future become so (2024, 11–21). With a focus on the possibility of development, the range of responsibility-recognizing attitudes already extends beyond blame—it can include normative expectations or aspirations, as well as those embedded in efforts to educate others and oneself. These capacities are not only activated in the occasions in which persons violate moral norms; they are capacities which underpin a default status, and one which it is valuable for us to have.

However, even with this more expansive notion of accountability responsibility in place, Calhoun argues, there are aspects of what it is to be a responsible person that are not yet in view. This brings us to the idea of “compliance responsibility.”

Calhoun claims having the status of accountability is consistent with frequently failing to meet normative standards, either because one does not understand the local norms, or because one is ill-motivated to comply with them. People can have the relevant capacities for sensitivity even when they don't know how to fulfill them or are poorly motivated. So it is a minimalist and far from optimistic conception of the responsible person. Nor is it a conception of the responsible person, Calhoun argues, with which we tend to engage with others in much of our daily life. We tend to engage with others who have “been socialized into many of the same moral norms, including those of common decency, that we have. It's thus reasonable to assume that those people are already largely sensitized to the same range of considerations that are normatively relevant in particular contexts as we are” (2024, 29). We tend to go through our daily lives not only with normative expectations about the behavior of others, but with predictive expectations that, for the most part, others will

live up to the demands we make of each other. As Calhoun puts it: “Daily participation in social practices relies on a more robust conception of responsible persons” than that embodied in the notion of accountability responsibility (2024, 31). So, our question for now is: what is the model of social practices Calhoun has in mind, and what is the picture of the responsible person embedded within it?

Calhoun focuses on practices understood as “established norm-structured practices with which [one is/]you are deeply familiar and assume others are as well” (2024, 31). The important features for our purposes are that the social practices in view are (a) established, such that the norms structuring them are settled and (b) understood by those participating in them. Moreover, (c) participants in the practice proceed on the assumption that others comply with the norms of the practice, (d) with an attitude of default trust (2024, 31–32, 37), and the assumption that (e) non-compliance may well be met with sanction of some sort (2024, 36). This model of social practices generates, and depends upon, the following model of the “compliance responsible person”, which involves that such persons are: (1) “minimally well-formed social agents, largely fit to be self-directed fellow participants in social life” (2024, 32); (2) familiar with the local norms of the practices; (3) in general disposed to comply with the basic normative expectations; (4) and to trust that others will do likewise.

Drawing on Cristina Bicchieri's (2016) understanding of social norms, Calhoun argues that compliance responsible persons have the capacity to categorize social situations, and to understand, apply and navigate the social scripts that apply in that context—they have a “practical “know-how”” (2024, 35). There is typically a fluidity to the compliance responsible person's actions, such that “norm compliant behaviour flows naturally from [their] grasp of the situation” (2024, 35). So constructed, the model of the compliance responsibility brings into view a different range of responsibility-recognizing attitudes—and indeed ones that pervade social life. We are recognized and treated as responsible persons not only when we are blamed for violations of norms, but also when we are trusted, as a default attitude, to comply with the norms operative in a context (2024, 37). For example, when on public transportation, we trust by default (not via some verbal contract) that the fellow passengers comply with norms associated with public transit. We show our trust when we allow ourselves to sleep on the train, expecting others to not harm us.

Of course, people are not always trusted to comply. As Calhoun points out, people who are not (trusted to be) compliance responsible may be cultural outsiders as yet unfamiliar with local norms (a tourist), or may be novices in a practice (a medical student), or may be outsiders to the practice (a non-Catholic attendee at a Catholic mass) (2024, 42). Notably, the main obstacles to compliance in Calhoun's examples are epistemic obstacles: people simply may not know how to comply. And, where compliance cannot be relied upon, the practices are not, in Calhoun's terms, well functioning: “instead depending on coercive management of participants” (2024, 37).

Calhoun supports these claims with examples of a number of familiar, mundane, and run-of-the-mill interactions and social

practices: the practice of cooperating in a supermarket, using a library, coexisting in the intimacy of a family home, and the practice of running an academic department. And the picture of social practices extracted is a decent fit for these practices when they function at least minimally.

This may be an adequate picture of responsible persons when they operate in decently functioning social practices—where compliance is possible and desirable. However, we want to acknowledge that the salient features of the model of compliance responsibility (1–4 above) are dependent upon the features of social practices that Calhoun focuses on (a–e above). As Calhoun acknowledges, this picture is an idealized one in a number of respects: relevant for present purposes are that “all are offered default trust that they will generally be compliant with basic practice norms” and “the norms defining particular practices are rosily assumed to be good ones” (2024, 161 emphasis added). Calhoun clarifies that she is developing a model of “well-functioning (or, as I sometimes say, decently functioning)” social practices (2024, 159). Well functioning does not mean all things considered normatively justified (161–162). Nonetheless, the model Calhoun presents supposes that a practice is less well-functioning to the degree to which individuals are not compliant in the practice (2024, 162).

But this is not the only way of modeling social practices. As an idealization, it is possible to develop a model that abstracts away from or emphasizes other features. And the features of persons who operate within those practices may differ accordingly. In the next section, we illustrate this point by focusing on Karen Stohr’s account of social practices that populate “moral neighborhoods”.

3 | Stohr: Moral Neighborhoods and Fictive Moral Selves

The idea of social practices plays a role in Karen Stohr’s articulation of the notion of “moral neighborhoods”. Stohr isn’t concerned with responsible persons, but rather with the idea of moral development and the tools we need to formulate and strive towards our moral ideals. But we can take Stohr’s model of social practice in order to compare it with Calhoun’s and to consider what capacities of persons social practices, so modeled, demand.

In Stohr’s view, social practices themselves are characterized in terms of “mutually understood and widely employed conventions surrounding interactions in a particular context or location” (2019, 132–133). These conventions are important in signaling to others a willingness to abide by the norms or rules of the practice, which reflects an underlying agreement to do so. In successful practices, people know what these norms or rules are, and know that there will be sanctions for violating them. This is the case even if they are not consciously aware of them, nor explicitly choose them (the norms, or the participation in the practice).

Social practices are part of what make up a “moral neighborhood”: “a constellation of social norms, practices, and behaviors” (2019, 4). These configurations of practices and norms

not only structure and facilitate the way we engage with the social world; they also provide a framework for us to formulate aspirations and enable us to morally improve. This is a function of the fact that others hold us to our moral aspirations, as Stohr puts it (2019, 126). The thought is that the normative pressure provided by others—their expectations and the norms that govern the practices we inhabit—can be a helpful way of keeping us on track, helping us to be better moral selves.

For Stohr social practices concern behaviors - “normatively laden actions and expressions” (Stohr 2019, 132) - governed by and in accordance with norms. And, like Calhoun’s account, in Stohr’s there is an emphasis on mutual expectation and understanding. Whilst they may be compatible, however, there are differences in emphasis in Stohr’s model which bring to light importantly different features of social practices, and the role they play in Stohr’s wider views about the conditions for moral improvement, which are worth remarking upon.

There are some minor differences: Stohr writes of conventions reflecting “underlying agreement”, suggesting that there is some degree of investment in, or endorsement of, the norms structuring the social practices. Whilst Calhoun’s model posits an attitude of default trust—we simply assume, as a default, the predictive expectation that others will comply—Stohr’s model draws attention to the conventions used to signal our awareness of, and willingness to conform to, what is expected of us in a context (though this need not be consciously done, as she emphasizes). For example, British people typically ask “is this the queue?”, even when it is quite obviously the queue, to signal their conformity with the queuing norms in a context. That such signaling is needed draws attention to the precarity of our reliance on others to comport with local norms, and subtle ways norms are enforced (beyond coercion). It also brings to the fore that compliance (or not) depends not only on epistemic matters, but on investment in and endorsement of the relevant practice and its norms.

A more important point of contrast concerns the departures from the idealisations of Calhoun’s model. Stohr focuses on the relevance of social practices to our moral development. Focusing on the positive aspects of social practices that feature in “good moral neighbourhoods”, Stohr draws attention to how they can facilitate moral growth and achievement of “fictive moral selves” to which we aspire. They do so in part because others “hold us into aspirational moral identities through networks of social norms” (126). But Stohr also draws attention to the ways that social practices, and the moral neighborhoods they comprise, can be constraining in undesirable ways. For example, Stohr writes that “well-constructed social practices make us legible to each other as fellow members of a community with shared moral understandings and a common evaluative outlook” (2019, 120). But social practices may often fall short: some social practices might render us “illegible” to others, in the sense that the practices hinder mutual understanding, and can thwart the moral development of those within them: “social communities operating on shared moral understandings can and do get things badly wrong. Many social practices are oppressive, unjust, limiting, or hostile to people who are expected to participate in them” (2019, 116). Thus Stohr centres a less “rosy picture” of social practices

than Calhoun, with implications for the capacities responsible persons need.

A fourth feature worth emphasizing concerns one further aspect of our social practices that can be morally supportive or thwarting. Stohr remarks on the relationship between the material or physical environment and the social practices, drawing attention to “what interactions those material surroundings make possible, or in the terms I have been using, what normative spaces can be constructed within them” (2019, 126). For example, having a physical space of one’s own, in which to construct one’s own sense of self and moral aspirations, away from potentially oppressive spaces and norms, can facilitate moral development (see Stohr’s discussion of Austen’s protagonists at pages 125–126). Calhoun may not disagree with Stohr about the significance of material environments, but it is not a feature given prominence in her model.

Finally Stohr draws attention to the complexity of social practices, acknowledging that “moral neighborhoods routinely overlap and we can and do occupy multiple versions of them at the same time.” (2019, 102). However, the full implications of this observation, in terms of the potential for conflicts between practices and norms, require further exploration (which we undertake in Sections 4 and 5).

As said, Stohr is not primarily concerned with the model of the responsible person presupposed by these social practices, but we can do some reconstructive work to tease out what features of persons her model relies upon. First, the idea that practices rest on mutual agreement presupposes that there are individuals with the capacities to co-deliberate and converge with others (even if they have not in fact explicitly done so, it must make sense that they could, in order for us to attribute the idea of mutual agreement). Second, that practices rest on conventions that signal awareness and willingness to abide by norms requires persons who have the ability to read such social meanings, and whose actions can be imbued with such meanings. That such conventions are needed indicates the awareness of participants that may understand the norms, but be unwilling to signal that they will abide by them—capacities for critical reflection on practices and social meanings are thereby foregrounded, and the importance of investment in and endorsement of practices is also more visible. Thirdly, since Stohr brings into view a less idealized model of social practices, it becomes clearer that persons within them—even those familiar with the norms—may be responsible without compliance. Where practices are complex and conflicting, persons will have to navigate this with at best partial compliance. And, where practices are “oppressive, unjust, limiting, or hostile” (2019, 116), responsible persons will need competences in sustaining resistance, rather than compliance. Finally, the role of physical spaces in social practices requires that agents have interpretative skills that they can apply to aspects of their environments, including critically.

Already, we can see that the responsible person within the practices that populate Stohr’s moral neighborhoods requires capacities not only for fluid compliance, but also for negotiation and critical response. We are not claiming that Calhoun would deny that critical reflection or navigating norm conflict are capacities that responsible persons need. However, her idealized model

which focuses on compliance obscures these capacities from view. Again, we want to emphasize that we are not arguing that one model of social practices and the person they presuppose is the right one. Rather, at this stage we aim to demonstrate that focusing on different features of social practices brings into view different features of the persons within those practices and capacities on which they rely.

4 | Haslanger: Practices, Resources, Resistance

Sally Haslanger develops a model of social practices within critical theory, for the purpose of generating conceptual resources useful to movements seeking social justice. At the forefront of her account is the notion that social practices are a site for social change, and the model of practices developed foregrounds the features of practices that are conducive to that goal. To this end, in Haslanger’s view, to identify something as a practice “is to situate it within a web of social meanings that function, in the primary instance, to coordinate our behavior around resources” (2018, 237). Practices involve patterns of learned behavior—they go beyond mere regularities but need not be explicitly rule-governed. Rather, they are shaped by social meanings and responsiveness to each other in managing resources. Each of these aspects is important: the learned social meanings; the responsiveness; and the materiality of practices.

Like Calhoun and Stohr, Haslanger’s account emphasizes the importance of practices in coordination and norm-governed interaction. Haslanger writes that practices “provide a ‘stage setting’ for coordinated action that gives us roles to occupy, norms and patterns to follow, and reasons to act” (2018, 240). Crucial in Haslanger’s account, though—because of the emphasis on social critique—is the idea that those meanings are not necessarily settled. Rather, they are “open to interpretation and contestation” (2018, 237).¹

There is also emphasis on how learned social meanings and local norms facilitate “mutually responsive and/or accountable performances” (2018, 240). This is in part because social practices are imbued with “descriptive normativity”—the idea that practices are underpinned by assumptions, which may be mistaken, about the “right way” to do things within that practice. This is consistent with the practice itself not being legitimate.² It is also because norms and practices “evolve through responsiveness both to each other’s performances and the parts of the world we have an interest in collectively managing” (2018, 245). That is, we collectively (not necessarily explicitly) coordinate to shape and change norms and practices, whilst assuming that others will be responsive to these evolutions of norms and behavior. Haslanger foregrounds the fluidity of norms, which themselves change and evolve in response to our actions. The emphasis is on how we actively shape, rather than conform to, the norms of a practice (though see fn 1).

Also crucial to our present purposes are Haslanger’s remarks (which bring to centre stage a feature of Stohr’s model we identified in Section 3) that there are always multiple practices operative within a context, and they may be “diverse, conflicting, and sometimes incoherent” (2018, 238). Haslanger puts this in terms of the “fragmentation of agency” (2018, 241), which means that

it may be impossible to conform to the norms of all the practices in which we are participants. These conflicts, however, provide the opportunity for critique and development, when we take the norms and meanings from one practice and consider another, potentially conflicting one, in light of them. Haslanger writes that “practices I engage in and meanings I employ in one context can transform another” (2018, 242). Navigating the complex and conflicting norms is part of the process through which norm change can occur.

Finally, Haslanger’s model of practices (again, giving prominence to an aspect we also identified in Stohr’s account) emphasizes the “materiality” of practices. However, Haslanger articulates not only how the physical environment shapes our practices, but how our practices are themselves a means to coordinate and distribute resources, both positive and negative. So materiality constrains the possibilities for norm-governed interaction: for example, the presence of a wall can’t just be ignored, even if it can be navigated around, climbed over, or broken through. The material dimensions of practices also provide further opportunity for critique, since there may be misalignment between the ideas and norms involved in a practice and the actual distribution or use of resources. Practices might devalue, over-value, or fail to value in the proper way some resources. With critique and coordination, practices can evolve to (one hopes) better reflect norms about valued resources.

Whilst Haslanger’s primary goal is to develop an account of social practices that is useful for critical theory and social critique, we can nonetheless engage in reconstructive work and ask what notion of the responsible person these practices rely upon. As with Calhoun and Stohr’s models, persons must have the capacity for some degree (not necessarily conscious or explicit) of understanding of norms and social meaning. Important in Haslanger’s picture is that persons have the capacity to develop a critical perspective on social meanings. In the foreground of Haslanger’s model is that with these critical capacities, persons must be able to evaluate the extent to which social practices serve their competing purposes. Since practices might conflict, this includes having the capacity to navigate conflict. Note that this will involve both being able to navigate inner conflict—with respect to one’s competing purposes, norms and values—and conflict with others, who may have different understandings of social meanings and practices. Further, persons in these practices must have the capacity to envisage change, and be responsive to others in advancing critiques and proposing change. Finally, this will require the capacity to see beyond the constraints of the material environment and consider how resources might be better redistributed within a practice. This requires the capacity to develop and apply moral, political, or social goals to one’s context.

Once again, Calhoun does not explicitly reject the idea that these capacities are important to responsible persons; but these aspects of agency are obscured and so marginalized in her model. As a result, we do think it is important to note that the capacities to navigate conflict, negotiate and resist do not seem to be readily incorporated into Calhoun’s framing of “compliance responsibility”. Calhoun’s (idealized) model frames compliance responsible persons as those who can be trusted to, well, comply; the alternative is that a “subset of participants is not compliance

responsible and requires surveillance and coercive sanctions” (2024, 163). This leaves little room in the model of the responsible person for those who are disposed to comply fluidly and automatically with some norms and practices, but who proffer resistance to conflicting or otherwise problematic norms, and alternatives on which participants in a practice might converge. It seems at best incomplete to describe that mode of responsible agency as a matter of “compliance”.

Our goal is not at this stage to argue that Haslanger’s is the “right” model of social practices but that as a result of the different features of social practices that are given prominence, a different set of capacities comes into view. In the next section we will provide two examples to illustrate that at least sometimes, there is value in a model of social practices and the capacities of responsible persons on which it relies which speaks to the potential for conflict, contestation, and resistance.³

5 | Navigating Social Practices: Norm-Responsive Responsible Persons

In this section we present two examples of social practices. Notably, each concerns practices surrounding mundane and everyday aspects of our lives: eating and going to the toilet. Eating is readily recognizable as a social practice (as indicated by its mention by all three authors writing on social practices). Going to the toilet is perhaps less so—maybe because, as the norms surrounding it in our cultures dictate, it is considered a relatively private activity and not one that gets written about much in academic papers (we aren’t here to comply with that norm)! But it is an activity structured by social norms, and as we will see there is a descriptive normativity to the practices. One can get it right, or wrong, and the possibilities for doing so depend on one’s social role, familiarity with the norms, and the material environments that constrain the practice. It is also a practice that has (frustratingly) received a great deal of media attention, in the UK at least, with much controversy over who can use what bathrooms, and the availability of bathrooms in public space (e.g., Brooks and Walker 2025). We start with dinner.

5.1 | Case 1: Dinner Party

The idea of meals as a social practice figures in the work of all three theorists. Calhoun briefly mentions the norms that structure “a family dinner” and “the dinner norms in just this family” as an example of “specific, local contexts and practices” with which compliance responsible persons must be familiar (2024, 13). Stohr elaborates the example of a dinner party in more detail as an example of how norm governed practices can further our moral ends—the ends of fostering community with others, for example. Stohr writes that:

“A dinner party contributes to those ends insofar as it enables conversation and promotes fellow-feeling. The aim of a dinner party should be to create a normative space in which those ends can be realized. The normative space, however, is instantiated in material conditions that affect its shape. This means

that the format for a dinner party that realizes the moral ends must be tailored to the social and physical realities in which the dinner takes place.” (2019, 129).

These moral ends can be realized if people abide by the norms that govern how people should interact at dinner parties. Participants who get too drunk, engage in indiscreet conversation, or get swept up in competitive after-dinner board games, for example, might derail the pursuit of moral understanding. But if we aspire to sociality, then others can “hold us into” the fictive moral selves we aspire to be, to facilitate our moral development and enable us to enjoy these forms of community.

Finally, Haslanger mentions meals as an example of highly variable and sometimes contested social practice: norms govern what counts as food in a locale, how it is cooked and eaten, and at what time. This in turn shapes “the length of breaks for meals at work or school, the equipment needed to serve food, the broader systems of food production and distribution” (2018, 232).

There are obvious lines of critique of our dining social practices that have to do with the awful and torturous conditions in which animals are—largely unnecessarily for a human diet—produced as food. We set these aside and instead focus on some of the local aspects of dining practices which many of the readers—as academics who are unlikely to have endured the conditions of industrial scale farming and abattoirs (see Press 2023) - will be familiar. This example serves to illustrate how the complexity of practices means that responsible persons will at times be required to negotiate norm conflict; and even though fully apprised of the different sets of norms in play, conformity with them all is not possible.

Consider a departmental party, at which dinner will be served. There will be academic staff, administrative staff, and graduate students in attendance. Even still, it is a relatively small and friendly bunch; you anticipate no more than 30 people will be there. But there are complex and conflicting social norms in play. First, norms governing arrival: at academic events, punctuality is important. Amongst friends, arriving to a party fashionably late is more the norm. But you also consider that the organizer will be setting up and might welcome a hand with getting things ready. You know the local norms well. But which of the three norms is applicable here?

Second, there are norms about resources: what food to bring? It is a potluck, but at department level, catering tends to be all vegetarian. Is that the expectation here too? The department often subsidizes grad students in light of their more precarious financial position—is the norm that everyone should bring a fancy main dish, or is it ok for some folks to bring just snacks?

Then there are norms about engagement—should the conversation remain focused on philosophical topics, or more expansive terrains? The norms for academic versus friend-based parties will likely vary on this. Likewise for norms about music and dancing, drinking and intoxication.

An important feature of this example is that here—as with a number of aspects of social life—there are multiple complex

and competing social norms in play, generated by the overlap of social practices in a context. The conflicting norms mean that even individuals fluent in the local practices and norms (academic norms; norms of socializing) may be unclear about what is expected of them in this context, where those practices collide. But this is not at root an epistemic obstacle to compliance—there are no local norms that are unknown to the participants. Nor should the lack of compliance here be responded to with coercion or surveillance (which Calhoun takes to be the alternative to compliance). Rather, it is a coordination and responsiveness problem—participants in this event, which brings together clashing sets of norms from different kinds of practices, need to signal to each other or negotiate (more or less explicitly, perhaps) what norms will be (or they want to be) operative. (Having the “organized fun” of party games, for example, can make clear that activities far from philosophical discourse are positively encouraged; the host might nonetheless make space for it by announcing the kitchen a quieter zone for those who want to discuss the characteristics of responsible persons, for example).

The complex norms in play may also make it difficult for participants to form predictive expectations of each other; and whilst there may be default trust in good will and common decency, it may be an obstacle to attitudes of default trust with respect to either of the overlapping practices. And indeed, participants who proceed by assuming compliance with one set of norms might seem insufficiently accommodating, or even domineering, in failing to recognize the multiple norms that coincide in that space.

These aspects of overlap, complexity, and even conflict are prominent in the models of social practices from Stohr and Haslanger. In these contexts, the picture of the responsible person embedded in these practices goes beyond someone that has fluency in the relevant norms and expectations and automatically complies (expecting the same of others). Rather, a responsible person in this context has agility in navigating norm conflict, responsiveness to each other, and to the evolution of norms in novel contexts, as well as how to negotiate the distribution of resources (social capital, food, etc.) in doing so.⁴

5.2 | Case 2: Binary Bathrooms

Using the bathroom (or “going to the toilet”, in UK English) isn’t a much discussed social practice, perhaps for obvious reasons—it certainly has not garnered much philosophical attention. But it is a good example of how our practices are instantiated not only in shared understandings of social norms, but also in the distribution of material resources—in this case the arrangement of the material environment. Consider the differential interactions that material infrastructure affords (many) cisgender and (many) transgender people, as described by Kristjónudóttir Jónsdóttir (2022):

Most people wouldn’t even think twice about using a public facility, as their biggest concern about public toilets is probably whether they’ll be clean or not—not whether they’ll be assaulted for using it.

That alone perfectly illustrates how horrible it is to exist in public spaces as a trans person in today's society.

Public toilets in many spaces are structured according to binary gender (into “ladies” and “gents”; “women’s” and “men’s”). Social practices about bathroom use include norms governing self-selection of the appropriate bathroom.⁵ In such contexts, for gender conforming cis people, the norms governing which bathroom to use are straightforward and often followed without reflection; fluid compliance is possible. Predictive expectations of others are easy to understand and meet, as are conventions for signaling willingness to conform to the norms in the context (including observing the “right” sign and comporting oneself accordingly).

But for people who are gender non-conforming, including trans and non-binary people, it will not be possible to simply do “the ‘to be done’ in this situation”—despite being aware of the norms, and “minimally well-formed social participants” (Calhoun 2024, 33). This is in part because the norms of the infrastructure are built on assumptions that there are two, and only two, genders—and that these correspond with material infrastructure that facilitates the sorting of different kinds of bodies. It is in part because some of us are seemingly not addressed by the norm at all. It is in part because the material infrastructure simply does not provide the resources to facilitate some people choosing the “right” bathroom. And it is in part because the predictive expectations of how others will react to one’s presence—even in relation to norms of common decency—fails, leaving gender non-conforming people fearing hostile or even violent reactions from other bathroom users.

Consider the description of the choice situation described by Lori Watson (2016), who self-describes as a cis woman whose gender presentation does not fit the expectations of womanhood—such that she cannot easily signal her compliance with the conventions in her gender presentation. As she describes, she is routinely misgendered: “the overwhelming majority of humankind, men and women alike, does not yet recognize my womanhood as a way of being one” (2016, 247). Watson writes:

Doing something as basic as going to the bathroom, anywhere that is public, is a nightmare. Few places have “unisex” bathrooms. So here are my choices: go into the women’s bathroom and face public shouting, alarm, ridicule, and confrontation. Or go into the men’s bathroom, look down at the floor, walk quickly into a stall, and hope no one pays any attention to me but face the serious fear that they might. ... I have to time my bathroom breaks for when I think no one is in there or likely to be in there (2016, 247).

Once again, there is no lack of understanding of the norms—Watson is perfectly normatively literate with the local norms of the context. But the norms governing the practice, and the material environment in which those norms are instantiated, mean that even with a disposition to comply, Watson is unable to fluidly do so.

For some non-binary people, it is not merely impossible to comply with the norms, but undesirable to do so also, since that involves misgendering oneself and engaging in a practice that erases one’s identity. In such a context, the capacities that persons navigating these practices need are not well captured by the idea of normative literacy and disposition to comply, based on the default trust in general compliance with predictive explanations. Rather, capacities are needed that equip one to navigate erasing and ill-fitting norms; uncertainty regarding what expectations are being applied to oneself; and about how others will respond. The capacity to confront and resist exclusionary norms may also be required; along with those to envisage a more adequate material environment that embodies a better set of social practices. In this case not much imagination is needed: for example, norms of self-selection should prevail; and rather mundanely, a routinely provided gender-neutral toilet would be an improvement of the practice. But these features of the current—defective—practice appear better captured by Haslanger’s model of social practices, and from which we extracted an alternative model of the responsible person and their capacities.

5.3 | Norm-Responsive Responsible Persons

We have argued that responsible persons navigating the complexity of our everyday social practices cannot be assumed to be compliance responsible. A good understanding of local social norms may sometimes generate fluid compliance, but may other times generate friction, contestation, and resistance.

The set of capacities this requires goes beyond the “ground floor” conception of capacities for normative governance involved in accountability responsibility (2024, 30–31). Like compliance responsibility, as articulated by Calhoun, it requires understanding of and familiarity with local norms and practices. The understanding and familiarity it requires is likely a sophisticated one, which enables persons to make judgments about how best to negotiate conflicting norms, or respond to problematic norms and practices. But it also goes beyond the capacities involved in compliance responsibility, insofar as fluid dispositions to comply and trust that others will for the most part do so is insufficient for complex functioning and evolving social practices.

The responsible person who navigates social practices, then, is better thought of as someone with “norm-responsive responsibility”, rather than compliance responsibility, as Calhoun has it. Sometimes being norm-responsive generates compliance. But insofar as it is important that practices evolve, norm-responsiveness will sometimes generate contestation and resistance. Navigating our multifarious social practices responsibly requires this more extensive range of capacities.⁶

This range of capacities is also distinct from the idea of “taking responsibility”, as Calhoun articulates it (the third dimension of her tripartite model, beyond accountability and compliance responsibility) (2024, 53–60).⁷ When responsible persons take responsibility they do more than is required of them, or even expected of them; they elect to promote certain values, go above and beyond. These forms of taking responsibility are recognized with attitudes such as praise, esteem, or appreciation. And, Calhoun argues, our social practices are structured around the

assumption that persons will take responsibility and do more than the bare minimum. Indeed, some ways in which we recognize this dimension of responsibility, she argues, are prospective: we ask for volunteers, rely on favors, leave room within our practices for people to step up.

Whilst in one sense, social practices that sometimes conflict in complex ways, or are defective, relies upon the assumption that people will go beyond what the norms expect of them, this is not coextensive with the idea of people going beyond the bare minimum and electively promoting values. “Taking responsibility” in Calhoun’s sense leaves intact the norm-structured practices, whereas contestation seeks to challenge or change them.⁸ Relatedly, whilst taking responsibility in Calhoun’s sense is typically welcomed by many participants in the practice, navigating and sometimes resisting conflicting or defective norms may often not be. That means a different set of dispositions and will be required to be responsive to norm-structured practices, in the appropriate—sometimes conflictual—way.

In sum, if accountability responsibility is having the capacity for normative self-governance, and taking responsibility involves using those capacities to go above and beyond what social norms expect of us, we seek to model the mode of responsibility that sits in the space of navigating social practices as that which requires local understanding and familiarity, but the disposition to either comply or negotiate or challenge or contest or resist, depending on a nuanced assessment of those practices, their relationship to other norms, and their fit for purpose given the resources they coordinate and the participants within them.

6 | Conclusion: Norm-Responsive Responsible Persons

Our aim has not been to argue that one particular model of social practices is the right one. Social practices vary, and whilst some are wholly based in mutual expectation, others are instantiated in material resources and infrastructure. Whilst some social practices will be simple and almost universally agreed upon, others will be conflictual. Sometimes it will be clear which is the social practice to follow; in other contexts multiple practices might overlap and judgments will be needed about how to navigate known but competing norms (as per dinner party). In other contexts yet, willingness to engage in contestation or even resistance will be needed (as per binary bathrooms). Each model of social practices we have considered draws attention to important features of some of our practices. Our aim has been to tease out that the model of the capacities of persons who navigate those social practices depends in part on which features of social practices, in which contexts, we give focal attention in our account to. The two examples we have developed are intended to show that at least sometimes, an account that attends to complex, perhaps conflicting, and materially instantiated social practices is needed. Accordingly, we should model the responsible person in social practices not simply as, often, compliant—but also as sometimes resistant, in order to shape practices that better make our social world. Resistance is as much an important part of the responsible person as compliance. Perhaps now more than ever it is important to emphasize this in our account of the responsible person.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹In a response, Calhoun acknowledges (of course) that practices change: “what social norms require, prohibit or permit changes over time alongside changes in general patterns of behaviour of those participating in a social practice. Get enough defection, and you no longer have a social norm” (173). But quite how one gets from compliance to defection (other than via ignorance), is obscured on Calhoun’s model, due to the idealisations imported.

²Again, see Calhoun 2024, 162.

³Ultimately, there may be plural apt models of practices that each serve different (theoretical or practical) purposes.

⁴The phenomenon of ‘code-switching’ is a further example of elective rather than default compliance: when people code-switch, they (often) assess the cultural context and decide for pragmatic reasons to comply with the norms in a very intentional way. For discussion of code-switching, see Morton (2013), Dembroff and Saint-Croix (2019).

⁵Though in the UK this has recently been complicated by a Supreme Court ruling that ostensibly reduces the status of ‘woman’, at least in the Equality Act 2010, to biological features. The ramifications of this ruling are still being adjudicated by a number of public institutions.

⁶Where does this leave the ‘default trust’ that Calhoun argues we take towards other responsible participants in social practices? We think it feasible to maintain default trust in norm-responsiveness, where this involves compliance with decent norms, resistance to problematic ones, and negotiation of conflicting ones. Trusting each other to be so responsive is an important responsibility-relevant attitude. But we do not have space to fully support this thought here.

⁷This aspect of Calhoun’s account is somewhat different from Young’s (2011) forward-looking articulation of the idea of ‘taking responsibility’.

⁸Though it might shift *how much* compliance with a norm is considered mandatory rather than supererogatory.

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