

Explaining Oppression: An Argument Against Individualism

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Abstract: The recent, widespread focus on implicit bias has sparked a debate about the role of bias in causal explanations of persistent, systematic injustice. “Structural prioritizers” argue that structural causes are more important than individual causes, while “equal prioritizers” insist on the equal importance of individualistic and structural factors. In this paper, I make two interventions on this debate. First, I suggest that the debate is better framed in terms of explaining oppression. This is because there are multiple phenomena that are closely related to the forms of persistent, systematic injustice at the core of this debate. Using the language of oppression helps to clearly fix the explanatory target, distinguish it from closely related phenomena, and elucidate the explanatory demands that are relevant in the context of this debate. Second, I argue that both sides are mistaken in accepting that both individualistic and structural factors are necessary for explaining oppression. Explaining oppression, I argue, requires accounting for the various ways in which oppression is persistent and systematic, which requires a higher level of explanation than can be offered by appeals to individualistic factors. Instead, I sketch a picture on which individual attitudes help explain lower-level phenomena that help constitute oppression, but oppression itself is explained by structural phenomena that individuals help constitute and shape. Thus, when it comes to oppression, we should embrace pure explanatory structuralism.

How should we explain persisting, systematic forms of injustice like racism and sexism? In recent years, mainstream discussions have focused on the role of implicit bias in perpetuating systemic injustice. In response to the neglect of structural factors in these discussions, “structural prioritizers” draw attention to the centrality of these factors, arguing that structural causes are more important than individual causes when it comes to explaining these forms of injustice. In response, others argue that structural prioritizers have gone too far in the anti-individualist direction, and call for a recognition of the equal importance of individualistic and structural factors in bringing about these injustices. Despite their disagreement, however, both sides of this debate share a common assumption: that individualistic and structural factors are both independently necessary for explaining persistent and systematic forms of injustice like racism and sexism. In this paper, I argue – against both sides of this debate – that individualistic factors are not necessary for explaining these persistent, systematic forms of injustice. Ultimately, I suggest that the appeal to individualistic factors should be replaced by an appeal to higher-level structural phenomena that situate individuals within structures.

An important part of my argument in this paper is to clearly fix and elucidate the phenomenon that is at the core of this debate. Of course, what counts as an adequate explanation in any given case depends on what it is that one is trying to explain. This point,

though familiar, becomes especially important when there are several closely related phenomena in the vicinity of one's explanatory target, as I contend is the case in this debate.

What phenomenon is it, then, that is at the core of this debate? Members of this debate express an interest in explaining persistent, systematic forms of injustice like racism and sexism. As I will show, reflecting on the different ways in which injustices like racism and sexism are persistent and systematic allows us to distinguish between three closely related kinds of phenomena: (1) particular incidents of injustice, (2) particular patterns of injustice, and (3) clusters of interconnected patterns of injustice. Clearly identifying the target phenomenon – which I take to be (3) – in turn clarifies the explanatory demands.

My next step, then, will be to argue that individualistic explanations fail to satisfy the relevant explanatory demands. Note that I am not claiming that *all* explanations involving social phenomena must be purely structural; that is, I am not here defending strong methodological holism.¹ Rather, my claim is that a higher level, purely structural explanation is called for when it comes to explaining the target phenomenon.

The paper will proceed as follows. I will start by presenting the individualist-structuralist debate in more detail before identifying three distinct senses in which the phenomenon at the core of this debate is systematic and two senses in which it is persistent, and noting that these features map onto key characteristics of oppression. Making use of these features, I will then distinguish between oppression – the phenomenon that appears to be at the core of this debate – and two closely related phenomena. Using an exchange between Sterken and Haslanger, I will elucidate the explanatory implications of this distinction, and use this to clarify the explanatory demands that must be satisfied. I will then turn to showing that explanations appealing to individualistic factors are unable to meet these explanatory demands by considering the range of pure and mixed individualist views one could have and showing that each fails. Lastly, I will briefly sketch out the kind of pure structural view that we should adopt, and highlight some of the practical benefits of this picture. The conclusion is that we should be pure explanatory structuralists about contemporary forms of oppression.

1. The Debate

As a starting point, I want to provide an overview of the individualist-structuralist debate.

¹ See (List and Spiekermann 2013; Zahle 2021) for helpful overview of the debate between methodological holists and methodological individualists.

Members of this debate characterize the phenomenon they seek to explain in a variety of ways. For instance, (Madva 2016) refers to "persistent racial inequality", "systemic social ills", and "patterns of [group-based] advantage and disadvantage"; (Haslanger 2015) refers to "persistent inequality", "social injustice", and "racism and sexism"; and (Saul 2018) characterizes the phenomenon she is concerned with as "oppression", "systematic injustice", "social inequality", and "systemic inequality." Importantly, I take it that the concern is not with injustice of any kind, but a particular kind of injustice. Specifically, the goal is to address the kind of injustice that is – in ways that have yet to be clarified – persistent and systematic, and which is exemplified by the historical and contemporary conditions of women, people of color, queer folks, and people with disabilities in the United States, among others.

Second, the kind of explanation relevant to this debate is causal explanation: the goal is to identify the forces or mechanisms that explain the existence and persistence of these persisting, systematic forms of injustice. For example, (Anderson 2010) argues that segregation is a "principal cause" of racial inequality; (Banks and Ford 2011) reject the idea that the racial inequalities they are most concerned about "stem from" implicit bias; Haslanger says she is primarily interested in explaining the "existence and persistence" of social injustice;² (Ayala-López 2018) argues that discursive justice is not "the result of" biased minds; and (Saul 2018) argues that implicit bias plays a greater role in bringing about injustice than others have allowed.

More specifically, the debate is about the kind of causal explanation that one needs in order to explain injustice of this kind. There are two broad camps: the individualists and the structuralists.³ The pure individualist maintains that the kind of persisting, systematic injustice exemplified by racism (etc.) can be explained solely by reference to individual mental states and choices. The pure structuralist, on the other hand, maintains that persisting, systemic injustice can be explained solely by reference to social structural entities and processes (e.g. state laws, corporate policies, housing segregation, and mass incarceration).

Although the pure individualist view is often taken to be the mainstream, or "public" view, neither of these pure views has enjoyed support in the philosophical literature of late.⁴ Instead, the debate has taken place between people who endorse some kind of mixed view.

² (Haslanger 2015, 2016).

³ See (Soon 2019) for a similar overview.

⁴ (Ayala and Vasilyeva 2015; Ayala-López 2018) seem to come closest to a pure structural view, insofar as they suggest that biased mind explanations are inadequate for the job of explaining testimonial injustice. (Soon 2019) identifies the pure individualist view as the "public view."

People who endorse a mixed view agree that both individual attitudes and choices, on one hand, and social structural entities and processes, on the other, have essential roles to play in our explanations of racism, sexism, and other forms of persisting, systematic injustice. What they disagree about is the relative explanatory importance of these factors. *Structural prioritizers* maintain that structural factors are more explanatorily important.⁵ *Equal prioritizers*, in contrast, maintain that individualistic factors are just as important as structural factors when it comes to explaining persisting, systematic injustice.⁶

In this paper, I will argue that we should adopt a pure structuralist position. My starting point will be to highlight some important characteristics of the phenomenon that we are interested in explaining that help to clarify our explanatory target. In particular, I will show that there are multiple important ways in which the “persistent” and “systematic” injustice that has been and continues to be faced by women, people of color, people with disabilities, queer folks, etc. in the United States and elsewhere is persistent and systematic. This allows us to more clearly identify the phenomenon to be explained, to distinguish it from nearby phenomena, and thereby to elucidate the explanatory demands that must be satisfied.

2. The Phenomenon

I will begin by highlighting three ways in which the unjust conditions faced by many women, people of color, and other marginalized groups are systematic, and two ways in which they are persistent. These match up with key characteristics of oppression that have been identified by feminists, indicating that oppression is our explanatory target.

2.1. Patterned

The first way in which the injustices that characterize the conditions of women and people of color are systematic is that they are not random or coincidental, but *patterned*. It is not just unlucky that Liliana is repeatedly left to clean up after her colleagues at work events, nor that Liliana, Ashley, Rashida, and so many other women repeatedly find themselves left to perform “office housework” that is not part of their official work duties. Rather, the conditions

⁵ The term “structural prioritizer” is due to (Madva 2016). Representatives include (Haslanger 2015: 8), (Banks and Ford 2011). (Anderson 2010)

⁶ The term “equal prioritizer” is due to (Soon 2019). Representatives include (Madva 2016) and (Saul 2018), although Madva is more focused on the forward-looking question of intervention than the backward-looking question of explanation. Davidson and Kelly might also be best placed in this middle camp – this is where Soon places them (Davidson and Kelly 2018: 16).

of women and people of color are characterized by certain unjust *patterns* of experiences. This is connected to the widespread idea that oppression is *group-based*⁷ – these patterns arise as a result of mechanisms that systematically target women and people of color.

2.2. Domain-Crossing

Second, these injustices are *domain-crossing*: they systematically affect individuals across many, or virtually all, domains of life. For example, in the economic domain, Black Americans applying for home loans are 1.8 to 5 times more likely to have their applications denied than similarly qualified white Americans;⁸ in the legal domain, Black Americans are more likely to be stopped, searched, handcuffed, and arrested than white Americans, and more likely to receive harsher sentences for similar crimes;⁹ and in the medical domain, the care that Blacks receive scores lower on 40% of health care quality measures as compared to the care that whites receive.¹⁰

2.3. Interlinking

Third, this kind of injustice is systematic in that one must look at the system of injustice as a whole, and understand how patterns of injustice interact, to properly recognize their impact. (Eller 2014), drawing on Frye’s work on the oppression of women, describes this as follows:

“The harms in these spheres are related to one another in such a way as to create in the oppressed a feeling of being squeezed from all sides. Marilyn Frye uses the analogy of a bird trapped in a cage to convey the sense in which oppression is systematic (ibid., 4-5). By only looking at one wire of the cage at a time, we might wonder why the bird didn’t simply fly out. But when we view the entire cage all at once, we see that escape is impossible.”¹¹

Thus, it is not just that the injustices we are considered are patterned (and thus systematically affect members of the group), nor that these patterns systematically affect people across domains of life. It is also that these different patterns interact in such a way as to give rise to injustices that are only visible at the level of systemic analysis. In keeping with the birdcage analogy, I will describe these patterns as being *interlinking*.

⁷ See (Frye 1983), (Young 1990), (Haslanger 2004), (Fricker 2007), (Eller 2014).

⁸ (Glantz and Martinez 2018).

⁹ See (Eberhardt et al. 2006), (Starr and Rehavi 2013), (Hetey et al. 2016), (Commission 2018).

¹⁰ ('2017 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report' 2018)

¹¹ (Eller 2014: 3)

2.4. Persistent

Having identified three senses in which these injustices are systematic, I now turn to two senses in which they are persistent.

First, as emphasized in the literature, the *patterns* of injustice that help make up racial and gender injustice are persistent. As Haslanger observes, the pattern of women being economically disadvantaged relative to men is “longstanding.”¹² As Anderson notes, disparities in objective well-being between Black and white Americans are “large and enduring.”¹³ These are not short-lived injustices, and they are not likely to go away without significant work and attention. Rather, the patterns of injustice that characterize the unjust conditions of women, people of color, etc. are stable, persistent, and enduring.

2.5. Robust

But it is not just individual patterns of injustice that are persistent. Rather, one notable feature of the kind of injustice faced by women and people of color in the U.S. is the stability of the overall conditions: attempts to change these patterns often result in the re-emergence of the pattern in a different form. Haslanger describes this in terms of there being a dynamic homeostasis at the level of the system.¹⁴ In order to distinguish the persistence of the whole from the persistence of particular patterns of injustice already described, I will describe the overall effects as *robust*.

3. Explanatory Demands

I have highlighted three ways in which the unjust conditions of women, people of color, and other marginalized groups are systematic – they are patterned, domain-crossing, and interlinking – and two ways in which they are persistent – individual patterns of injustice that help make up these conditions are persistent, and the overall effects of these patterns are robust.

Notably, in recognizing the ways in which these kinds of injustice are persistent and systematic, we land upon features that feminist philosophers have identified as important characteristics of *oppression*.¹⁵ This is not too surprising, given that the groups that have been of interest in this debate – that is, “groups stigmatized on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity,

¹² (Haslanger 2018a: 251)

¹³ (Anderson 2010: 23)

¹⁴ (Haslanger 2017b: 17)

¹⁵ See (Cudd 2006; Eller 2014; Fricker 2007; Frye 1983; 2000: 11; Haslanger 2004; Young 1990).

sexuality, class, disability, religion, and so on”¹⁶ – are precisely the sorts of groups whose persistent, systematically unjust conditions have spurred theories of oppression. For this reason, and for the purposes of clarifying the explanatory target, I will reframe the debate in terms of what kinds of entities we need to appeal to in order to provide a causal explanation of *oppression*. That is, the goal is to explain the existence and persistence of these robust, domain-crossing, interlinking clusters of persistent patterns of injustice.

Shifting now to thinking about the explanatory demands associated with this task, it is important to distinguish between three phenomena that exist at three different levels, with phenomena at one level helping to constitute the next. At the highest level, oppression, such as the oppression of women in the United States, is made up of patterns of injustice (e.g. the pattern of women being left to perform “office housework” chores). Patterns of injustice, in turn, are constituted by individual experiences of injustice, such as Liliana’s being left to clean up after her coworkers after the department party on Tuesday. The higher level phenomenon not only comprises multiple different instances of the lower-level phenomena, but also encompasses connections or relations between those lower-level phenomena – some particular form of oppression is comprised of multiple patterns of injustice that are related in being interlinked, as well as collectively robust and domain-crossing; and a pattern of injustice is comprised of multiple unjust events that are systematically connected in taking the same form and affecting the same kinds of people.

Attending to these distinctions between levels is significant because the explanatory demands differ at each level. To elucidate what it takes to explain these different, but closely related, phenomena, I will next draw on an exchange between Sterken and Haslanger.

3.1. Explaining Events vs. Explaining Patterns

What it takes to explain oppression is different from what it takes to explain a pattern of injustice, which is in turn different from what it takes to explain an unjust event. An exchange between Sterken (2018) and Haslanger (2018) helps to illustrate these differences and the importance of keeping these distinctions clear.¹⁷

Both Sterken and Haslanger agree that what counts as an adequate explanation depends on what you are trying to explain and why.¹⁸ Haslanger uses a “Parental Leave” case to

¹⁶ (Madva 2016: 703)

¹⁷ See in particular (Haslanger 2018a: 251-56; Sterken 2018: 183-95)

¹⁸ (Haslanger 2016, 2018a)

illustrate the need for structural explanations.¹⁹ In the case, new-mother Lisa, rather than new-father Larry, ends up taking time off from work to care for new baby Lulu, and as a result Lisa becomes Lulu's primary caregiver. Haslanger argues that we should explain this by appealing to certain structural constraints: specifically, the fact that Lisa, like many other women, has access to paid maternity leave, and Larry, like many other men, does not have access to paid paternity leave. Given these constraints, and the fact that they lack access to affordable childcare, their best choice is to have Lisa be the one who takes time off to care for the baby. Sterken, however, objects to Haslanger's claim that we need to appeal to broad structural constraints in order to explain why Lisa, rather than Larry, quit her job to care for their new baby. Sterken argues that, instead, the best explanation will appeal to the local particularities of the situation, which includes Lisa and Larry's mental states and the mental states of those they interact with. After all, some employers do offer paid paternity leave, so we need to appeal to the fact that Larry's employer doesn't in order to explain what happens in this case.²⁰

Importantly, Haslanger and Sterken's disagreement is only an apparent one, and one that emerges from a confusion about the explanatory target. As Haslanger clarifies in her reply to Sterken, she was taking Lisa's situation as representative of a larger pattern that she was interested in explaining – specifically, “why there is a longstanding pattern of women being economically disadvantaged relative to men, and relatedly, why women more often than men quit their jobs when they become parents.”²¹ Sterken, in contrast, was focusing exclusively on Lisa's decision. To help sharpen the difference, suppose that Larry's boss had considered an equitable parental leave policy, but the final decision was made when he was in a bad mood, which led him to opt against paid paternity leave. If what we are explaining is how it came to be that Lisa has paid maternity leave but Larry does not have paid paternity leave – that is, the situation considered independently, as an *event* – then the boss's grumpiness on decision day should be part of the explanation. But Haslanger was not interested in explaining Lisa's case as an independent event, but rather as an instance of a broader pattern. To explain the pattern, we need to appeal to the broad structural constraints that explanatorily unify the different cases, rather than the local peculiarities that played a role in Lisa's decision. In short, the disagreement

¹⁹ (Haslanger 2015). See also (Cudd 2006; Okin 1989)

²⁰ (Sterken 2018: 183-95)

²¹ (Haslanger 2018a: 251)

is only an apparent one because Sterken was trying to explain the event, while Haslanger was trying to explain the pattern that the event helps constitute.²²

3.2. Explaining Patterns of Injustice vs. Explaining Oppression

It is not enough to stop at the distinction between events and patterns, however. Rather, recognizing the domain-crossing and interlinking nature of oppression, as well as its robustness, elucidates a further distinction between explaining a particular pattern of injustice and explaining oppression. Just as to explain the pattern one needs to consider the events as part of a whole, to explain oppression one also needs to consider the patterns as part of a whole. This requires providing an explanation that can account for the interlinking, domain-crossing, and robustness of the cluster of group-based patterns.

As Lisa's case demonstrates, this is not to say that it is never helpful to think about individual patterns, or even individual events, as part of explaining oppression. Focusing on concrete cases can help us to identify key elements with greater ease and clarity as we look for patterns and connections across different cases. What is important is that we remember that what we are interested in is the whole that they help represent. Thus, when we are focusing on concrete cases as part of helping us to inquire into the causal sources of oppression, we should not just ask, say, "Why was Rashida's mortgage application denied?" but rather, "Why was Rashida's mortgage application denied, *given that this forms part of a persistent pattern of injustice that is itself part of a robust cluster of interlinking, domain-crossing patterns of injustice?*" Explaining oppression is more than just explaining why particular events occurred, or even explaining why we see certain group-based patterns of injustice.

I will next argue that while pure and mixed individualistic explanations can explain why particular events occurred, they fail to explain oppression. I will start with pure individualist views.

4. Against Pure Individualism

²² Thomasson is also interested in explaining patterns of injustice insofar as they demonstrate a need to expand our picture of structural explanation to consider how norms help organize our thinking such as to constrain what we take to be live options. I am very friendly to this proposal, though as we will see later, I think we should expand the picture even further. (Thomasson 2016)

To argue against the pure individualist, I will consider four increasingly sophisticated versions of the pure individualist view and show that none of these is able to account for the features of oppression I have identified.

4.1. The Simple View

The first and simplest view is the Simple View, which attempts to explain oppression by reference to a single individual's attitudes. The Simple View is clearly a non-starter when it comes to the forms of oppression that we are familiar with, which clearly involve multiple actors.²³

4.2. The Mere Aggregate View

Given that the Simple View is a non-starter, the first plausible view is the *Mere Aggregate View*. The Mere Aggregate View (MAV) attempts to explain oppression by appealing to the aggregate of the attitudes of the individuals in a social milieu. MAV is inspired by methodological individualist views, which maintain that "social phenomena... are in principle explicable only in terms of individuals - their properties, goals, and beliefs"²⁴ and that "collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons."²⁵ However, while MAV is able to account for the group-based and domain-crossing nature of oppression (simply by noting that many people have group-based attitudes in a number of domains), it is unable to account for the way in which oppression is patterned, persistent, interlinking, or robust.

MAV fails to account for the patterned nature of oppression because it fails to provide a unifying explanation that can cover all of the different instances that help constitute the pattern. In the best-case scenario, MAV will be able to explain each of the events that constitute the relevant patterns. For instance, it can appeal to Anna's bias to explain why event A happened, to Brittany's bias to explain why B happened, to Collins' bias to explain why C happened, and so forth for each event. But providing an explanation for why each event in the pattern occurred is, again, not sufficient for explaining the pattern. What we need is an explanation of why A happened, *given that B, C, D, etc. also happened*. But appealing to Anna's bias to explain why A happened does not tell us why B, C, D, etc. also happened, and likewise for the explanations of

²³ Nonetheless, I will later discuss a mixed view that makes use of the Simple View.

²⁴ (Elster 1982: 453)

²⁵ (Weber 1978: 13)

B, C, D, etc. The aggregative explanation treats each of the explananda as independent, when what we are trying to understand is what it is that brings about and sustains the whole that they are part of. As such, the Mere Aggregate View fails to explain the pattern that A, B, C, etc. help constitute— as well as why this pattern is a persistent one, why it interlinks with other patterns, and why the effects of the overall cluster of patterns are robust. In other words, it fails to explain oppression.

4.3. The Widespread Attitudes View

One might attempt to supplement the Mere Aggregate View by citing the fact that racist, sexist, ableist (etc.) attitudes are very widespread. Indeed, this strategy seems to underlie the classic individualist explanations that Haslanger targets:

Standard Story of Social Stratification: Greg is an employer who is considering three candidates for a job: Kwame, Kathy, and Eric. Greg is (explicitly) sexist and racist and although Kwame and Kathy are better qualified than Eric, Greg hires Eric because he is a white male, rather than Kwame or Kathy. Repeat this scenario – including cases of applications for educational opportunities, access to health and financial resources, etc. – and this provides an explanation of social inequality along lines of race/sex. (Haslanger 2015: 3)

The directive to “repeat this scenario” suggests that Greg’s attitudes are widespread, and moreover, that this plays an important role in explaining the relevant patterns of injustice— it is *because* the attitudes are widespread that they explain the pattern.

Upon reflection, however, it should be clear that merely citing the fact that the attitudes are widespread does not do much to help the pure individualist, because the it still treats the explananda as independent. What is needed, again, is a unifying explanation that can explain why all of the events in a pattern occur, and which is somehow connected to the explanations that underlie other related patterns such as to account for their interlinking. Moreover, in order to account for the persistence of these patterns, the explanation must be sufficiently stable. Simply invoking the fact that these attitudes are widespread does not provide such an explanation, and so does not actually enhance the explanation offered by MAV.

4.4. The Hereditary View

The final individualist view, the hereditary view, avoids the errors of the Mere Aggregate and Widespread Attitudes views by adding an explanation of why the relevant attitudes are so widespread. Specifically, the view appeals to a hereditary principle: these widespread attitudes are widespread because individuals inherit the attitudes of previous

generations. Although the hereditary principle is clearly false about human psychology – most people no longer believe that the Sun revolves around the Earth, or that good health involves balancing the humors, and even the particular contents of racist and sexist attitudes have evolved over time – it is instructive to see how it improves on MAV.

In particular, unlike the other views, the hereditary view (HV) does have what it takes to account for the patterned and persistent nature of oppression, at least if one takes for granted that some initial group shared the relevant attitudes. On HV, the hereditary factor serves to explanatorily unite the different instances: Anna, Brittany, Collin, etc. all have the bias as a result of this shared inheritance. This helps elucidate the need for a unifying explanation.

Note, however, that HV still does not have the resources to explain why it is that these widespread, inherited attitudes give rise to robust, interlinking patterns of injustice. From the perspective of HV, it is simply a coincidence that the resulting patterns interlink – one could easily have inherited attitudes that do not generate these interlinking effects.²⁶

Given the failure of these views, the challenge for the individualist is to provide some story that would explain why the relevant attitudes are widespread and relatively well-entrenched, as well as why the patterns of injustice that result from these attitudes interlink as they do – importantly, without appealing to social structural processes to do so. At present, it does not seem as though the individualist has the resources to do this.

5. Against Mixed Views

I have argued against the pure individualist by providing four increasingly sophisticated individualist views, and showing that each fails to satisfy the explanatory demands. But of course, those involved in the recent philosophical debate already reject pure individualism. Thus, I will next show that, except in one special case, we also should not accept mixed views – that is, views that take both individualistic and structural factors to be explanatorily necessary.

Given that most people in the debate adopt a mixed view, it is surprising how little has been explicitly said about the ways in which individualistic and structural factors are meant to play a role in explaining oppression on these positions. Accordingly, I will lay out a range of views that one could have about how it is that individualistic and structural factors both play a role in explaining oppression, and argue against each. Some of these seem to have support in

²⁶ Similarly, if we suppose that the initial set of attitudes happens to be interlinking, then HV is able to account for domain-crossing, but only as a matter of coincidence.

the literature, while others are included to fill out the range of possible views. These views will, as far as I can tell, cover logical space: first, individualistic and structural factors could independently explain different parts of oppression; second, they could provide independent parts of the explanation for the same part(s) of oppression; or, third, they could jointly explain (some parts of) oppression.

5.1. The Additive View

The first way in which individualistic and structural factors could both play a role in explaining oppression is if they each independently explain different parts of oppression. Given that oppression consists in a cluster of patterns of injustice, the thought would be that individualistic factors explain some of these patterns (e.g. women faculty being disrespected because they are seen as undeserving of their positions),²⁷ while structural factors explain others (e.g. women like Lisa becoming the primary caregivers for their children). We can then “add together” the individualistic and structural explanations of the different constituent parts to get an overall explanation of oppression – call this the Additive View.

Unfortunately, the Additive View inherits the problems of the pure individualist views.²⁸ This is because the Additive View requires individualistic factors to be able to explain oppression-constituting patterns of injustice. This would require importing some pure individualist view to explain the patterns that are meant to be explained by individualistic factors. But as we have seen, there is no individualist view on offer that is able to do this.

5.2. The Causal Chain View

The second way in which individualistic and structural factors could both play a role in explaining oppression is if they independently provide different parts of the explanation for the same part(s) of oppression. Again, given that oppression consists in a cluster of patterns of injustice, these parts would be patterns. The thought would then be that individualistic factors independently explain some part(s) of the pattern(s), and structural factors independently explain other part(s) of the pattern(s). To be distinct from the Additive View, both individualistic and structural factors must somehow be part of the explanation for the same pattern of injustice, while still being explanatorily independent from each other.²⁹

²⁷ See (Madva 2016: 714-15)

²⁸ I will consider how we ought to explain patterns like the disrespect faced by women faculty in the next section

²⁹ In the next section we will consider cases where they are *not* explanatorily independent.

Saul's response to (Haslanger 2015) suggests a view of this kind. In particular, consider again the case in which new-mother Lisa, rather than new-father Larry, ends up being the one to leave work because Lisa, but not Larry, has access to paid parental leave. Again, Haslanger offers a structural explanation of the case, appealing to inequitable parental leave policies in order to explain the pattern of women tending to be the ones who cut back on work to become primary caregivers. Saul, however, argues that this explanation is incomplete – why is it, after all, that we have these inequitable parental leave policies in the first place?³⁰ Saul notes that these policies are in place because individuals decided to implement these policies. Thus, Saul draws attention to an explanatory causal chain: the pattern of mothers becoming primary caregivers results from a pattern of inequitable parental leave policies, which is itself the result of individuals deciding to implement such policies.

Identifying this explanatory causal chain suggests a way in which individualistic and structural factors could be part of the same explanation, while still being explanatorily independent: they could each play an independent role at different points in the chain. Taking the example above, while structural factors (in the form of the parental leave policies) explain the oppression-constituting pattern exemplified by Lisa's case, individualistic factors play an earlier role in the explanatory chain, insofar as they explain the presence of those policies. Call this the Causal Chain View.

My argument against the Causal Chain View, in the first instance, takes the same basic form as the argument against the Additive View. That is, I will argue that the Causal Chain View also requires importing a pure individualist view to explain patterns of unjust events at the "individualistic stages" of the chain. But at this point, I also want to sketch out a contrasting, positive view that demonstrates how we should move beyond the shortcomings of individualist views to explain these patterns. This positive view maintains that we need a higher-level, structural explanation at the stages in the causal chain where the Causal Chain View would attempt to insert an individualistic explanation.

My negative argument proceeds by carefully observing the kinds of phenomena involved at the various stages of the explanatory causal chain.

To begin, we have the target explanandum – the pattern, exemplified by Lisa, of new mothers rather than new fathers tending to be the ones who cut back on work to become the primary caregivers for their children. Again, this pattern can be explained by reference to

³⁰ Saul focuses on a different example with the same structure. See (Saul 2018: 221-23).

structural constraints like access to paid parental leave.³¹ But we can also go further back in the causal chain and ask why these structural constraints are in place. In the case of Lisa and Larry, it is Larry's employer who does not offer paternity leave. For other families, it will be their respective employer that does not offer paid paternity leave. Note, then, that what we have here is another pattern: namely, a pattern of employment institutions failing to offer paid paternity leave. The task for the next stage in the causal chain, then, is to explain this pattern— why is it that all of these different institutions have these inequitable parental leave policies? But this means that, once again, the task is to offer a purely individualistic explanation of a pattern of injustice. And so, once again, one would need to import some pure individualist view that could explain this pattern. But, again, it seems that no such pure individualist view is on offer.

At this point, I want to move beyond the purely negative argument to consider how we *should* explain such patterns, particularly in the context of explaining oppression. Why is it that all of these different institutions have inequitable parental leave policies? Or, to return to a previous example, why are women faculty frequently perceived as being undeserving of their positions? As illustrated by the Additive and Causal Chain views, many want to turn to individual attitudes and choices to explain these patterns— after all, individuals had to make the relevant policy decisions in the former case, and the interactions that women faculty have are with individuals.

But, again, we must distinguish between explaining an event and explaining a pattern. When explaining an event, the particular, local circumstances are relevant to the explanation. If what we are explaining is how it came to be that Lisa has paid maternity leave but Larry does not have paid paternity leave, then the fact that Larry's boss was grumpy and therefore not feeling generous on the day he made a decision about the policy should be part of the explanation. But that is not our aim here. What we are aiming to explain is why there is a robust cluster of persistent, domain-crossing patterns of gender injustice, exemplified by Lisa and Larry's case. In treating Lisa and Larry as exemplars, the aim is to explain why there are so many cases of this kind— why do so many employers have these kinds of policies? With respect to this aim, it is not helpful to cite Larry's boss's grumpiness on decision day— or the fact that another person's boss had sexist attitudes, and this other person's boss just decided to copy another business's policies, and so on; this just brings us back to the Mere Aggregate View.

³¹ In reality, there will be multiple factors that jointly explain this pattern. But for simplicity, and given that Saul seems to grant the structural explanation at the next stage, we can suppose that only one major factor is operative at each stage. I will consider a view that takes individualistic and structural factors to jointly explain oppression in the next section.

Unless the pattern is mere coincidence, we require some kind of unifying explanation that makes sense of why so many people made the kind of decision that Larry's boss made.

My positive suggestion is that we need to appeal to higher-level phenomena in order to explain these patterns. In particular, I want to suggest that we should appeal to *schemas*. Cultural schemas are public clusters of shared cognitive and affective tools. They can take a variety of forms, such as concepts, beliefs, narratives, scripts, attitudes, expectations, norms, bodily habits, and patterns of inference.³² On a lower level, cultural schemas are internalized by individuals as psychological schemas through processes of socialization. Although different individuals in a milieu will stand in different relations to the shared cultural schemas— for instance, some may resist or revise cultural schemas that others internalize— widespread internalization of these schemas gives rise to a coordinated responsiveness between individuals in the milieu.³³ On a higher level, cultural schemas constitute an ideology. That is, following Haslanger and Shelby, cultural schemas are conceptually interconnected in such a way as to form a largely coherent system of thought that constitutes the worldview and self-conception of the social milieu.³⁴ This ideology, constituted by the interconnected network of cultural schemas, functions to coordinate our actions and shapes our practices across domains of life.

Appealing to cultural schemas allows us to explain the patterns we have been considering. Gendered scripts and expectations that mothers will or should become the primary caregivers can explain why so many individuals, like Larry's boss, have opted to offer paid maternity leave, but not paid paternity leave. These gender schemas can help explain why, in his moment of grumpiness, Larry's boss took it to be an acceptable outcome to maintain the status quo, and why many others— whether in moments of grumpiness or not— arrived at similar conclusions. Similarly, gender schemas can explain why women faculty face disrespect and gendered expectations in the workplace. By appealing to these schemas and the social processes that make them widespread, we can make sense of why it is that so many women faculty have these interactions with many different individuals. Cultural schemas provide a higher-level, unifying explanation of the events, and so allow us to explain the patterns that these events help constitute.

³² I am here drawing on Haslanger's conception of ideology here. See (Haslanger 2012, 2016, 2017a, 2018b).

³³ Haslanger calls this coordinated responsiveness a social practice (Haslanger 2018b).

³⁴ (Haslanger 2017a: 159; Shelby 2003: 158). Shelby and Haslanger disagree on the extent to which ideology forms a coherent worldview. Further, Haslanger restricts "ideology" to its pejorative meaning. I use "ideology" more broadly.

Further, this picture also allows us to go up another level and appeal to ideology (in combination with institutional factors, or the kinds of structural factors typically referenced in this debate),³⁵ to explain the actual target of explanation here: the robust cluster of persistent, domain-crossing patterns of injustice that constitute some form of oppression. I do not have the space to go into full detail as to what this explanation should look like, but in brief, the interconnections between cultural schemas and their coherence into a worldview can help make sense of why it is that the kinds of patterns we have been considering end up interlinking and being present across multiple domains of individuals' lives. Connections between different schemas, as well as causal and constitutive connections between schemas and institutions, can provide connections between the patterns that those schemas and institutions individually help explain. Moreover, the stability of ideology and institutions also helps explain the robustness of oppression. An individualistic approach leaves out these important connections, and so lacks the resources to explain the patterns of injustice, let alone these other, higher-level features of oppression.

This picture, then, gives us three interconnected levels of explanation. In combination with institutional factors at each stage, the internalization of cultural schemas by individuals can explain events considered as instances of patterns; cultural schemas provide a unifying explanation of these events to explain the patterns; and ideology provides a unifying explanation of the patterns to explain oppression. Whereas the individualistic explanation lacked the resources to unify the different events and make sense of the pattern, the appeal to cultural schemas and ideology provides the explanatory connections necessary for making sense of the existence and persistence of the patterns of injustice.

5.3. The Joint Cause View

Before concluding, there is still one more way in which individualistic and structural factors could both play a role in explaining oppression: they could jointly explain oppression, or some of its parts. In this case, neither factor is explanatorily independent, but both play essential roles in the explanation. Call this the Joint Cause View.³⁶

³⁵ Institutions can be thought of as being made up of roles, rules, and relations. For example, a philosophy department may have roles such as *department chair* and *teaching assistant*; it may have rules governing who can occupy the role of department chair and how teaching assignments are distributed; and it may have relations between roles such that the department chair is responsible for managing the teaching assistants. See (Davidson and Kelly 2018; Haslanger 2016; Shelby 2016) for further helpful discussion.

³⁶ I do not know anyone who clearly defends this view in the literature, although in correspondence, [Redacted] points to this as the kind of mixed view we should go for, saying, "On the mixed view that

For the same reasons that we have seen before, the Joint Cause View will fail when aimed at explaining patterns of injustice. There is one case, however – which does not include racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression that have been the focus of the individualist-structuralist debate – in which the Joint Cause View can be successful.

First, the negative argument. Suppose there is a rule that children who are not in their seats when the first school bell rings get detention.³⁷ In practice, however, it is up to the particular teacher to write up the detention slip, and they may choose to give the tardy student a pass. Suppose further that there is a pattern in how discretion is applied – Black and Latinx students are rarely given a pass, while white students frequently are – and that this pattern is consistent with similar racial disparities in rule-enforcement at and beyond this particular school. Finally, suppose that Black and Latinx students, but not white students, tend to depend on unreliable public transportation to get to school, making it more likely that the students of color will be late to class. Now consider a particular occasion in which Eduardo is late to class and his teacher, Ms. Finley, penalizes him with detention. To explain why Eduardo got detention, one can point to the rule and the fact that Eduardo’s bus, in typical unreliable fashion, was late this morning. One might think, however, that this is insufficient to explain why Eduardo got detention. After all, Ms. Finley could have decided to give him a pass. So it is Ms. Finley’s decision not to exercise discretion, *combined with* the late bus and the tardiness policy, that explains the detention. Thus, it might seem that one needs to appeal to a combination of individualistic and structural factors to explain the case.

Once again, however, if we are trying to explain why Eduardo got detention as part of an explanation of *oppression*, then we are not simply trying to explain why Eduardo got detention; rather, what we must explain is why Eduardo got detention *given that his getting detention is part of a persistent pattern wherein students of color are disproportionately likely to get detention for being tardy, where this is itself part of a robust cluster of persistent, interlinking, and domain-crossing patterns of injustice*. That is, similar to Lisa’s case, we must treat Eduardo’s situation as representative of a pattern that is itself part of a larger cluster of injustice. Then, although there is an explanatory gap between the structural factors that make students like Eduardo more likely to be late for school and the pattern of students like Eduardo getting detention, appealing to Ms. Finley’s bias is inadequate for filling that gap. Saying that Ms.

makes the most sense to me, each link in the chain (and each node in the web) of our more elaborate explanations includes both individuals and structures.”

³⁷ This example is adapted from (Haslanger 2012).

Finley is biased does not tell us why so many other teachers also exercise discretion in similarly inequitable ways. To fill the explanatory gap, one needs to appeal to something – like the cultural schemas that explanatorily connect these attitudes and make them widespread – that can explain why so many teachers, including Ms. Finley in this instance, are more lenient with their white students than with their students of color. Merely appealing to the fact that many individual teachers have these tendencies does not shed light on why there is this pattern. Thus, the Joint Cause View will not succeed when we are trying to explain patterns of injustice, for the same reason that previous views failed.

However, when we consider whether we could provide a joint explanation of some form of oppression as a whole, a special case does emerge. To see this, imagine that there is a tyrant who hates Gs. Importantly, this must be a case in which the tyrant's hatred of Gs is *not* part of some larger pattern of bias against Gs and thus not a manifestation of the milieu's ideology – otherwise the case is explained by the ideology. Rather, we must suppose that the tyrant's hatred of Gs is explanatorily isolated from the attitudes of others in the community (and, in this sense, random).

We can suppose that the tyrant who randomly hates Gs makes various decrees that lead Gs to experience group-based, domain-crossing, and interlinking patterns of injustice. For instance, the tyrant decrees that Gs are to be denied education, medical care, access to goods and services, and so on. In such a case, I want to concede that the tyrant's hatred plays an essential role in explaining their oppression. Even then, however, the tyrant's attitudes toward G's only explain the G's oppression *in conjunction* with structural factors that enable the tyrant's will to be executed. Were the tyrant a nefarious god whose will can be magically executed, then the tyrant's hatred of Gs would be sufficient to explain the G's oppression. But the tyrant is not a god. In order for the tyrant's will to be executed, many people need to act in accordance with their will such as to deny G's medical care, education, and other basic necessities. In the absence of such an infrastructure, the tyrant's hatred of Gs is unable to explain what happens to them – the tyrant, as an individual, has very limited direct control over what happens to Gs. Thus, we must appeal to the conjunction of the tyrant's hatred and the social structure that unquestioningly enacts their decrees to explain why the Gs continue to suffer so grievously. Thus, we require a joint cause explanation in order to explain the Gs' oppression.

While there are some grounds to question whether the Gs are oppressed in this case – some may think that the G's circumstances, while odious and deeply objectionable, do not quite

satisfy the requirement of robustness³⁸ – it is reasonable to think that this should count as oppression. In this case, there is a caveat to the pure structuralist position: I must allow that in a range of special cases – ones where a tyrant’s random hatred of a group of people is able to have widespread, systematic effects due to the support of a social structure that unquestioningly enacts their will – a purely structural explanation will not do. Note, however, that even in this special case, social structures still do most of the work of bringing about the injustice; it is just that the tyrant’s attitudes determine what it is that the structures bring about.

Despite this, in the majority of cases, and particularly in the familiar cases of racism, sexism, etc. that the debate between individualists and structuralists have focused on, I have shown that individualistic factors cannot do the work needed to explain oppression on either pure or mixed views, because individualistic factors are unable to provide the requisite explanatory connections. Instead, we need a purely structural explanation of oppression.

6. Towards a Pure Explanatory Structuralism About Oppression

In this paper I have done three main things. First, I have reframed the individualist-structuralist debate in terms of what kind of explanation we need to explain *oppression*. Using the language of oppression makes clear that at the core of this debate are forms of injustice that, like racism and sexism, are persistent, group-based, patterned, interlinking, domain-crossing, and robust – and thereby elucidates the need to provide an explanation of a whole cluster of patterns with these features, as opposed to merely explaining why particular unjust events or patterns of injustice occur.

Second, I have argued that we should reject pure and mixed individualist views about oppression. Except in one special case, these views fail to meet the demands of explaining oppression. This is because they fail to provide the explanatory connections needed to explain both the patterns of injustice and the higher-level features of the cluster of patterns.

Third, I have briefly sketched out a contrasting, positive view to gesture at how we might overcome the shortcomings of individualistic explanations. In particular, I have suggested that we should appeal to higher-level cultural schemas, rather than individual attitudes, to explain patterns of injustice. On a still higher level, I have suggested that we need to appeal to ideology, in combination with institutions, in order to explain oppression. I take

³⁸ The thought is that because the nature of their circumstances is wholly dependent on the tyrant’s hatred, the Gs will no longer suffer once the tyrant dies, or if she is replaced, or even if she spontaneously ceases to hate them. This, one might think, makes the injustice that Gs face insufficiently robust.

this kind of account to provide the resources for a purely structural explanation of oppression, on a pluralistic picture of social structure that sees both ideology and institutions as distinct, but causally and constitutively interconnected,³⁹ kinds of social structures.⁴⁰

The conclusion for the individualism-structuralism debate is that we should generally reject pure and mixed forms of explanatory individualism about oppression, particularly about the familiar cases of racism, sexism, etc. that have been the focus of the debate. But I also want to draw out and reflect on some of the more positive takeaways that come from the alternative view I have sketched out.

In essence, my main argument against the mixed view is that individualistic explanations operate at the wrong level, failing to properly situate individuals within ideological structures in the way that individuals have been situated within institutional structures in the context of this debate. To draw on a helpful metaphor, both institutions and ideology help set the “grooves in the road” that individuals are then likely to follow. The higher-level perspective afforded by appeal to institutions and ideology allows us to recognize how individual behavior is coordinated across domains such as to persistently give rise to different patterns of injustice and forms of oppression. This coordination happens through material constraints (e.g. whether one has access to paid paternity leave or not), but also through the constraints of ideology, which affect, e.g., what one takes to be a live possibility, how those possibilities are framed, and the sanctions one will face for different choices. Two related takeaways then, are that (1) we need a higher-level perspective to explain oppression than the appeal to individual beliefs and decisions offers – to return to the metaphor, we need to appeal to the grooves in the road that direct traffic in order to make sense of the traffic

³⁹ On one hand, cultural schemas help shape what institutions arise and what policies these institutions have. On the other hand, institutional outcomes also reinforce the ideology. For example, if institutional policies lead to the over-policing of Black communities, this may reinforce cultural schemas associating Black people with criminality. Despite these important interconnections, it is useful to separate ideology and institutions because, for instance, institutional policies may continue to reflect the influence of past schemas that are no longer part of the dominant ideology. See (Haslanger 2011, 2016) for further discussion of the constitutive relation between schemas and institutions.

⁴⁰ One might wonder why we should think of ideology as a kind of social structure. For one, ideology seems to fill the kind of theoretical role that social structure is meant to inhabit: ideology is clearly a social phenomenon, and one that plays an essential role in creating the background against which individuals and groups act; ideology helps us to identify and critique systemic injustice; it is the result of social interactions between individuals and has the function of creating or preserving unjust relations between individuals. Cf. (Haslanger 2016: 2). Moreover, thinking about ideology in structural terms fits in with a broader tradition of understanding social structures in terms of the collective rules and resources that organize or “structure” our social practices and collective arrangements. See (Porpora 1989). Lastly, while not exactly the same, ideology also fits with Davidson and Kelly’s characterization of “soft structures.” See (Davidson and Kelly 2018: 10-11).

patterns; and (2) we need to situate individuals within structures, rather than separating individuals from structures.⁴¹

In this way, the structural picture helps to clarify the target we are pursuing when it comes to ameliorating oppression – we must aim to transform the underlying institutions and ideologies that give rise to the persistent, domain-crossing, interlinking patterns of injustice. It also helps to illuminate important challenges that must be faced in this process. Individuals striving to alter their thinking or behavior, for instance, should take into account the institutional constraints and the ideological mechanisms that will be working against them. Similarly, in trying to change problematic cultural schemas, we should be cognizant of the ways in which these schemas are bolstered by other elements of the ideology, and consider how we might manage the sorts of ideological defense mechanisms discussed in the active ignorance literature.⁴² More positively, situating individuals within structures and thinking about how the structural mechanisms operate can help us to identify degrees of freedom that individuals can make use of, as well as identify the points that require intervention. For instance, by adopting a structural analysis we can recognize that we should target the schemas that underlie sanctions for non-compliance with unjust practices rather than merely trying to change individuals' first-order beliefs about those practices – again, thinking about the structures that do the explanatory work helps us to identify strategic points for intervention. By highlighting the connections between ideology and institutions, and situating individuals within social structures, the structural picture not only provides the resources needed to explain oppression that were missing from the individualistic explanations, but can also provide a richer framework for thinking about how to pursue social change.

To be sure, more work needs to be done to fill out this picture. For now, I conclude that we should abandon both pure and mixed individualism, and instead work on further developing a pure explanatory structuralism about oppression.

⁴¹ One way to think about the implication of my argument is that the debate should not be whether we should prioritize individuals vs. structures in our explanation and intervention, but that we should instead think about this as a continuation of old debates about materialism and idealism. Framed this way, I could be seen as resisting a framing that pits materialism and idealism against each other, since I think they are deeply intertwined.

⁴² Charles Mills, for instance, describes ways in which white ignorance resists attempted correction. For this and further discussion, see (Alcoff 2007; Martín 2020; Medina 2013; Mills 2007; Wieland 2017; Woomer 2019).

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