

Intersecting What? Intersecting How?

An Intersectional Social Ontology at the Structural and Experiential Levels

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Abstract: While intersectionality has gained prominence, the idea that race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and other social divisions intersect has remained relatively undertheorized. For instance, exactly what kind of phenomena should be understood intersectionally – identities, groups, oppressions, or structures? And what does it mean to say that these phenomena intersect? My paper helps address this gap by developing a social ontology that provides a concrete picture of intersectionality at the levels of individual experience and social structure. On my account, intersectionality manifests at the level of social structure through structural mechanisms that represent a “fusion” of, e.g., race and class in the form of what I call *complex sub-Sorts*, as well as *fused institutional roles*. Then, because social structures causally explain experiences of injustice, distinctive experiences emerge at the intersections of traditional categories of analysis as a product of (1) the causal effects of “fused” structural mechanisms and (2) interactions between structural mechanisms. This account highlights different ways that social categories appear in discussions of intersectionality, and offers concrete ways of understanding the idea that social categories intersect.

1. Introduction

Intersectionality has become a centerpiece of feminist theorizing while also, more recently, making its way into mainstream political discourse. Proponents of intersectionality emphasize that it is critical, both theoretically and politically, to attend to the ways in which race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and other social divisions intersect. Central to this idea is that it is not sufficient to recognize the multiplicity of these different socio-political axes, but that we must, further, take an integrative approach that is sensitive to their interplay.

This paper concerns how, concretely, we should understand the idea that race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and other social divisions intersect. Many phenomena fall under the broad umbrella of these divisions – race, for instance, can be understood as referring (at least) to racial identities, racial groups, racial oppression, or racist structures, and likewise for class, gender, ability, and so on. Which of these various phenomena should be understood intersectionally – is it identities, oppressions, or structures that intersect? Moreover, what does it mean to say that these phenomena intersect? What does an intersectional picture of the social world look like?

My aim is to help answer these questions by developing a social ontology that provides a more concrete picture of intersectionality at the levels of individual experience and social structure. More specifically, one of the core notions of intersectionality has been the notion of mutual constitution. I will provide a picture that helps to elucidate how mutual constitution manifests, and what it amounts to, at these levels. Part of the upshot of this account is that it highlights different ways that categories appear in discussions of intersectionality, and offers concrete ways of understanding the idea that social categories interact or intersect.

In providing this account, I am not aiming to give a comprehensive picture of intersectionality. For instance, in taking up intersectionality as a theoretical framework, I do not mean to imply that we cannot or should not also understand intersectionality as a methodology or form of critical praxis.¹ Likewise, while I focus here on ontology, I think there are also, e.g., important epistemic dimensions that I do not explore. Even within the realm of metaphysics, I am open to there being other phenomena that should be understood intersectionally, other ways in which the phenomena that I am discussing should be understood intersectionally, and other ways that core intersectional notions can be seen to concretely manifest in the social world.²

My goal is thus not to capture everything, but rather to provide greater clarity on some important dimensions of intersectionality. In particular, recent work that has taken a metaphysical approach to intersectionality has been at a higher level of abstraction that leaves open questions such as, for instance, how it is that intersectional social categories shape individuals' experiences. I aim to provide a more concrete account that fills in some of these details and, in so doing, helps to elucidate abstract intersectional notions.

To give a brief overview, on my account, intersectionality manifests at the level of social structure through structural mechanisms that represent a "fusion" of, e.g., race and class in the form of what I call *complex sub-Sorts*, as well as *fused institutional roles*. Then, because of the role that social structures generally play in explaining experiences of injustice, intersectionality at the structural levels gives rise to intersectionality at the level of individual experience. More specifically, distinctive experiences emerge at the intersections of traditional categories of

¹ For defense of a methodological approach, see (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020). For a general overview of different approaches to intersectionality, see (Botts 2017; Carastathis 2014; Collins 2015; Gasdaglis and Madva 2020; Lawford-Smith and Phelan 2021).

² Indeed, while I do not have the space to develop this in the paper, I think the account can be expanded to the levels of oppression and higher-level systems of power. I develop an intersectional picture of oppression in other work. See (Martín 2024).

analysis as a product of (1) the causal effects of “fused” structural mechanisms and (2) interactions between structural mechanisms. Thus, the causal explanatory connections between social structures and experiences of injustice explanatorily connect intersectionality at the structural level and experiential levels, giving us a unified picture of intersectionality across these levels.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will review some of the central ideas of intersectionality as a theoretical framework. In Section 3, I will provide a general overview of the account of social structure that I will be working with in this paper. In Section 4, I will develop the account of intersectionality at the structural level, and in Section 5, I will show how this gives rise to intersectionality at the experiential level. In Section 6, I compare my view to other metaphysical approaches in the literature.

2. Core Notions of Intersectionality

The term “intersectionality” traces back to Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined it as part of a critique of discrimination law, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics.³ But intersectionality as a critical tradition precedes the coining of the term, finding roots in activist social movements like that of the Combahee River Collective, as well as in the work of Black feminists like Sojourner Truth and Julia Cooper.⁴ Because intersectionality has played, and continues to play, a core critical function, it can be helpful to start with contrasting approaches that intersectionality critiques.

One contrasting approach treats race, class, gender, and similar social divisions as segregated silos. On the segregated approach, matters of race are considered to be wholly independent of matters of class, gender, ability, and so on – not just conceptually or metaphysically, but also as a matter of practice. This approach takes each social division to be able to be understood, analyzed, and intervened on independently of the rest. Frustration with siloed political movements motivated the formation of the Combahee River Collective. The feminist movement, led primarily by white women, and the Black liberation movement, led primarily by Black men, focused exclusively on matters of gender and race (respectively), ignoring, or even further entrenching, the racism and sexism faced by Black women.⁵ Similarly, Kristie Dotson has drawn attention to the pervasiveness of a segregated approach within

³ (Crenshaw 1989, 1990)

⁴ For some helpful discussion of the history of intersectionality, see (Collins and Bilge 2020)

⁵ (Collective 2017: 17).

contemporary philosophy of race, as reflected in speakers' tendencies to brush off questions involving both race and gender by saying, "I do race, not gender."⁶

An additive approach aims to rectify this segregated, siloed approach by considering multiple "silos" at once. This approach recognizes that individuals have multiple identities, belong to multiple social groups, and experience multiple forms of oppression and/or privilege, and emphasizes the importance of taking all of these into account. This approach is like the segregated approach in that it still takes race, gender, class, ability, etc. to be able to be analyzed and studied independently; it differs from the segregated approach in that it emphasizes the importance of combining, or "adding together," these independent analyses.⁷ For instance, the additive approach emphasizes that Black women are disadvantaged not just by race, but also by gender, and maintains that we should therefore combine analyses of race and gender in order to understand Black women's experiences. An additive approach is reflected in views of oppression that separate oppression into independent axes. Ann Cudd, for instance, describes a "vector force" picture of oppression, on which there are vector forces applied along different axes that affect, e.g., all men, all women, all Black people, and so on.⁸ An individual's experience, on this picture, is just the result of adding together the effects of these independent forces.

Intersectionality critiques not just the segregated approach, but also the additive approach.⁹ In particular, intersectionality resists the siloed characterization of race, class, gender, and other social divisions that the additive approach retains from the segregated approach, maintaining instead that these categories are *mutually constituting*.¹⁰ As Patricia Hill Collins puts it, "By now, a general consensus exists about intersectionality's general contours. The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena."¹¹

⁶ (Dotson 2016)

⁷ Collins helpfully characterizes these approaches as "fundamentally challeng[ing] the logic of segregation" (Collins 2019: 227).

⁸ (Cudd 2006: 47)

⁹ I think this is a helpful framing for getting at some of the claims that I take to be distinctive to intersectionality, although some include additive approaches as part of intersectionality. See, e.g., (Collins 2019).

¹⁰ Other terms are also sometimes used, such as *co-formation*, *mutual construction*, *co-constitution*, and *reciprocal constitution*.

¹¹ (Collins 2015: 2)

Beyond the general consensus, many questions remain. For instance, there is disagreement as to whether intersectionality maintains that all of the relevant relations are mutually constituting rather than additive, or whether it merely maintains that some of the relevant relations are non-additive, and therefore rejects an additive *approach*.¹² Likewise, there is disagreement about the level of analysis that intersectionality operates on.¹³ That is, when we say that race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on are mutually constituting, is it identities, social groups, individual experiences, oppressions, structures, or systems that are mutually constituting?

I follow Collins in thinking that intersectionality should be understood as spanning across levels of analysis, as captured in the following “guiding premises” that she identifies as being central to intersectionality as a critical theoretical framework:

1. Race, class, gender, and similar systems of power are interdependent and mutually construct one another.
2. Intersecting power relations produce complex, interdependent social inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and age.
3. The social locations of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations shapes their experiences within and perspectives on the social world.
4. Solving problems within a given local, regional, national, or global context requires intersectional analyses. (Collins 2019: 44)

In this paper I operate primarily within the space between (2) and (3) – I focus on social structures (which I take to help constitute intersecting power relations), and how those structures shape individual experiences of injustice, including both experiences of advantage and disadvantage. Annina Loets has identified three theses specifically relating to advantage and disadvantage that represent some consensus about intersectionality at the level of experience –

Non-additivity: “[I]ntersectional disadvantage cannot be reduced to a conjunction of single-identity disadvantages.”¹⁴

Specificity: “[P]eople sometimes face adversities which are specific to their intersectional identities.”¹⁵

Compatibility: “[I]ntersectionality does not only inflect oppression, but also privilege.”¹⁶

¹² (Jorba and López de Sa 2024: 1458-59)

¹³ See, for instance, (Bilge 2010; Cho et al. 2013; Crenshaw 1989, 1990; Ehrenreich 2002; Garry 2011; Haslanger 2020; Shields 2008; Spelman 1988).

¹⁴ (Loets 2024: 859)

¹⁵ (Loets 2024: 860)

¹⁶ (Loets 2024: 862)

Part of my goal here is to offer a social ontology that not only accommodates but also elucidates why these theses obtain by explanatorily connecting intersectionality at the experiential level to intersectionality at the structural level.

2.1. Mutual Constitution

While the negative aspect of intersectionality is a rejection of additivity, one of the core positive aspects lies in the notion of mutual constitution. Here, too, many questions remain.

Different theorists have spelled the notion of mutual constitution out in different ways, and in particular, there has been disagreement as to whether the notion of mutual constitution entails the dissolution or transformation of traditional categories of, e.g., race, class, and gender.¹⁷ Marta Jorba and Maria Rodó-Zárate have distinguished between two different kinds of relations underlying the notion of mutual constitution in the literature: constitution as *affecting*, which takes mutual constitution to centrally involve interactions between social divisions that preserve those divisions, and constitution as *new formation*, which takes mutual constitution to bring something new and distinctive into being.¹⁸ With respect to mutual constitution as new formation, they distinguish between approaches that see the interaction between categories as creating *new categories* – so that, for example, the interaction of “Black” and “woman” creates a new category, “Black woman” – and approaches that see the interaction as involving a *fusion* of categories.

While it is not entirely clear in their discussion, I take it that a key difference between the “new category” and fusion approaches has to do with whether the old categories continue to exist alongside the new. To help bring out this difference, I will draw on Collins’ distinction between *articulation* and *co-formation* (though I will retain the language of “fusion” rather than “co-formation”).

To develop the notion of articulation, Collins draws on Stuart Hall’s metaphor of the trailer truck.¹⁹ The idea begins with the observation that a trailer truck is made up by joining two parts, the cabin and the trailer. As Collins puts it, “the two parts become connected or articulated to one another through a specific linkage. The distinctive parts of the truck remain intact.... neither part is changed in the process of articulation, but rather the articulation creates

¹⁷ For an overview of the different stances intersectionality theorists have taken towards categories, see (McCall 2005).

¹⁸ (Jorba and Rodó-Zárate 2019)

¹⁹ (Grossberg 1986)

a new, complete truck.”²⁰ That is, in cases of articulation, the interaction between parts creates something new and distinctive that is different from any of the parts. The parts work together to constitute the whole, but— importantly — the parts remain distinguishable and identifiable even while bringing about a new formation.

In contrast, I suggest that we understand fusion using the metaphor of mixed paint. In mixing red and yellow paint, the resulting orange paint does not have a “red part” or a “yellow part” in the way that the truck has a cabin part and a trailer part; it is, rather, a fusion of the two paints. With fusion, the whole cannot be differentiated into distinct, interacting parts. As Collins notes, co-formation, or fusion, “seemingly dissolves the categories themselves” in bringing about the new formation.²¹

As illustrated here, the notion of mutual constitution is often discussed abstractly in terms of parts and wholes, and interaction or fusion. However, it is typically unclear what the relevant “parts” and “wholes” are, or what the interaction or fusion of parts amount to.

My goal in this paper is to provide answers to these questions, focusing on the structural and experiential levels. More specifically, I aim to provide a social ontology that provides a more concrete picture of how it is that the notion of mutual constitution— in the sense of articulation, as well as fusion— applies to individual experiences and social structures.²² Moreover, my aim is to provide a *unified* picture of how intersectionality applies to these two levels of analysis. That is, I will provide a picture on which intersectionality at the level of experience is explanatorily connected to intersectionality at the structural level. This will also help us to understand why it is that the three core theses that Loets identifies obtain.

3. Sketch of Background Ontology

My goal is to provide a social ontology that offers a concrete, explanatorily unified picture of intersectionality at the levels of individual experience and social structure. I want to begin by providing a general overview of how I will be understanding social structures, as well as the explanatory connection between social structures and individual experience.

At a high level of description, the picture is that social structures— of which there are different kinds, and which are causally and constitutively interconnected— causally explain

²⁰ (Collins 2019: 232-33)

²¹ (Collins 2019: 241)

²² Note that in focusing on the experiential level, I am here interested in particular experiences of individuals, rather than an individual’s experience as a whole.

individual experiences of advantage and disadvantage that make up privilege- and oppression-constituting patterns of injustice.

I will say more about how social structures explain individual experiences and patterns of injustice later. For now, I want to say more about how I am thinking about social structures. I distinguish between two main kinds of social structure – ideologies, or cultural *technē*, and institutions. I draw an aspects of both Haslanger’s and Shelby’s views of ideology and institutions in developing this account.

The first kind of structure that I identify is ideology, or what Haslanger refers to as a cultural *technē*.²³ An ideology, or cultural *technē*, is made up of schemas – that is, shared cognitive and affective tools that are internalized by individuals through processes of socialization and that, together, coordinate our social practices.²⁴

On a big-picture level, I take the schemas that make up an ideology to be conceptually interconnected, such that an ideology roughly coheres into a worldview. This worldview includes a vision of what the social order is and should be like. Nevertheless, an ideology need not be perfectly coherent and can contain contradictory ideas.²⁵

On a lower level, the particular schemas that constitute an ideology can take a variety of forms, including concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions. Although different individuals in a milieu will stand in different relations to shared ideological schemas – for instance, some may resist or revise schemas that others internalize – widespread internalization of these schemas guides and coordinates behavior in important ways.²⁶ For instance, culturally-specific conceptions of breakfast – including what does and does not count as breakfast, when one should eat breakfast, how breakfast relates to other meals, who prepares breakfast, etc. – form part of a social milieu’s cultural *technē*. The schemas that make up a conception of breakfast generally lead us to think about and interact with objects in ways that are guided by this conception. For instance, they lead many of us to cook eggs in the morning; to crave pancakes for brunch; to identify cinnamon rolls, but not salad, as breakfast food; or to urge busy loved ones to eat breakfast because it’s the most important meal of the day. Ideologies not only guide

²³ Haslanger uses ideology in the pejorative sense, and takes the term to refer to “a cultural *technē* gone wrong, a cultural *technē* that organizes us in ways that are unjust, or in ways that skew our understanding of what is valuable” (Haslanger 2017: 159)

²⁴ See (Haslanger 2012, 2017, 2018)

²⁵ I thus follow Shelby is taking ideologies to be roughly coherent. This is a point where Shelby and Haslanger disagree. See (Haslanger 2017; Shelby 2003)

²⁶ This is a key part of the idea that schemas are involved in “looping effects.” See (Hacking 1999; Haslanger 2012, 2018; Khalidi 2010).

and shape behavior, but also provide resources for justifying or rationalizing certain kinds of (unjust) action or treatment.

In addition to ideology, I also include institutions in my picture of social structures.

Shelby characterizes an institution as:

[A] formal system of roles and rules that enable and regulate sustained cooperative action for some specified purpose. Within such a system, there are explicit criteria for assigning persons to specific roles, and each role requires its occupant to follow certain rules to remain in good standing. (Shelby 2016: 25)

However, I want to make room for both formal and informal institutions, or what Davidson and Kelly call hard and soft structures, which differ in terms of how explicitly the relevant rules and roles are formulated.²⁷

Institutions are often causally interconnected with each other as a matter of practical necessity. For example, the many different departments and centers of a university depend on each other to keep the university running, and universities also rely on funding from a number of agencies and contract with various companies to procure, e.g., important technologies for research and teaching.

Institutions and ideologies are also causally and constitutively interconnected with each other. For example, schemas that associate women with motherhood, but do not associate men with fatherhood, may shape a company's policy decision to offer paid maternity leave, but not paid paternity leave. This is an extension of the idea that ideology serves to guide and coordinate behavior. On the other hand, if the availability of paid maternity leave and not paid paternity leave means that it often makes most sense for mothers and not fathers to become primary caregivers for their children, this may reinforce the schema that casts women as the family caregivers.²⁸ This is part of so-called looping effects: ideology guides behavior and so shapes what the world comes to be like in important ways, but the world being thus shaped then loops back to shape – and often reinforce – how we think about the world.

To summarize, causally and constitutively interconnected institutions and ideological schemas make up the structural level on my view.²⁹ These social structures causally explain

²⁷ The distinction, as Davidson and Kelly note, is complicated insofar as formal and informal institutions can be intertwined and overlapping. (Davidson and Kelly 2018)

²⁸ (Cudd 2006; Haslanger 2016; Okin 1989)

²⁹ I also conceive of a social system as a dynamic system that is comprised of interconnected social structures and that, among other functions, manage power and resources within a social milieu. For the purposes of this paper I will not focus on this higher systems level, however, and will primarily focus on the levels of social structure and individual experience.

experiences of injustice, thereby connecting the structural level to the level of experience, and ultimately also connecting intersectionality at the level of experience to intersectionality at the level of structure.

I will first develop an account of intersectionality of the level of structure before developing the causal-explanatory connections between social structures and experience in more detail, and using this to make sense of intersectionality at the level of experience.

4. The Structural Level

In this section, I focus on developing a social ontology of intersectional social structures. More specifically, I develop an account that concretely applies the notions of mutual constitution as fusion and mutual constitution as articulation to social structures.

4.1. *Sorts*

The first way in which the notion of mutual constitution as fusion is embodied at the structural level on my account is in the form of *complex sub-Sorts*. It will take some work to explain what I mean by a complex sub-Sort and to show how it embodies the notion of mutual constitution as fusion. I will start with the more general notion of a *Sort*.

I use the term ‘Sort’ to play off the double meaning of (1) a sort or type of thing, and (2) sorting as an activity that we undertake. I will be distinguishing between *thin* Sorts (which primarily capture the second meaning of “sort” as an activity) and *thick*, or ideological, Sorts (which encompass both of these meanings).

A thick Sort is a subset of an ideology or cultural *technē* that comprises a social conception of a group or kind. As such, it is a conception that one has of a sort of thing, but one that is shared by many individuals in a social milieu and that consists of a number of conceptually interconnected beliefs, concepts, images, attitudes, dispositions, and other schemas that together comprise a robust conception of the sort of thing in question and its relation to other sorts of things.

For example, consider the Sort *<vampire>*.³⁰ Due to a body of lore about vampires, there is a general conception of what vampires are, what they are like, how one should interact with them, etc.: they are characteristically undead creatures who drink blood, are generally malevolent, can be warded off using holy water, and can (and should) be destroyed by driving a stake through their heart. There are conceptual relations between the different schemas that help constitute *<vampire>*: the idea that they have a demonic or unholy nature, for instance, is

³⁰ I’ll use angle brackets to denote a Sort.

connected to the idea that they can be kept at bay with holy water. While it is now a common part of the conception of a vampire that they are mythological creatures, this has not always been the case – vampires have historically been blamed for incidences of plague, for instance.³¹ This illustrates that Sorts need not be veridical – they may represent the world as being in a way that it is not.

Because Sorts are cultural or ideological, they are not fixed, but can change as a culture evolves. More generally, what Sorts there are and what those Sorts are like is dependent on the practices of a social milieu – it is an empirical matter. Further, in reflection of the way that an ideology comprises a broad worldview, ideological Sorts are often conceptually interrelated or defined in relation to other Sorts such as to help form that worldview. For example, the Sort <breakfast> is conceptually related to the Sorts <lunch> and <dinner>. Together, these Sorts contribute to a vision of how it is that we nourish ourselves that connects up to, for instance, a vision of what kind of labor is necessary and how that labor is divided, which is filled out by other ideological Sorts and schemas.

As previously noted, part of what ideology does is guide, rationalize, and coordinate action – as they are part of the ideology, so, too, with thick Sorts. It is in guiding action that thick Sorts lean into the second meaning of sorting as an activity, as thick Sorts guide individuals in classifying objects in the world into categories that correspond to the Sort. This can be seen, for example, when someone uses the Sort <breakfast> to classify eggs as breakfast food. The claim that thick Sorts guide classification should be understood as a descriptive or explanatory claim, rather than entailing that the resulting classifications are truth-tracking (think, for instance, of the Sort <witch>). A thick Sort provides the notion of a particular category and guides how individuals classify objects in accordance with that notion.

While ideological, or thick, Sorts lean into both meanings of “sort” outlined above, I want to allow that there can be cases where institutions “sort” or categorize individuals without relying on any pre-existing conception of those categories. I will call the institutional mechanisms that have these categorizing effects *thin Sorts* to reflect the fact that they lack the ideological contents discussed above – although what start off as thin Sorts will often become thick as they become layered with ideological meanings and associations. For instance, consider Haslanger’s case in which a company institutes a drug testing requirement for a subset of its waged and salaried workers, and thereby introduces a new, meaningful division between

³¹ (Beresford 2008)

workers that did not previously exist.³² Such a policy constitutes a thin Sort that has the effect of creating categories corresponding to, on one hand, the workers who must undergo drug testing and, on the other, those who do not. These thin Sorts become thick Sorts if, for instance, those who must undergo drug testing come to be conceived of as being a distinct sort of worker who is, e.g., less trustworthy.

I want to emphasize that, on this picture, Sorts are structural mechanisms. In particular, they are not social groups or identities, although they may be intimately connected to these phenomena. For instance, the Sort <woman> is not a social group, but a collection of schemas. The Sort provides a notion of the category *woman*, conceptualizes this category as corresponding to a social group, and guides how individuals are treated in relation to that category. The Sort may also have the effect of bringing into existence the group *woman* – for instance, because it leads individuals to identify as women, if the group *woman* consists of those individuals who identify as women. Similarly, thin Sorts are institutional mechanisms that do not correspond to any pre-existing identities or pre-conceived social groups – though they, too, may result in the development of certain identities and social groups.

4.2. Features of and Relations Between Sorts

With the general notion of a Sort in place, I now want to highlight some additional features that Sorts may have that are relevant for developing the account of intersectionality at the structural level. I have already alluded to one important relational feature of Sorts – specifically, the fact that Sorts are conceptually interrelated and are often defined in relation to each other as part of comprising an ideological worldview. I now want to highlight some further features.

First, Sorts can be relatively *simple* or *complex*, where complex Sorts are understood in terms of simple (or simpler) Sorts, and simple Sorts are (more) basic relative to the ideology. Importantly, the simple-complex relation here is not a claim about some concepts being more basic than others as an analytical matter. Rather, returning to the point the Sorts are social structural objects, the simple-complex distinction is dependent on the development of Sorts within the practices of the social milieu. For instance, it could be that the Sort <*malaria*> is a complex Sort that was developed in relation to the Sort <*disease*>, because malaria came to be conceptualized as a particular kind of disease. However, one could also imagine <*disease*> being

³² (Haslanger 2004: 110).

developed as a generalization of Sorts like $\langle malaria \rangle$, $\langle cholera \rangle$, and $\langle leprosy \rangle$, in which case $\langle disease \rangle$ would be complex relative to $\langle malaria \rangle$.

Second, a Sort can be a *sub-Sort* of another Sort. Sort Σ_1 is a sub-Sort of Sort Σ_2 just in case the ideology conceives of the kind conceptualized by Σ_1 as a proper subset of the kind conceptualized by Σ_2 that captures a distinctive kind of thing with distinctive properties, and not just properties directly inherited from the Sorts of which it is a sub-Sort.³³ For example, $\langle malaria \rangle$ is a sub-Sort of $\langle disease \rangle$, as malaria is conceived of as a distinctive kind of disease with distinctive, characteristic features, modes of treatment, etc. Note that this is the case regardless of whether $\langle malaria \rangle$ is complex relative to $\langle disease \rangle$. Sub-Sorts do not just have their own distinctive features, but may also fail to inherit schemas that make up the higher-level Sort.³⁴

Third, Sorts can also be *implicit* in varying ways and to varying degrees. A Sort is implicit when there is a lack of explicit awareness that there is such a Sort, or when the Sort is “thicker” or has more contents than people generally realize.³⁵

To motivate and further develop these features of Sorts, I want to turn to some discussions from the intersectionality literature. Black feminists have highlighted important ways in which our conceptions of women are not uniform or universally applied to all women, but rather are specific to particular kinds of women. Collins, for instance, notes how common conceptions of feminine characteristics (“passive, follower, emotional, weak, physical”) are not universally applied to all women, but are rather specifically applied to white, middle class women.³⁶ Similarly, Crenshaw emphasizes that Black women are hyper-sexualized in such a way that they are “essentially prepackaged as bad women within cultural narratives about good women who can be raped and bad women who cannot.”³⁷

³³ Or, in the case of thin Sorts, just in case the category produced by Σ_1 is a proper subset of the category produced by Σ_2 .

³⁴ For instance, although $\langle disabled\ woman \rangle$ would seem to be a sub-Sort of $\langle woman \rangle$, schemas sexualizing women often do not straightforwardly apply to disabled women.

³⁵ I also suspect that it may be possible for a Sort to be implicit in a more thoroughgoing way. For instance, perhaps there could be a case where there are no schemas whose contents are about a particular collection of individuals, and yet various schemas could have implications for individuals with particular features. Similarly, a set of institutional policies could have implications for a particular set of individuals, even though none of the policies directly pertain to that set of individuals. I am here influenced by Johnson’s idea that there can be biases that are nowhere represented in an individual’s cognitive repertoire (Johnson 2020).

³⁶ (Collins 1993: 32).

³⁷ (Crenshaw 1990: 1271)

The Sorts framework enables us to capture these observations as points about social structural mechanisms. In particular, we can understand Collins as pointing to an implicit feature of our Sort <woman>: namely, that it implicitly takes white, middle class women as the paradigm of womanhood. Likewise, we can see Collins and Crenshaw as pointing out that there are specific, distinctive sub-Sorts of <woman>, like <white woman> and <Black woman>, that represent distinct kinds of persons, and that are constituted by distinct beliefs, images, norms, and other schemas. These sub-Sorts are, further, (1) complex: they are understood in relation to Sorts like <woman> and <white person>, and (2) largely *implicit*, in that they are generally not recognized in the way that Sorts like <woman> are.³⁸ Part of the important work that intersectionality theorists have done is to make the existence of these implicit sub-Sorts more explicit.

4.3. Complex Sorts as Exhibiting "Fusion"

With this framework in place, I now want to return to the claim that one way in which the notion of mutual constitution as fusion is embodied at the structural level is in the form of complex sub-Sorts like <white woman> and <Black woman>.

Recall that the notion of mutual constitution as fusion posits that there is an interaction between categories that results in a new, fused category. To use the example of the complex sub-Sort <white woman>, categories of race and gender "interact" in constituting this Sort in the sense that <white woman> is a complex Sort that is understood in terms of the Sorts <woman> and <white person> (specifically, the ideology conceptualizes it as a sub-Sort of these Sorts).³⁹ The interaction of categories is a *fusion*, meanwhile, insofar as <white woman> is a distinctive Sort with its own distinctive, characteristic schemas. While it is importantly related to <woman> and <white person>, it is not a conjunction of the two, nor does it have these Sorts as constituent parts.

Stepping back, there are a few things I would like to note.

First, note that the fusion exhibited in the form of complex sub-Sorts does not entail the destruction of categories of race and gender, at least in the sense that we can still have Sorts like <woman> alongside Sorts like <white woman>.

³⁸ Although Sorts like <woman> are not typically conceptualized as *Sorts*, they are recognized as important categories of analysis.

³⁹ One point to note is that while there is a sense in which Sorts can be thought of as categories (they represent or pick out a certain category), there is another sense in which categories are broader than Sorts (insofar as categories can be thought of as more general, conceptual or analytical tools, whereas Sorts are structural mechanisms that depend on the practices of a particular social milieu for their existence).

Second, recall that which Sorts there are is an empirical matter. For instance, just because we have <*vampire*> and <*working-class*> does not mean that we have the Sort <*working-class vampire*>. This helps to address the “et cetera problem” concerning, as Cho et al. put it, “the number of categories and kinds of subjects (e.g. privileged or subordinate?) stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach.”⁴⁰ On this picture, we do not have to posit that every intersection of categories corresponds to a Sort – what Sorts there are is an empirical matter.⁴¹

Third, I want to note that, on this picture, the language of “new categories” and “fusion” is relative to a traditional analytic lens that, for example, regularly recognizes and makes use of the Sort <*woman*> but does not recognize the Sort <*white woman*>. Thus, intersectionality theorists can be seen as drawing attention to what has been left implicit or even masked in our traditional conceptions of the social world, and changing the kinds of categories that we recognize and drawn on in our analyses.

Lastly, the example of <*white woman*> helps to elucidate why it is that intersectionality inflects privilege as well as oppression, in line with Loets’ Compatibility Thesis. There are distinct sub-Sorts not just corresponding to the intersection of two marginalized categories, but also the intersection of categories of privilege.

4.4. Fused Roles and Relationality

A second way that the notion of mutual constitution as fusion is embodied at the structural level on this account is through “fused” institutional roles.

The previous discussion of implicit, complex, sub-Sorts captures important ways in which intersectionality operates within the ideological domain. But complex sub-Sorts also help to carve out distinctive, “fused” roles within institutions.⁴²

Again, I want to turn to observations from intersectionality theorists to motivate and develop this idea. In particular, consider Collins’ discussion of the antebellum plantation. Collins emphasizes that while the antebellum plantation is usually understood as a racist

⁴⁰ (Cho et al. 2013: 787)

⁴¹ This does, however, point to the utility of adopting something like the regulative ideal outlined by Gasdaglis and Madva, which tells us that we should remain open to the possibility of new, unrecognized categories in our analyses. See (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020)

⁴² I here mainly focus on how thick Sorts can give rise to fused institutional roles, but I think it’s possible that there could also be thin, complex Sorts (or, fused roles that emerge from thin Sorts). It is a bit less clear when to conceptualize something as a complex Sort when it comes to thin Sorts, but it may be helpful to think about new policies that cut across existing categories (as in Haslanger’s drug testing example) or that blend existing categories (e.g. by creating a new role that takes on some elements of an existing role but also has distinctive components) as creating complex, thin Sorts.

institution, it was a “race, class, gender specific institution.” Moreover, in describing the “interlocking nature of race, class, and gender,” Collins draws attention to the ways in which the antebellum plantation had distinctive roles for wealthy white men, wealthy white women, enslaved Black men, enslaved Black women, and working class white men and women:

[W]e have a very interesting chain of command on the plantation – the affluent White master as the reigning patriarch, his White wife helpmate to serve him, help him manage his property and bring up his heirs, his faithful servants whose production and reproduction were tied to the requirements of the capitalist political economy, and largely propertyless, working class White men and women watching from afar. (Collins 1993: 30-31)

The race-class-gender specific roles that Collins highlights here are related to each other in important ways such as to ensure the continuation of the plantation institution. For instance, the role of the wealthy white man within the context of the plantation depends upon the enslavement and coerced labor of Black men and women.

We can understand the specific, distinctive roles that Collins identifies as “fused” roles. Similarly to complex sub-Sorts, the sense in which the roles are “fused” is in relation to traditional ways of analyzing social roles. The role of the wealthy white man, for instance, is an “interaction” of traditional categories of race and gender that creates a “new” category in the sense that (1) theorists traditionally analyze social roles in terms of race and gender categories like “white” and “man,” and not complex categories like “white man,” and yet (2) our institutions have roles that are specific to categories carved out by complex sub-Sorts like *<white man>*. These specific roles are “fusions” insofar as the role of white man is not a straightforward combination of the role of “man” and “white person,” but is, again, a distinctive role.⁴³

Returning to the point that institutions and ideology are causally and constitutively interrelated, complex Sorts can give rise to “fused” institutional roles. In such cases, the fused roles reflect the ways in which complex Sorts are often relationally defined, which in turn reflects the point that these complex Sorts fit into a broader ideological view of what the social world is and should be like, which includes different sorts of people being slotted into their “proper place” in the social order. Conversely, fused institutional roles can also be thin Sorts that, over time, acquire meaning and give rise to thick, complex sub-Sorts.⁴⁴

4.5. Articulation Through Interaction

⁴³ Again, this also draws out why it is that intersectionality inflects privilege as well as oppression.

⁴⁴ In this case, fused roles could be new roles that did not exist before.

Lastly, a third way in which core intersectional notions are embodied on this account is through the interaction of structural mechanisms. The interaction of structural mechanisms can be seen as embodying the notion of mutual constitution as articulation. Developing this point, however, begins to bridge the levels of structure and experience.

5. Intersectionality at the Level of Experience

In Section 3, I indicated that, on my account, social structures causally explain experiences of injustice. Further, in Section 4, I argued that intersectionality is manifested at the structural level in the form of complex sub-Sorts and fused institutional roles, which reflect the notion of mutual constitution as fusion. I also indicated, but did not develop the idea, that the notion of mutual constitution as articulation is manifested through the interaction of structural mechanisms.

Turning now to the level of experience, my central claim is that intersectionality at the level of experience largely arises from intersectionality at the structural level. More specifically, distinctive experiences emerge at the intersections of traditional categories of analysis as a product of (1) the causal effects of “fused” structural mechanisms and (2) interactions between structural mechanisms. Thus, the causal-explanatory connections between social structures and experiences of injustice explanatorily connect intersectionality at the structural level and experiential levels, giving us a unified picture of intersectionality across these levels.

To develop this central claim, I will first elaborate how it is that social structures causally explain experiences of injustice on my account. I will then turn to the implications of this account for intersectionality at the level of experience.

5.1. How structure explains experience

My claim is that social structures causally explain privilege- and oppression-constituting experiences of injustice. The general idea will be that social structures help guide or determine how it is that individuals are treated, what resources they have access to, and what options are available to them. Oppressive social structures make these determinations in ways that produce experiences of injustice. Further, I maintain that how these structures bring about experiences of injustice is explanatorily connected to how individuals are “Sorted.”

To build the account of how structures causally explain experiences of injustice, I will start with the case of ideology and thick Sorts. Recall that thick Sorts, and ideology more broadly, are made up of schemas that include ideas about what members of the kind conceptualized by the Sort are and should be like, how they should be treated or interacted

with, etc. Being *Sorted as a Σ in C*, for some Sort Σ and some context C , will then trigger the application of the norms, stereotypes, beliefs, scripts, and other schemas associated with Σ . An individual will be *Sorted as a Σ in C*, in this case, when they are known to have or are perceived as having features that are either taken to be definitive or typical of the Sort (in the case of thick Sorts) and, on this basis, are taken to be part of the kind conceptualized by Σ . These features can take a variety of forms: for instance, bodily features, ways of talking or moving, personality traits, ancestry, the markers on one's identification card, and forms of dress. The entity doing the Sorting can be another individual, an institution, or the person themselves.

To see how being Sorted in particular ways helps causally explain experiences of injustice through the action-guiding effects of ideology, consider the case of Liz. For Liz, Sorting herself as a *<woman>* generates a feeling of pressure to conform to feminine standards of grooming and dress. In other contexts, men who Sort her as a *<queer woman>* thereby feel entitled to yell obscenities at her suggesting that what she needs is a "real man." In contrast, being Sorted as a *<white woman>* sometimes give her word power over others', and other times leads her to be dismissed as weak and unfit for leadership positions. The fact that different individuals Sort her in particular ways shapes how they interact with her, what is expected of her, what opportunities are or are not granted to her, and thus shape Liz's experiences to an important degree. Insofar as ideological schemas guide behavior and shape interpersonal interactions, these schemas help explain why individuals associated with a Sort have particular experiences of systematic injustice (or conversely, of systematic advantage).

So far I have focused on the explanatory role of ideology and thick Sorts, but institutional structures also play an important role in explaining experiences of injustice. This is because, drawing on Haslanger's work on structural explanation, institutional laws and policies guide how institutions treat individuals, as well as how they distribute access to resources and opportunities.⁴⁵ Thus, how individuals are Sorted — such that particular policies are or are not applied to them, or are applied to them in advantaging or disadvantaging ways — will shape the institutional treatment they receive, the resources they are given access to, and the opportunities they receive. This, in turn, helps explain experiences of injustice.

The connection between institutional policies and Sorts can take various forms.

For one, institutional policies may themselves constitute thin Sorts that directly shape individuals' experiences — as in the case where a company's new drug-testing policy creates

⁴⁵ (Haslanger 2016)

new divisions among workers by Sorting workers into who must undergo drug testing and those who need not.

Second, institutional policies may reference a Sort(s) in the formulation of the policy, and thereby affect individuals according to how they are Sorted in their interactions with the institution. For example, an institutional policy may say that women are not allowed to vote, thereby shaping the experiences of individuals Sorted as women by denying them the option of voting.⁴⁶ Alternately, consider an institutional policy that offers 6 weeks of paid maternity leave, but does not otherwise offer parental leave. This policy makes available a certain resource only to those who are Sorted as mothers, which will depend in turn on being Sorted as a woman.

Third, an institutional policy may reference a feature that is directly or recursively associated with a Sort, and thereby affect individuals that are Sorted in the relevant ways. For instance, a policy may refer to individuals who self-identify as women, or individuals who have Native American ancestry. These are features that are *directly associated* with the Sorts <woman> and <Native American>, respectively. That is, they are features that are taken to be definitive or typical of the Sort. The policy will thereby have implications for individuals Sorted as women or as Native American, respectively. More complicatedly, a policy may refer to features that are *recursively associated* with a Sort – that is, that are associated with a Sort as the result of historical injustice. For example, consider an institutional policy that entails that a mortgage will only be approved for individuals with a credit score above a certain threshold. This policy refers directly to the feature of having a credit score above the threshold. While this feature itself is not directly associated with a racial Sort, it is recursively associated with racial Sorts, due to historical injustices that have made it harder for people of color, and especially Black Americans, to take the steps needed to attain a good credit score. For this reason, such mortgage policies will tend to have negative implications for individuals Sorted as Black.

Further, institutions may have roles – including fused roles – that directly correspond to complex sub-Sorts (as in the case of the antebellum plantation), or that more indirectly are “intended for” particular sub-Sorts. For example, Collins suggests that the American university

⁴⁶ One may think it makes more sense to take such policies to be referring to social groups. In that case, I would say that how individuals are Sorted ends up mediating whether or how the policy is applied to them. For instance, a trans man who was Sorted as a woman would not be allowed to vote in the context of this example.

functions as a modern planation, in the sense that different roles (e.g. upper-administration, professor, janitor) are generally filled by particular Sorts of people.⁴⁷

In summary, institutional policies help causally explain individual experiences of injustice because they guide how individuals are treated, and what resources and opportunities they have access to. Institutional policies will, in particular, have implications for individuals according to how they are Sorted. In this way, institutions not only help explain individual experiences of injustice, but also help explain *patterns* of injustice.

Likewise, thick Sorts help explain (a) individual experiences of injustice and (b) patterns of injustice. Being Sorted in a particular way in a context means that one will be treated in accordance with the dictates of the Sort; unjust Sorts will thereby bring about experiences of unjust treatment. Further, this point will apply generally for those Sorted in a particular way, thereby giving rise to patterns of injustice. These experiences and patterns of injustice can be privilege- as well as oppression-constituting. For example, it can be a matter of being unfairly let off the hook for harmful actions because “boys will be boys,” just as it can be a matter of being unfairly evaluated as overly aggressive because of negative stereotypes about Black women.

While I have mostly discussed the explanatory role of institutions and ideology separately here for the sake of simplicity, these mechanisms can and do work together to produce injustice.

5.2. Implications

I have presented an account on which structural mechanisms causally explain experiences of injustice such that an individual’s experience of injustice is shaped by how they are Sorted across contexts. I now want to consider the implications of this account for intersectionality at the level of experience.

First and most straightforwardly, complex sub-Sorts and fused institutional roles will give rise to distinctive, “fused” experiences for those who are Sorted in the relevant way. For example, recall Crenshaw’s insight that the Sort <*Black woman*> construes Black women as “bad women” who, in connection to ideological narratives around rape, are effectively “unrapeable.” This shapes Black women’s experience of sexual violence in a way that is distinctive to the sub-Sort <*Black woman*>, as compared to <*woman*>, <*Black person*>, or, e.g., <*white woman*>. Further, the experience of being viewed and treated as unrapeable is not an experience that has a

⁴⁷ (Collins 1993: 31)

“gender component” and a “race component.” In this way, the distinctive kind of experience that is the result of a complex sub-Sort or fused role manifests the notion of mutual constitution as fusion at the level of experience.

Second, I want to return to the idea that the interaction of structural mechanisms can be seen as embodying the notion of mutual constitution as articulation.

Here the idea is that structural mechanisms that track different Sorts can interact with each other such as to give rise to specific, distinctive experiences of injustice for individuals at the intersection of these Sorts. For instance, consider schemas that make individuals Sorted as women targets of sexual harassment. This structural mechanism, which helps constitute <woman>, can interact with structural mechanisms that track, e.g., Sorts like <working-class> and <upper-class>. For example, compare someone who is a beneficiary of mechanisms of intergenerational wealth— such that she can take a cab anywhere she goes— to someone whose family has been on the disadvantaged end of those same mechanisms— such that she must walk or take the bus everywhere. These women’s experiences of sexual harassment will be inflected by the implications of their class status.⁴⁸ For instance, the latter is likely to experience systematic street harassment, whereas the former is not. These differences in experience reflect the interaction of class mechanisms— mechanisms that affect individuals based on class Sorts— with mechanisms of gender.

This interaction of class and gender mechanisms manifests the notion of mutual constitution as articulation insofar as we can identify different “parts” — in the form of the structural mechanisms that track gender and class Sorts, respectively — that bring about a new, distinctive whole. Specifically, in this example, they give rise to distinctive experiences of sexual harassment for those Sorted as working-class women, versus those Sorted as upper-class women.⁴⁹

While articulation may seem additive because it describes the effects of combining mechanisms of, e.g., class and gender, it actually challenges an additive analytical approach. That is, it challenges approaches that would try to analyze oppression or injustice by considering the effects of, e.g., class separately from the effects of, e.g., gender. This is because

⁴⁸ This example is drawn from (Haslanger 2004: 113)

⁴⁹ This is similar to Jorba and Rodó-Zárate’s account of intersectionality at the individual level. On their view, social categories are properties of individuals, and individual experiences are an emergent entity that arises from the interaction of these properties. My view can be understood as developing the sense in which categories can be seen as interacting so as to give rise to those experiences. See (Jorba and Rodó-Zárate 2019).

considering the effects of class and gender separately does not take into account the new effects that emerge through the interaction of class mechanisms and gender mechanisms, which is precisely what occurs in cases of articulation.

To return to the intersectionality literature, this account allows us to capture and make sense of the way that Crenshaw describes Black women's experiences:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women (Crenshaw 1989: 149).

My framework allows us to understand Crenshaw's distinctions in terms of how different experiences are explanatorily connected to different kinds of structural mechanisms. The first two cases— in which Black women's experiences are similar to those of white woman and Black men— can be understood as experiences that are the result of structural mechanisms that track the Sorts *<woman>* and *<Black person>*, respectively; the case of “double-discrimination” can be taken to refer to distinctive experiences that result from the interaction of such Sorts, thus exhibiting articulation; and the case of discrimination as Black women can be understood as experiences that result from structural mechanisms that track *<Black woman>*, thereby exhibiting fusion.

In summary, intersectionality at the level of experience is reflected in the distinctive experiences of individuals that are the result of either (1) the interaction of mechanisms that track different Sorts (cases of articulation), or (2) “fused” structural mechanisms (i.e. complex sub-Sorts or fused institutional roles).

6. Comparisons and Upshots

My goal has been to provide a social ontology that provides a concrete and explanatorily unified picture of how the notion of mutual constitution— in the sense of articulation, as well as fusion— applies to individual experiences and social structures.⁵⁰ The relative concreteness of the account, as well as what it thereby contributes, can be drawn out through comparison to recent metaphysical approaches to intersectionality in the literature, which operate at a higher level of abstraction.

⁵⁰ Or at least, some of the important ways in which mutual constitution applies at these levels. Again, my goal is not to be fully comprehensive here, but rather to elucidate some important phenomena.

First, Jorba and Rodó-Zárate have proposed a properties framework for intersectionality that conceptualizes social categories as properties of individuals (e.g. being a woman, being white, being a lesbian) that interact in different ways to produce an emergent experience. Their account does not, however, say anything about how these properties shape individuals' experiences, or what kind of causal-explanatory story connects, e.g., being a woman to having the experiences in question—presumably the picture is not that the property of being a woman itself generates injustice. Or at least, as Fields and Fields emphasize with respect to race and racism, we should be wary of stories that imbue social categories with causal powers, due to their tendency to erase the actions of perpetrators of injustice.⁵¹

In contrast, my view fills out the causal-explanatory story, and moreover does so in a way that makes clear that properties like “being a woman” do not in themselves generate injustice. On my picture, social structural mechanisms explain individual experiences. These mechanisms can be understood to be explanatorily connected to properties like “being a woman” insofar as the ways that individuals are sorted as, e.g. women, by institutions or individuals affect whether or how those mechanisms are applied to the individual (e.g. by triggering the application of certain schemas, or making available certain resources).

Similarly, Jorba and López de Sa offer a view of intersectionality as weak emergence that is intended to be compatible with a variety of specific accounts and methodologies. Specifically, their view of intersectionality is that “whenever social structures make some intersection of categories relevant to discrimination or privilege, the corresponding intersectional experience emerges.”⁵² As they note, their account has virtues of metaphysical neutrality, methodological openness, and explanatory flexibility. The flip side of this is that it does not offer insight into when or how it is that social structures make some intersections relevant to discrimination or injustice, or how, as above, the categories come to shape experience. Again, the more concrete picture that I offer helps to answer these questions. It elucidates some of the mechanisms involved by pointing to the existence of complex sub-Sorts and drawing attention to the ways

⁵¹ Their point is well captured in the following: “The shorthand [of ‘race’] transforms *racism*, something an aggressor *does*, into *race*, something the target *is*, in a sleight of hand that is easy to miss. Consider the statement ‘black Southerners were segregated because of their skin color’ — a perfectly natural sentence to the ears of most Americans, who tend to overlook its weird causality. But in that sentence, segregation disappears as the doing of segregationists, and then, in a puff of smoke— *puff*— reappears as a trait of only one part of the segregated whole.” (Emphasis original) (Fields and Fields 2012: 17)

⁵² (Jorba and López de Sa 2024: 1464)

that structural articulation can generate distinctive experiences at the intersections of social categories.

Finally, Bernstein has given a metaphysical account of intersectionality that understands intersectionality in terms of the ontological and explanatory priority of an intersectional category (e.g. Black woman) over its constituents (e.g. Black and woman). The ontological priority claim means that “the intersectional category [is] more fundamental than its constituents,”⁵³ while the explanatory priority claim means that the intersectional category explains its constituents:

Rather than the conjuncts explaining the conjunction, the conjunction explains the conjuncts. The intuitive idea is that in understanding black womanhood, we thereby understand blackness and womanhood. Being a black woman explains being black and being a woman; features of blackness and womanhood are at least partially explained by black womanhood. Intersectional explanations are more informative than explanations exclusively involving the individual identity constituents. (Bernstein 2020: 331)

The abstract formulation that intersectional categories explain their constituents does not make clear what it means, for example, to explain being black, or for black womanhood to explain blackness. The shift to saying that intersectional explanations are more informative than explanations that merely appeal to the constituents suggests that perhaps Bernstein has in mind the claim that if we are trying to explain the experiences of, e.g., Black women, then an explanation that appeals to the category *Black woman* will do better than an explanation that appeals to either the category Black or the category woman. My account helps us to understand why this is the case – when complex sub-Sorts or fused institutional roles are involved, or when there is structural articulation, then we will need to appeal to the intersectional category to adequately capture and explain the individual’s experience. As before, my account helps to fill in how it is that categories are explanatorily connected to experience.

Further, my account helps to deal with an objection that Bernstein flags concerning whether the most specific categories will always be the most explanatory, as her account seems to claim. She replies that this will not always be the case: “As I see it, certain ‘social category magnets’ – joint-carving social categories akin to reference magnets – are the most explanatory, whether or not they are the most fine-grained. Intersectional categories often, but do not always, carve at the joints.”⁵⁴ The account of Sorts and fused institutional roles provides a way of

⁵³ (Bernstein 2020: 331)

⁵⁴ (Bernstein 2020: 332)

understanding why and when some, but not all, intersectional categories will be more fundamental and most explanatory. In particular, if we understand categories in abstract terms, then any two categories can be intersected to form a more specific, intersectional category which, on Bernstein's initial formulation of the view, is supposed to be more fundamental and more explanatory than the previous one. This threatens a metaphysical regress problem, while also seeming implausible as regards the explanatory claim.⁵⁵ But if, as my view suggests, we take these abstract categories to be concretized through our practices – first, as social structural mechanisms in the form of Sorts, institutional roles, and Sort-tracking institutional policies and second, as categorizations of humans through Sorting practices – and we recognize that it is these concrete mechanisms and practices, rather than the abstract categories, that do the causal-explanatory work, then it is an empirical question when the corresponding structural mechanisms and Sorting practices exist.⁵⁶ We can then take the intersectional category to be more fundamental and more explanatory when the corresponding structural mechanisms and practices exist. This avoids the objection and helps fill in the idea that there are 'social category magnets.'

Stepping back, I take my account to be generally compatible with these recent views that take a general and thereby relatively abstract metaphysical approach to intersectionality. My view helps fill in details as to how, within a broadly social constructionist framework, we might interpret the more abstract notions that these accounts rely on. It does so by, first, showing how social categories take concrete form in the way of Sorts, fused roles, Sort-tracking policies, and Sorting practices; and, second, providing a causal-explanatory link between these concretizations of abstract categories and individual experiences. One advantage of this is that my account elucidates how it is that intersectionality manifests in the world and what abstract notions like mutual constitution consist in. Another advantage is that it avoids essentializing or granting suspicious causal powers to social categories in a way that suggests that it is, e.g., Black womanhood that generates disadvantage, rather than unjust social structures and practices.

7. Conclusion

⁵⁵ The regress worry is well-known in intersectionality. See, for instance, (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020; Young 1994)

⁵⁶ This view suggests that we should also take a methodological approach to intersectionality in order to investigate the empirical question. See (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020).

In this paper I have developed an intersectional social ontology at the structural and experiential levels. I have argued that intersectionality manifests at the structural level in the form of complex sub-Sorts and fused institutional roles, which reflect the notion of mutual constitution as fusion. Further, I have argued that intersectionality manifests at the experiential level in the distinctive experiences of individuals that are either (1) the result of the interaction of mechanisms that track different Sorts (cases of articulation), or (2) the result of “fused” structural mechanisms (i.e. complex sub-Sorts or fused institutional roles). This picture thereby explanatorily connects intersectionality at the experiential level to intersectionality at the structural level.

This picture offers a clearer understanding of the sense in which intersectionality involves the interaction and fusing of categories. The “fusion” in these cases is relative to traditional analytic frameworks. That is, traditional categories of analysis do not recognize or include complex sub-Sorts and fused institutional roles. Because of this, the under-recognized, “intersectional” categories of analysis are understood in terms of the more traditional categories of analysis. It is not that the categories actually fuse or combine to produce new categories, but rather that we come to recognize categories that have already been important, and do so through a lens that excluded them. Intersectionality theorists thus draw attention to the existence and significance of overlooked categories, and the need to make use of these categories in our theory and practice.

It is worth noting that part of what is difficult about getting a grip on the intersection, fusion, or interaction of categories in intersectionality is that categories appear in so many different forms and at different levels of abstraction in these discussions. Categories appear, for instance, in how we conceptualize and categorize people, experiences, and structural mechanisms. Sometimes categories refer to very broad or abstract concepts, and sometimes they refer to more concrete objects, like collections of people. One way that “categories interact” in these discussions, for instance, is in the way that sub-Sorts like <*white woman*> are conceptualized in terms of simple Sorts like <*woman*> and <*white person*>. Here, the simple Sorts function as conceptual categories that interact in the conceptualization of another conceptual category (i.e. the complex sub-Sort). Contrast this with identifying an experience as one of double discrimination. Here categories appear in the form of categorizing the experience— e.g., categorizing it as the experience of, e.g., Black women, or as a race-gender specific experience. Further, categories also appear when we causally trace experiences to structural mechanisms,

like the Sorts <*Black woman*>, <*Black person*>, and <*woman*>. These Sorts (and similar structural mechanisms) represent a concretization of social categories, as when we say that some injustice is “due to race,” and are thus another way that categories appear in these discussions. Where a “fused” structural mechanism is involved, we can, again, see categories interacting from the perspective of a traditional analytic lens. Alternately, when it is a case of structural articulation, categories “interact” in the somewhat more straightforward sense that two or more structural mechanisms, which represent concretizations of different categories, interact with each other—that is, work together to causally explain a particular experience of injustice. Recognizing the breadth and slipperiness of our references to categories can help us at least get a better grip on these discussions. My account helps by elucidating some of the different functions that categories are playing and spelling out some of the important ways in which these categories are interacting in our social world.

Further, returning to Loets’ central theses, my account helps us to understand why it is that intersectional advantage and disadvantage cannot be additively analyzed, why it is that people have experiences of injustice that are specific to their intersectional identities, and why it is that intersectionality inflects privilege as well as oppression. It also helps as to more concretely understand important ways in which the abstract notion of mutual constitution manifests in the social world at the levels of individual experience and social structure. Part of how it does this is by showing how social categories take concrete form in the way of our social structures and practices, and how this can help us to make sense of the idea that social categories interact and fuse. In so doing, the account helps us to better understand why we need to adopt intersectional approaches in our theorizing and in our social movements.

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