

# Explaining Oppression: An Argument Against Individualism

Annette Martín

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**Abstract:** The recent, widespread focus on implicit bias has sparked a debate about how we should explain persistent, systematic injustice. Virtually everyone in the debate has agreed that we need to appeal to a mix of individual and structural factors, and the debate has focused on whether or not structural factors are more important than individual factors. In this paper, I argue, against both sides of the debate, that we should take a purely structural approach. First, I suggest that the debate is best framed in terms of explaining oppression. This helps to clearly fix the explanatory target, and elucidates the relevant explanatory demands. In particular, explaining oppression requires explaining persistent patterns of injustice. Second, drawing on the principle that causes should be proportional to their effects, I argue that explanations that appeal to individualistic factors are insufficiently robust to explain persistent patterns of injustice, instead rendering them as apparent coincidences. Third, I propose a positive view on which individual attitudes help explain lower-level phenomena that help constitute oppression, but oppression itself is explained by higher-level, structural phenomena that individuals help constitute and shape. In particular, I suggest that where the literature has traditionally appealed to individuals, we should instead appeal to internalized structural factors, or ideology. Oppression is then explained by a mix of factors— but a mix of different kinds of high-level, *structural* factors, rather than a mix of individual and structural factors.

How should we explain persistent, 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 we should reject appeals to individualistic factors when it comes to explaining these persistent, systematic forms of injustice. Instead, I ultimately suggest that the appeal to individualistic factors should

be replaced by an appeal to higher-level structural phenomena that situates individuals within different kinds of structures.

An important part of my argument in this paper is to elucidate the phenomenon that I take to be 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 and why. 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 here.

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 suggests that the focus is on explaining oppression. This allows us to distinguish between explaining particular incidents of injustice and explaining oppression-constituting patterns of injustice. Clearly identifying that what we are trying to explain are these persistent, oppression-constituting patterns of injustice in turn establishes certain explanatory demands. In particular, work in the philosophy science indicates that causes should be proportional to their effects. I argue that, if we are trying to explain high-level patterns of injustice, then achieving this proportionality requires offering a high-level, structural explanation.

Note that I will not be claiming that all explanations involving social phenomena must be purely structural; that is, I am not here defending strong methodological holism.<sup>1</sup> Rather, my claim is that a higher level, structural explanation is called for when it comes to explaining the target phenomenon. Likewise, I will not be claiming that individualistic explanations are never appropriate in connection to systematic injustice. Rather, I will be arguing that when we are trying to explain patterns of injustice, and particularly when we are doing so with the aim of identifying strategic targets for intervention, then we should give a purely structural explanation.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 1, I present the individualist-structuralist debate in more detail, noting that most people in the debate adopt a *mixed view* that takes persistent, systematic forms of injustice like racism and sexism to be explained by appealing to a mix of individualistic and structural factors. In Section 2, I identify three distinct senses in which the phenomenon at the core of this debate is systematic and two senses in which it is

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

persistent, and note that these features map onto key characteristics of oppression. I thus reframe the debate as being centrally concerned with trying to provide a causal explanation of oppression. In Section 3, I draw on Bhogal's account of coincidences, which develops the proportionality criterion that will be at the center of my argument. In Section 4, I develop this argument, considering a range of mixed views that one could have, and arguing that we should reject these views because, in appealing to individualistic factors, they offer insufficiently robust explanations of oppression-constituting patterns of injustice, thereby inappropriately rendering these patterns as coincidences. I also briefly sketch out my alternative view, which replaces appeals to individualistic factors with appeals to ideology, or what some have termed *internalized structure*. Ultimately, then, I also favor a kind of mixed view, but one that mixes different kinds of structural factors, as opposed to mixing individualistic and structural factors. In Section 6, I conclude that we should be pure explanatory structuralists, at least when we are focused on providing causal explanations that aim to identify appropriate targets for intervention in the remediation of oppression.

## 1. The Debate

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

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, among others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I take the kind of systematic injustice that is of interest in this debate to span across different national contexts. However, my examples will come from the perspective of a U.S. context, as this is the context I am most familiar with.

The kind of explanation relevant to this debate – at least, for the aspect of it that I will focus on – is causal explanation.<sup>3</sup> 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 “occurrence and persistence” of social injustice;<sup>4</sup> (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. The goal is to identify the forces or mechanisms that explain the existence and persistence of these persisting, systematic forms of injustice. Further, my focus on causal explanation will be pursued through a remedial lens: the goal is to offer a causal explanation that identifies appropriate targets for intervention.<sup>5</sup> I am thus interested in what Erck calls operative causation, or the identification of “those contributing factors, conditions, and processes/mechanisms that might be blocked, modified, or replaced to interrupt an active injustice, bring about its cessation, and prevent it to a reasonable degree in the future.”<sup>6</sup>

The debate has been defined in relation to two poles: a purely individualistic approach on one end, and a purely structural approach on the other.<sup>7</sup> The pure individualist maintains that the kind of persisting, systematic injustice exemplified by racism (etc.) can or should be explained solely by reference to individual mental states and choices. The pure individualist view is identified with methodological individualism, which takes all social phenomena to be explicable in terms of individual decisions and attitudes, and is taken to be the mainstream, or “public” view.<sup>8</sup> The pure structuralist, on the other hand, maintains that persisting, systemic injustice can or should be explained solely by reference to social structural factors, entities and processes.

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, I will not be focusing on normative explanations, or explanations that seek to identify what is wrong with and who is responsible for the relevant injustices. This is in contrast to (Zheng 2018), who argues that there is an important role for individuals in normative explanations of injustice. Similarly, (Ayala-López and Beeghly 2020) argue that individuals are part of the normative core of injustice.

<sup>4</sup> (Haslanger 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Later in the paper I will consider how identifying targets for intervention can be complemented by normative approaches, or other approaches that seek to understand who is responsible for injustice and how we can or should go about achieving change.

<sup>6</sup> (Erck 2025: 251).

<sup>7</sup> See (Soon 2020) for a similar overview.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of the identification between the pure individualist view and methodological individualism see, for instance, (Heydari Fard 2024; Soon 2020). (Soon 2020) identifies the pure individualist view as the “public view.”

Although the debate has been defined in relation to these poles, in reality neither the pure individualist nor the pure structuralist view has enjoyed support in the philosophical literature.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the debate has primarily taken place between people who endorse a *mixed view*. On a mixed view, 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. Given that virtually everyone in the debate has adopted a mixed view, the disagreement has not been about whether we should appeal to individual or structural factors in our explanations, but rather about the relative explanatory importance of these factors. *Structural prioritizers* maintain that structural factors are more explanatorily important.<sup>10</sup> *Equal prioritizers*, in contrast, maintain that individualistic factors are just as important as structural factors when it comes to explaining persisting, systematic injustice.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, I will be defending a purely structural approach to the kind of persistent, systematic injustice that has been at the center of this debate. The kind of structural view that I will adopt accords with Ayala-López and Beeghly's characterization of a structural approach in that, first, I take a relatively broad view of what counts as a structural factor. The kinds of structural factors that I will appeal to include not just institutional factors (e.g. state laws, corporate policies, housing segregation, and mass incarceration), but also social norms, controlling images, shared conceptual resources, and other cultural schemas that I will group under the heading of what Ayala-López and Beeghly call *internalized structure*.<sup>12</sup> Second, I also follow Ayala-López and Beeghly in understanding a structural approach as "look[ing] at individuals through a wider lens" through which individuals are seen as "situated in networks of relationships within an organized larger whole, i.e., a structure," rather than leaving individuals out of the picture altogether.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> (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.

<sup>10</sup> The term "structural prioritizer" is due to (Madva 2016). Representatives include (Haslanger 2015: 8), (Banks and Ford 2011). (Anderson 2010)

<sup>11</sup> The term "equal prioritizer" is due to (Soon 2020). 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).

<sup>12</sup> (Ayala-López and Beeghly 2020: 249). This aspect of my approach also aligns with Zheng's Bourdieusian account of implicit bias as a form of social structure. See (Zheng 2018). I will later draw on Haslanger's account of cultural schemas to further expand what I mean by internalized structure, which I believe aligns with Ayala-López and Beeghly's use of the term.

<sup>13</sup> (Ayala-López and Beeghly 2020: 247)

It is this wider – or, to use another common metaphor, *higher-level* – lens that will primarily characterize my approach in this paper. My main argument will concern the level of explanation that we should provide in explaining the phenomenon – or, at least, one central phenomenon – that is at the core of this debate. In particular, I will draw on the idea from the philosophy of science that causes should be proportional to their effects, and that this proportionality constraint helps determine the level, or grain, of explanation that we should provide.<sup>14</sup> Whereas traditional mixed views mix levels of explanation – combining higher-level, structural factors with lower-level, individual factors – I argue that considerations of proportionality indicate that we should instead appeal to a combination of higher-level, structural factors. The combination of structural factors that I appeal to will, in particular, include internalized structural factors. In this way, my view appeals to a higher-level, structural counterpart of the kinds of individualistic factors (e.g. individual biases) that people who endorse a mixed view appeal to, in addition to the kinds of structural factors that proponents of the mixed view regularly appeal to (e.g. institutional policies or state laws).

In developing this proportionality argument, my starting point will be to highlight some important characteristics of the phenomenon that we are interested in explaining that will help to clarify our explanatory target and elucidate the corresponding explanatory demands.

## **2. The Phenomenon**

In order to elucidate the explanatory target, 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

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<sup>14</sup> (Bhagal 2020; Woodward 2010; Yablo 1992)

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*<sup>15</sup> – these patterns arise as a result of mechanisms that systematically target women and people of color.

## 2.2. Domain-Crossing

Second, there are *many* unjust patterns, across a variety of domains, that characterize the experiences of women and people of color. 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;<sup>16</sup> 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;<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

More generally, the injustices that women and people of color face are not limited to particular spheres, but instead permeate across domains of life. They affect, for instance, one's education, finances, physical health and safety, mental well-being, professional outcomes, and inter-personal (e.g. sexual, romantic, and platonic) relationships. These effects may, but need not be, part of an extended causal chain.<sup>19</sup> For instance, receiving a lower-quality education can be part of a causal chain that negatively impacts one's financial prospects, which in turn leads to worse health outcomes, but experiencing threats to one's safety from catcallers need not be a cause of one's being turned down for the job.

The pervasiveness of these patterns of injustice across domains is another sense in which racism, sexism, and similar kinds of injustice are systematic. They do not just affect one's outcomes and experiences in one domain, but systematically affect one's outcomes and experiences across multiple, or virtually all, domains of life. To distinguish this from the sense of systematicity already identified – which captures the way in which these forms of injustice are patterned – I will use *domain-crossing* to refer to the way in which the patterns of injustice associated with these forms of injustice permeate across spheres of life.

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<sup>15</sup> See (Frye 1983), (Young 1990), (Haslanger 2004), (Fricker 2007), (Eller 2014). Recently, however, Martín has argued that the systematic nature of oppression is not best understood in group-based terms. See (Martín 2025).

<sup>16</sup> (Glantz and Martinez 2018).

<sup>17</sup> See (Eberhardt et al. 2006), (Starr and Rehavi 2013), (Hetey et al. 2016), (Commission 2018).

<sup>18</sup> ('2017 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report' 2018)

<sup>19</sup> See (Cudd 2006) , (Eller 2014: 4).

### 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."<sup>20</sup>

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*.

### 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, particular patterns of injustice that help make up racial and gender injustice across different domains are persistent. As Haslanger observes, the pattern of women being economically disadvantaged relative to men is "longstanding."<sup>21</sup> As Anderson notes, disparities in objective well-being between Black and white Americans are "large and enduring."<sup>22</sup> These are not short-lived injustices, and they are not likely to go away without significant work and attention. Rather, these patterns are persistent and enduring.

### 2.5. Stable

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 is the stability of the overall conditions: attempts to change these patterns often result in the re-emergence of the pattern in a

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<sup>20</sup> (Eller 2014: 3)

<sup>21</sup> (Haslanger 2018b: 251)

<sup>22</sup> (Anderson 2010: 23)

different form. For example, efforts to undo educational segregation by integrating schools in the U.S. have led to intra-school segregation through “racialized tracking” – in which students are, from a young age, separated into accelerated, grade-level, and remedial tracks, with the result that Black students are under-represented in the accelerated track and over-represented in the remedial track.<sup>23</sup> Haslanger describes this in terms of there being a dynamic homeostasis at the level of the system.<sup>24</sup> 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 *stable*.

## 2.6. Explanatory Target: Oppression

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 effect of these patterns is stable.

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*.<sup>25</sup> 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, sexuality, class, disability, religion, and so on”<sup>26</sup> – 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 as seeking to identify the operative causes of *oppression*.

Identifying oppression as the explanatory target is significant, because seeking to explain oppression is different from seeking to explain particular unjust events that might help

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<sup>23</sup> While Black students make up 17% of the student population in the US, only 10% of students in gifted and talented education programs are Black, while 53% of students in remedial programs are Black. (Pirtle)

<sup>24</sup> (Haslanger 2017a: 17)

<sup>25</sup> For instance, many have emphasized the group-based nature of oppression (Cudd 2006; Eller 2014; Fricker 2007; Frye 1983; Haslanger 2004; Young 1990). While the patterned aspect is not often made explicit, it is implicit in these discussions – e.g. “In daily interchange women and men of color must prove their respectability. At first they are often not treated by strangers with respectful distance or deference” (Young 1990: 58); “If she [a woman] refrains from heterosexual activity, she is fairly constantly harassed by men who try to persuade her into it” (Frye 2000: 11).

The domain-crossing nature of oppression has been discussed by (Cudd 2006; Eller 2014; Fricker 2007). Interlinking is famously discussed by (Frye 1983), as well as (Eller 2014).

<sup>26</sup> (Madva 2016: 703)

constitute some form of oppression. Oppression consists in stable, interlinking clusters of persistent, domain-crossing patterns of injustice. A particular unjust event may help constitute a pattern of injustice that itself helps constitute a particular form of oppression, but oppression exists at a higher level than the events that help constitute it. This, as I will argue, makes a difference to the kinds of explanations that we should offer. To be certain, our explanatory target can shift across contexts, even holding fixed that we are approaching explanation through a remedial lens. For instance, in a court of law, we may be interested in holding accountable the individuals involved in bringing about a particular injustice that helps constitute some form of oppression.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the explanatory target is a particular instance of harm – for example, a particular case of harassment. My explanatory target in this paper is broader than this: it consists in the stable, interlinking clusters of persistent, domain-crossing patterns of injustice that constitute some form of oppression. The goal here is to understand what it is that underlies these persistent patterns of injustice, so as to guide interventions to terminate them. Different explanatory targets, and different purposes, make different kinds of explanation appropriate.<sup>28</sup> The question of what explains why a particular woman was harassed is an important one, and appealing to her harasser’s bad behavior will be necessary for proper accountability in a court of law. But in this paper, my focus is on providing an explanation that targets the broader question of, for example, why there is a persistent pattern of men sexually harassing women, of which this particular harasser’s bad behavior is a part. The goal is to get insight into what can be done, not just to stop this particular harasser, but to end the broader pattern of harassment and prevent it from reoccurring – and likewise for other oppression-constituting patterns of injustice with which this pattern interlinks.

### **3. Explanatory Demands: Coincidences and Proportionality**

To make the case that we should take a (purely) structural approach to explaining oppression, I will draw on Bhogal’s (2020) account of coincidences and explanatory proportionality. Bhogal takes up the popular idea that, in a good explanation, the explanans is proportional to the explanandum. He spells out this idea by appealing to two principles: PRECISION and ROBUSTNESS. PRECISION states that “explanations are better if in more of

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<sup>27</sup> Thank you to an anonymous referee for this example, and for pressing me on this point.

<sup>28</sup> Erck likewise notes that the kind of explanation that is appropriate in a court of law will differ from the kind of explanation that we should give as part of an etiological explanation of injustice. The former invites a backward-looking, narrative explanation, whereas the latter calls for a forward-looking explanation. See (Erck 2023, 2024)

(that is, a higher proportion of) the physically possible worlds where the explanans is true, the explanans explains the explanandum.”<sup>29</sup> The precision principle favors more specific, lower-level explanations over more coarse-grained, higher-level explanations. For instance, suppose that there is a glass of water on a table. My knee hits the table, this jostles the glass, and the water spills. Now compare two explanations of the spill. One explanation appeals to the fact that I knocked the table with my knee in order to explain why the water spills. The second explanation appeals to the more precise chain of micro-states that realized my knocking the table with my knee – this includes, for instance, the precise velocity at which my knee was moving when it hit the table. The explanation in terms of micro-states will score higher on precision than the first, because there are many possible worlds where I knock the table with my knee (i.e. where the explanans is true), but this does not result in the water spilling (viz., because I did not knock the table hard enough); thus, there will be many possible worlds where the explanans is true but the explanans does not explain the explanandum, because the explanandum does not obtain in that world.<sup>30</sup> ROBUSTNESS, on the other hand, states that “explanations are better if in more of (that is, a higher proportion of) the physically possible worlds where the *explanandum* is true, the explanans explains the explanandum.”<sup>31</sup> This principle disfavors explanations that are too specific. Returning to the spilled water, the explanation in terms of my knocking the table with my knee will score higher on robustness than the explanation in terms of micro-states, because there will be very many possible worlds where the water spills (i.e. where the explanandum is true), but my knee was moving at a slightly different velocity (and thus, where the explanans does not explain the explanandum, because the explanans does not obtain). A good explanation, Bhogal argues, balances PRECISION and ROBUSTNESS. Such an explanation maximizes the set of physically possible worlds in which both the explanans and the explanandum are true, and the explanans explains the explanandum. In this way, balancing the principles of PRECISION and ROBUSTNESS captures the popular idea in the philosophy of science that a good explanation is one in which the explanans is proportional to the explanandum.

Bhogal further uses this framework to provide an account of coincidences and, in particular, to elucidate why we tend to think that a good scientific or philosophical view will avoid coincidences wherever possible. Coincidences involve what Bhogal calls a “striking

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<sup>29</sup> (Bhogal 2020: 687)

<sup>30</sup> (Bhogal 2020: 688)

<sup>31</sup> (Bhogal 2020: 688) (emphasis original).

match” between components. For example, in 1710, the Scottish physician John Arbuthnot found that in every year between 1629 and 1710, there were more males born in London than females.<sup>32</sup> In this example, the “striking match” is that in both 1629 and 1630, there were more males born in London than females, as well as in 1631, 1632, 1633, and so on until 1710. Faced with this striking match between the relative number of males and females born in London in each of these years, one may wonder what explains this, or whether it is merely a coincidence.

Bhogal distinguishes two ways of describing the regularity, or the “striking match,” that Arbuthnot discovered. The *matching proposition* (“in every year between 1629 and 1710, there were more males born in London than females”) describes the events in a way that states the feature or property that is shared between the relevant events. The *particular proposition*, in contrast, “describe[s] the relevant properties of the separate component events in virtue of which there is a match.”<sup>33</sup> In this example, the particular proposition would specify the number of male births and the number of female births in 1629, the number of male births and female births in 1630, and so on for each year through 1710. Note that the particular proposition entails the matching proposition – that is, specifying the number of male and female births in each year entails that the number of male births was greater than the number of female births every year between 1629 and 1710.

Intuitively, when something is genuinely a coincidence, there is no good explanation for why the striking match occurs. But sometimes a coincidence is merely apparent: the explanation we are considering does not provide a good explanation of the matching proposition, but there is another explanation that *does*. This elucidates why there is pressure for a theory to avoid coincidences where possible: (apparent) coincidences involve bad explanations.<sup>34</sup>

For instance, to return to Arbuthnot’s regularity (that, for every year between 1629 and 1710, the number of male births was higher than that of female births), we can compare two explanations. The first explanation explains the regularity by appealing to the chain of physical events that led to each individual birth; it provides an explanation of each individual birth separately, which entails the truth of the regularity. Compare this to an evolutionary explanation that appeals to the fact that (1) there is evolutionary pressure to have a 1:1 ratio of males to females at the age of sexual maturity and (2) the infant mortality rate is higher in males than females. Together, this means that there is evolutionary pressure to have a higher

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<sup>32</sup> Bhogal takes this example from (Kitcher 2001).

<sup>33</sup> (Bhogal 2020: 679)

<sup>34</sup> (Bhogal 2020: 693)

proportion of male as compared to female births, which explains why there were more males than female born in London every year between 1629 and 1710. We can assess how these two explanations fare with respect to explaining the matching proposition. Although the lower-level explanation that separately explains each individual birth provides a good explanation of the particular proposition, when it comes to the *matching* proposition, this explanation scores poorly on robustness: there are many ways that the number of male births could have been higher than that of female births without this specific chain of physical events taking place (i.e. there are many possible worlds where the explanandum is true, but the explanans does not explain the explanandum). Thus, the lower-level explanation (which explains each individual birth separately) makes the striking match seem like a coincidence, because it makes it appear as though there is no good explanation for the match. In contrast, when it comes to explaining the matching proposition, the evolutionary explanation scores well on both precision and robustness. The evolutionary explanation thus provides a good explanation of the striking match, which shows that the regularity is not, after all, just a coincidence.

The upshot is that we should prefer views that avoid rendering regularities as coincidences where possible, which is connected to the more general principle that there should be a proportionality between explanans and explanandum in the explanations we offer. This discussion of coincidences is relevant to my purposes because, again, I am interested in explaining persistent patterns of injustice – put differently, I am interested in explaining certain persistent, striking regularities involving systematic injustice.<sup>35</sup>

Next, I will draw on these principles to argue that we should give a purely structural explanation of oppression: explanations that appeal to individualistic factors – whether purely, or alongside structural factors – are insufficiently robust, and inappropriately render the patterns of injustice that constitute oppression as coincidences. This is connected to Erck’s point that, in identifying operative causes of injustice, we should select causal factors that are irreplaceable.<sup>36</sup> This is because, as Erck helpfully puts it, “If we attempt to substitute an unjust facet of society for a just one without addressing the situation’s relevant causes, then our solutions are likely to be incomplete or unacceptably short-lived.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, if the goal is to end patterns of injustice, then we do not want to focus merely on the actions of some

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<sup>35</sup> Again, this is compatible with there being situations in which one is interested in explaining instances of injustice, or similarly, in explaining the particular proposition rather than the matching one. This is not, however, my interest in this paper.

<sup>36</sup> (Erck 2025: 257-58)

<sup>37</sup> (Erck 2024: 8)

particular bad actors if there is some deeper cause that explains why there are so many bad actors behaving in these ways in the first place. In such a case, treating the pattern as merely a coincidence of explanatorily isolated events allows new bad actors to simply take the place of the original ones, ultimately allowing the pattern to persist.

## **4. Against Mixed Views**

Because virtually everyone in the philosophical debate adopts a mixed view, this will be the focus of my argument.<sup>38</sup> Given the prevalence of mixed views, it is surprising how little has been explicitly said about the ways in which individualistic and structural factors are meant to be working together to explain 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 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.

### **4.1. 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, we could say that individualistic factors explain some of these patterns, while structural factors explain others. For instance, thinking about the oppression of women, one might think that individual bias explains why many women have the experience of being catcalled by men, whereas structural factors explain why women tend to become the primary caregivers for their children.<sup>39</sup> We can then “add together” the individualistic and structural explanations of these different patterns to get an overall explanation of oppression – call this the Additive View.

I argue that we should reject the Additive View: the Additive View requires explaining oppression-constituting patterns of injustice by appealing to individualistic factors, but such

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<sup>38</sup> Though, as will be clear, my arguments will also apply to individualist approaches.

<sup>39</sup> See (Cudd 2006; Haslanger 2015; Okin 1989).

explanations are insufficiently robust, thereby inappropriately rendering these patterns as coincidences.

First, notice that the description of a set of events as a pattern— like the pattern of women being catcalled by men— is a matching proposition: it highlights features shared by the set of events. Contrast this with the particular proposition that conjoins independent descriptions of each of the particular catcalling events: e.g., Araceli was catcalled by Adam at t1, Brittany was catcalled by Brian at t2, Camilla was catcalled by Collins at t3, and so on.

The individualistic explanation appeals to the attitudes and actions of the particular individuals involved in these events. It appeals to Adam's bias to explain why event A happened, to Brian's bias to explain why B happened, to Collins' bias to explain why C happened, and so forth. The individualistic explanation offers a good explanation of the particular proposition— it scores well on precision as well as robustness. Recall that precision examines the share of worlds in which the explanans explains the explanandum in the physically possible worlds where the *explanans* is true, whereas robustness examines the share of worlds in which the explanans explains the explanandum in the physically possible worlds where the *explanandum* is true. In the catcalling case, in most worlds where the particular proposition is true, the explanans explains the explanandum. That is, in most worlds where Adam catcalls Araceli at t1, Brian catcalls Brittany at t2, Collins catcalls Camilla at t3, etc., Adam, Brian, Collins, etc. have the relevant sexist biases. The explanation thus scores well on precision. The explanation is also somewhat robust: in most worlds where Adam, Brian, Collins, etc. have these biases, this explains why they catcall women, though in many of these worlds it is not going to be specifically Araceli at t1, Brittany at t2, and so forth whom they catcall. Nevertheless, with respect to the particular proposition, the individualistic explanation fares reasonably well. Intuitively, each man's bias explains his catcalling behavior, and appealing to the aggregate of these individuals' biases offers a good explanation of the set of catcalling events.

However, the individualistic explanation does not offer a good explanation of the *matching* proposition. While the individualistic explanation is, again, highly precise (in most worlds where Adam, Brian, Collin, etc. have these biases, their biases explain the pattern of women being catcalled), it is not very robust. Again, robustness checks whether in the worlds where the explanandum— in this case, the matching proposition — is true, the explanans explains the explanandum. That is to say, it checks whether in worlds where there is a pattern of women being catcalled by men, this pattern is explained by the aggregate of Adam's bias,

Brian's bias, Collin's bias, etc. But there are many nearby possible worlds where there is a pattern of women being catcalled by men, and it is *not* true that Adam, Brian, Collins, and the other particular men involved in the actual events have these biases. For instance, there are many nearby worlds where there is a pattern of women being catcalled by men where Adam's parents delay having a child, such that Adam is never born; perhaps they have a different child, who also absorbs the sexist stereotypes of the environment that Adam is raised in, and who also catcalls women. Likewise, there are many nearby worlds where there is a pattern of women being catcalled by men where Adam in particular resists the sexist stereotypes that he was exposed to, such that *he* is not biased and does not catcall women, and yet where many other men *are* biased and *do* catcall women. Hence, there are many nearby possible worlds where the pattern exists, and yet where this is not explained by the aggregate of Adam's bias, Brian's bias, Collin's bias, etc. The pattern of women being catcalled by men is, thus, not so specifically dependent on these low-level factors.

Thus, although the individualistic explanation does reasonably well at explaining the particular proposition, it does not provide a good explanation of the matching proposition, specifically due to a failure of robustness.<sup>40</sup> Rather, from the perspective of the individualistic explanation, it is merely a coincidence that so many women have the experience of being catcalled by men.<sup>41</sup>

Before moving on, I want to point out how my argument parallels an exchange between Sterken and Haslanger that parallels this argument.<sup>42</sup> Haslanger uses a "Parental Leave" case to illustrate the need for structural explanations.<sup>43</sup> 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 consequently 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.

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<sup>40</sup> This also reflects Erck's *irreplaceability* condition. This condition says that, when we have the goal of offering a causal explanation that identifies appropriate targets for intervention, it matters whether a factor is replaceable— that is, whether the same outcome would have occurred even if that factor were removed. In particular, from the perspective of remediation, we should be selecting irreplaceable factors. Although, as Erck notes, replaceable factors can still be relevant for questions of moral responsibility.

<sup>41</sup> I think this is an intuitive claim, but recall that it is also supported by Bhogal's account of coincidence.

<sup>42</sup> See in particular (Haslanger 2018b: 251-56; Sterken 2018: 183-95)

<sup>43</sup> (Haslanger 2015). See also (Cudd 2006; Okin 1989)

Sterken, however, argues that the best explanation of the case will appeal to the local particularities of the situation. 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.<sup>44</sup> But Haslanger replies that she was taking Lisa's situation as representative of a larger pattern that she was interested in explaining. Sterken is correct that the individualistic explanation best explains Lisa's case considered on its own, but we need the structural explanation in order to explain the pattern that Lisa's case illustrates. Individualistic explanations are good for explaining particular events, but not for explaining the broader patterns.

I conclude that we should reject the Additive View, because it relies on individualistic explanations to explain patterns of injustice. While individualistic explanations are well-suited for *event* explanations, they are not good at explaining the relevant *patterns* of injustice that we are trying to explain. Individualistic explanations are too fine-grained, rendering these patterns of injustice a coincidence, when they are not.<sup>45</sup>

## 4.2. 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 or aspects of the explanation of oppression, or of its parts. Again, given that oppression consists in a cluster of patterns of injustice, these parts would be patterns. To be distinct from the Additive View, both individualistic and structural factors must somehow be part of the explanation of oppression, or of oppression-constituting pattern(s) of injustice, while still being explanatorily independent from each other.<sup>46</sup>

(Saul 2018) 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

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<sup>44</sup> (Sterken 2018: 183-95)

<sup>45</sup> I think it is clear that these patterns and not coincidences, but I will provide an alternative, structural explanation in the next section that provides a more rigorous foundation for this claim.

<sup>46</sup> In the next section we will consider cases where they are *not* explanatorily independent.

these inequitable parental leave policies in the first place?<sup>47</sup> Saul notes that these policies are in place because individuals implemented these policies. Thus, Saul draws attention to an explanatory causal chain: the pattern of mothers becoming primary caregivers is the result of inequitable parental leave policies, but these policies are themselves the result of individuals deciding to institute them.

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 (viz. 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.<sup>48</sup>

My argument against the Causal Chain View, in the first instance, takes the same form as the argument against the Additive View. The Causal Chain View also requires that individualistic factors be able to explain patterns of injustice at the individualistic stages of the chain, but individualistic factors are unable to provide good explanations of these patterns. But at this stage I also want to build on the negative argument by sketching out a contrasting, positive view that demonstrates how we should move from an individualistic approach to a structural approach to explain these patterns. This positive view maintains that we should appeal to structural factors – specifically, to internalized structural factors – at the places where proponents of a mixed view want to appeal to individualistic factors.

My negative argument proceeds by carefully attending to the phenomena involved at the different stages of the explanatory chain.

To begin, we have the target explanandum – in this example, the pattern, exemplified by Lisa, of new mothers rather than new fathers tending to become the primary caregivers for their children. Again, this pattern can be explained by reference to structural constraints like access to paid parental leave.<sup>49</sup> But, as Saul indicates, we can also go further back in the causal

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<sup>47</sup> Saul focuses on a different example with the same structure. See (Saul 2018: 221-23).

<sup>48</sup> We could interpret Saul as suggesting, more strongly, that while structural factors may provide a *proximate* cause of oppression, individualistic factors provide the *ultimate* cause. But given that, as Soon notes, some structuralists make the opposite claim – biases are only a proximate cause of oppression, because structures explain why individuals have these biases – we can consider the weaker claim that individualistic factors are some part of the causal chain, whether ultimate or not. See (Soon 2020: 1861)

<sup>49</sup> 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

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.

What I want to observe is that we here have 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? As before, the individualistic explanation, which appeals to the attitudes of the particular individuals involved in each of the particular cases, does not provide a good explanation of this. Even supposing that it provides a good explanation for the particular proposition— why institution A has such a policy, and why institution B has such a policy, and so on— the individualistic explanation is insufficiently robust to explain the *pattern*. As before, in nearby worlds where the pattern persists, the particular individuals involved could be swapped out or shifted slightly. Once again, the individualistic explanation suggests that the pattern— in this case, the prevalence of inequitable parental leave policies across institutions— is a coincidence, when it is not. The individualistic explanation thereby offers a poor explanation of the pattern.

At this point, I want to move beyond the purely negative argument to consider how we *should* explain these patterns, and particularly, how to do so in a way that makes clear that these are not mere coincidences. Why is it that all of these different institutions have inequitable parental leave policies? Or, to return to a previous example, why is it that so many women have the experience of getting catcalled by men?

My positive suggestion is that we need to appeal to higher-level phenomena in order to adequately explain these patterns. In particular, I want to suggest that we should replace the appeal to individualistic factors with appeals to internalized structure. The result is a kind of mixed view, but one that combines different kinds of structural factors, in contrast to the traditional mixed view that combines individualistic and structural (primarily, institutional) factors.

I understand Ayala-López and Beeghly's reference to the idea of internalized social structure as picking out something like Zheng's Bourdieusian account of habitus, or Haslanger's account of ideology.<sup>50</sup> Drawing on Haslanger's account, ideology, or culture, is

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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.

<sup>50</sup> See (Haslanger 2012, 2016, 2017b, 2017a, 2018a).

constituted by *cultural schemas*.<sup>51</sup> Cultural schemas are public clusters of shared cognitive and affective tools.<sup>52</sup> They can take a variety of forms, such as concepts, beliefs, narratives, scripts, attitudes, expectations, norms, bodily habits, and patterns of inference. 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.<sup>53</sup> Again, 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.<sup>54</sup> This ideology, constituted by the interconnected network of cultural schemas, functions to coordinate our actions and shape our practices across domains of life.

Returning to our explanatory target, 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, and thus why there is a pattern of inequitable parental leave policies. Similarly, to return to the pattern of catcalling considered in the previous section, the practices of socialization that make these gender schemas so widespread can explain why so many men have the sexist biases that lead them to catcall women. Unlike the individualistic explanations that try to explain the pattern of catcalling or the pattern of inequitable parental leave policies by appealing to the aggregate of each individuals’ biases, the explanation in terms of internalized social structure does well with respect to both precision and robustness. The explanation does well with respect to precision, because in many of the worlds where the internalized social structure is in place (that is, where

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<sup>51</sup> To clarify, the sense of culture here is not one that only takes marginalized groups as having cultures. Rather, culture is something that all social milieus have.

<sup>52</sup> To see how the affective dimension can come into play, schemas can shape what kinds of emotional responses are deemed (in)appropriate in certain situations, and the way that schemas shape how situations are interpreted can also shape one’s affective response. Think, for instance, of a woman who feels gross because she has not shaved her legs as a result of internalizing certain schemas. Interestingly, these schemas can continue to exert an emotional pull even if her deliberative position is that she rejects the idea that women ought to shave their legs.

<sup>53</sup> Haslanger calls this coordinated responsiveness a social practice (Haslanger 2018b).

<sup>54</sup> (Haslanger 2017b: 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.

these practices of socialization are in place and these gender schemas are widespread) these structural factors explain the pattern-- be it the pattern of catcalling or the pattern of inequitable parental leave policies. The explanation does well with respect to robustness, because in many of the worlds where these patterns are in place, the internalized structural factors explain the pattern, even if the lower-level details as to who exactly is involved shifts between worlds.

The explanation that appeals to internalized social structure provides a higher-level version of the explanation in terms of particular individuals' attitudes. This higher-level explanation is more proportional to the higher-level patterns we are trying to explain, and so provides a better explanation. In particular, the structural explanation shows why it is not a coincidence that all of these events occur. It is able to explanatorily unify the events, and to make sense of why it is that so many individuals have the kinds of attitudes that they do, such that these patterns are in place.

Further, I would like to note that the picture of internalized structure allows us to go up another level from the level of cultural schemas, and to appeal more comprehensively to ideology (in combination with other kinds of structural factors), to explain the actual target of explanation here: not just lone patterns of injustice, but a stable cluster of persistent, domain-crossing patterns of injustice that constitutes oppression.<sup>55</sup> 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 ideology-constituting 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 affecting individuals across multiple domains of their lives. Connections between different schemas, as well as causal and constitutive connections between schemas and institutions, can provide explanatory connections between the patterns brought about by those schemas and institutions. Moreover, the stability of ideology and institutions also helps explain the stability of oppression. An individualistic approach leaves out all of these important connections, and so lacks the resources to explain the patterns of injustice, let alone these other, higher-level features of oppression.

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<sup>55</sup> Although I focus on institutional factors and ideological factors in the paper, because I think these are better reflected in the way the debate has gone, I want to leave open that other kinds of structural factors can also come into play. For instance, Frye's account of oppression emphasizes that part of oppression is that privileged people systematically benefit at the expense of oppressed people. (Frye 1983) This sets up a kind of structure that systematically incentivizes privileged people to act such as to maintain their elevated status. This is another way in which a structural perspective is helpful for explaining the persistence of oppression. This also points to certain kinds of resistance strategies, which aim at, e.g., making the status quo inconvenient for privileged people. See, for instance, (King Jr 1992)

This picture, then, gives us three interconnected levels of explanation. If we are seeking to explain particular events (or to explain the particular proposition that reflects a conjunction of events), we can appeal to individual attitudes, which generally reflect the internalization of cultural schemas by individuals. If we go up a level and are seeking to explain patterns of injustice, we should appeal to cultural schemas. And if we go up another level, and are seeking to explain oppression, then we should appeal to ideology more broadly.

To be clear, although I have been highlighting the explanatory role of internalized social structure at these three levels, I do not think that internalized social structure does the explanatory work alone. Rather, the claim is that where the traditional mixed view appeals to individualistic factors, we should appeal instead to internalized social structure. At the same time, where the traditional mixed view appeals to institutional structural factors, we should still appeal to these institutional structural factors. My view is in this way a kind of mixed view, except that it is a mix of structural factors instead of a mix of individualistic and structural factors.

Some might object – if the purpose is to identify targets for intervention, isn't it misleading to say that we should be trying to change structures rather than change individuals, because, after all, structural change requires individual change?<sup>56</sup> In response, I would like to reiterate that my approach sees individuals as situated in and helping to constitute structures. Thus, I agree that structural change will require changes at the lower, individual level, and that it is not quite right to say that we should focus on structures “rather than” individuals. But, I would also emphasize that the kind of individual change that we need is one that will constitute a structural change (and, moreover, a change of the right kind). Compare this to trying to melt an ice cube in an environment that is below freezing – what one needs to do is increase the temperature so that it is above 0° C. Doing so will require a lower-level change in the behavior of particles – but specifically, it must be a lower-level change that constitutes a higher-level change that increases the temperature sufficiently. Other lower-level changes that do not achieve this higher-level change will not melt the ice cube. Likewise, structural change requires individual change, but the kind of individual change must be of the sort that will change the structures. Thus, to adequately guide interventions aimed at eliminating oppression, we need the higher-level structural perspective that situates individuals within structures, rather than a

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<sup>56</sup> See (Madva et al. 2024)

perspective that is narrowly focused on individuals.<sup>57</sup> What we need is a wide lens, structural approach.

### 4.3. 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.<sup>58</sup>

In the first instance, the argument here will be the same as for the other possible versions of the mixed view that we have seen. However, I will allow that there is a special case – which does not include racism, sexism, or other stable forms of oppression that have been the focus of the individualist-structuralist debate – in which the Joint Cause View can be successful.

To motivate the Joint Cause View, suppose there is a rule that children who are not in their seats when the first school bell rings get detention.<sup>59</sup> 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.

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<sup>57</sup> As I have noted elsewhere, this can be complementary with other approaches where a focus on individuals is appropriate, such as when it comes to identifying who is responsible for injustice. I also want to note that there is value in individuals exercising their autonomy to make their lives better with the power they have, even if this does not amount to the kind of structural change that eliminate oppression altogether. Individual resistance can make an important difference on a smaller scale, even if it does not eradicate persistent injustice.

<sup>58</sup> What I am calling the Joint Cause View matches Mackie's INUS account of causation, on which it is true that *c* causes *e* if *c* is an Insufficient but Necessary part of a condition that is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient for the occurrence of *e*. For instance, the oxygen is insufficient for starting the fire on its own; but the oxygen is a necessary part of a broader set of conditions that includes, say, the oxygen, the striking of the match, and the flammable material – and these conditions are sufficient, if not necessary, for starting the fire. See (Mackie 1965). Although no one has explicitly taken up this position in the individualist-structuralist debate, I believe that Ross's recent account of structural explanation could be used to develop a Joint Cause View. On Ross's account, structural factors constrain the options that are available to individual agents. Since structures determine the set of choices, and individuals then choose between them, on Ross's view, social structural and individual factors are "'interacting causes' that work together in producing some outcome of interest" (Ross 2024: 177).

<sup>59</sup> This example is adapted from (Haslanger 2012).

The proponent of the mixed view might argue that a purely structural explanation is insufficient in cases of this sort: structural factors, such as the fact that Black and Latinx students often need to rely on public transportation, cannot on their own explain why Black and Latinx students get more detention for tardiness than white students. Rather, we also need to appeal to the fact that teachers choose not to exercise discretion in the same way for different students. For instance, consider a particular occasion in which Eduardo is late to class and his teacher, Ms. Finley, penalizes him with detention. If Ms. Finley had exercised her discretion, Eduardo would not have gotten detention. 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, we need to appeal to a combination of individualistic and structural factors to explain these kinds of cases.

My response is once again that if we are trying to explain oppression, then we are trying to explain patterns of injustice. In this explanatory context, Eduardo's situation is representative of a broader pattern. Thus, while I agree that we should appeal to Ms. Finley's bias to explain Eduardo's particular situation, when we are trying to explain the broader pattern, we should not appeal to Ms. Finley's bias, aggregated with the bias of other individual teachers who are similarly biased. The explanation that appeals to individual's attitudes (in combination with structural factors) is insufficiently robust. In nearby worlds where these patterns exist, these individuals' biases do not explain the pattern. These patterns are not so dependent on the particular individuals who act in these cases, and the individualistic explanation renders it a coincidence that so many teachers exercise discretion in a biased way. Instead, we should appeal to the higher-level, internalized structure explanation. By appealing to cultural schemas and the practices of socialization that make these attitudes widespread, we 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. 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.

Now some might object – why insist that what we care about is explaining the pattern, as opposed to explaining the event or set of events? Why focus on the matching proposition?

For one, given that there is a pattern, leaving the pattern unexplained makes for a bad explanation when a better explanation is on offer – this is the point of saying that the individualistic explanation leaves the pattern a coincidence. But second, this is where differences in purpose come into play. I agree that we can legitimately choose to focus on explaining *Eduardo's* situation (for instance), without seeing it as representative of a broader pattern. Relatedly, if our motivation in providing a causal explanation is to assign moral

responsibility, then it is appropriate to point to (say) Ms. Finley's bias. But when we are focused on remediating oppression – as I have been focused on, and as I think most people in this debate are interested in (at least in part) – then my claim is that we should offer a causal explanation that takes a wide lens, situating Ms. Finley's bias in a broader structure. Applying a narrow lens to Ms. Finley's bias fails to identify or address the cultural schemas and the practices of socialization that lead many people, including Ms. Finley, to develop these biases and act in biased ways.<sup>60</sup> If we care about remediation, therefore, then we should point to the broader structure that underlies these biased attitudes and makes them persistent and widespread, and strive to change things so that people no longer, on the whole, continue to develop these biases.

#### *4.3.1. An Exception*

Stepping back, my argument against different versions of the mixed view has rested on the fact that, typically, where individuals are involved in explanations of oppression, there are many individuals who are behaving in much the same ways. As a result, we need to account for a pattern of individual action, and simply stating that many people have acted in the same way does not provide a good explanation of this; rather, it merely casts these patterns of individual behavior as coincidental.

Putting the issue in this way, however, does suggest a special case that serves as a counterexample to my general argument. 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 best explained by appealing to 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. Note, however, that the tyrant's attitudes toward

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<sup>60</sup> To be clear, I also think that other kinds of structural factors – like institutional factors that generate outcomes that match certain stereotypes – can also play a role in reinforcing individual biases. This is part of the interconnectedness of different kinds of structural factors on my view.

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. 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. In other words we require a joint cause explanation – one that appeals to the social structural factors in conjunction with an individualistic factor (the tyrant's decrees, stemming from her hatred of Gs) – in order to explain the Gs' oppression.<sup>61</sup>

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 stability<sup>62</sup> – it is reasonable to think that this should count as oppression. In this case, there is a caveat to the pure structuralist position that I have been defending: 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.

Despite this, in the majority of cases, and particularly in the real and 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. Instead, we need a purely structural explanation of oppression – one that combines institutional structural factors with internalized structural factors.

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<sup>61</sup> Related to my discussion here, this case reflects what Sterelny calls fragility. Social outcomes are fragile to the extent that the whims and quirks of particular individuals influence outcomes (and robust otherwise). The oppression of the Gs in this case is thus highly fragile – it is up to the whims of one particular person, the tyrant. Racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are not like this, however. They have persisted across many individuals, and despite significant and concerted efforts at change. The persistence of oppression-constituting patterns of injustice, and the stability of oppression more generally (or at least of the paradigm cases of oppression in this debate, like racism and sexism), reflects that oppression is not very fragile. This goes back to the point that explanations of persistent patterns of injustice need to be robust, in Bhogal's sense, in order to reflect this stability and persistence. If we allow for non-stable, non-persistent forms of oppression, then there can be a greater role for individuals in those explanations. See (Sterelny 2016)

<sup>62</sup> 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 stable.

## 5. 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*, specifically through a remedial lens that aims to identify targets for intervention. Using the language of oppression makes clear that at the core of this debate are forms of injustice like racism and sexism that are persistent, patterned, interlinking, domain-crossing, and stable—and thereby elucidates the need to provide an explanation of a whole cluster of patterns of injustice with these features, as opposed to merely explaining why particular unjust events occur.

Second, I have argued that we should, in most cases, reject appeals to individualistic factors in explanations of oppression. Except in one special case, explanations that appeal to individualistic factors fail to be proportional to the patterns of injustice that they seek to explain, specifically because they are insufficiently robust. The problem stems from the fact that in most cases of oppression, explanations that would appeal to individualistic factors need to appeal to actions taken by many individuals, but do so without providing any sense of why these actions (or the attitudes underlying them) are so prevalent. The individualistic explanation thus renders these patterns as coincidences, when they generally are not.

Third, I have 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 (or even higher-level ideologies) in place of lower-level individual attitudes to explain patterns of injustice. I take these internalized social structural factors, in combination with institutional or other kinds of structural factors, to explain oppression. In this way, I also advocate for a kind of mixed view, but one that appeals to a mix of *structural* factors, rather than a mix of individual and structural factors.<sup>63</sup> The structural approach that I favor takes a wide lens that situates individuals within internalized, or ideological, structures, in much the same way that individuals have traditionally been situated within institutional structures in the context of this debate.

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<sup>63</sup> 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, my view resists pitting materialism and idealism against each other, and instead sees both material and ideological factors as playing important explanatory roles. Indeed, I take them to be importantly interconnected.

The higher-level perspective afforded by appealing to institutions and ideology allows us to recognize that individual attitudes and behavior are coordinated such as to give rise to persistent patterns of injustice across domains of life – something that is missing from the individualistic explanation. 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. To draw on a helpful metaphor, both institutions and ideology help set the “grooves in the road” that individuals are then likely to follow.

In this way, the structural picture helps to set targets for intervention when it comes to ameliorating oppression – we must aim to transform the underlying institutions and ideologies that give rise to persistent, domain-crossing, interlinking patterns of injustice. It also helps to illuminate important challenges that must be faced in the 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.<sup>64</sup> 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 to identify strategic points for intervention. For instance, adopting a structural analysis suggests that we should strategically target sanctions that police compliance with unjust practices, rather than merely trying to change individuals’ first-order beliefs about those practices, since people are likely to comply as long as the sanctions are in place, even if they do not endorse the practice.<sup>65</sup> This illustrates that taking a wider lens that situates individuals within ideological structures can help us to identify strategic points for intervention. To be clear, the structural approach – which focuses on identifying targets for intervention – is compatible with approaches that seek to identify responsibility for structural injustice, and which may appropriately take a more individualistic approach in that process. Likewise, I see this structural approach to the etiology of injustice as being compatible with the kind of

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<sup>64</sup> 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).

<sup>65</sup> For relevant discussion of norms and norm change, see (Bicchieri 2016)

complexity theory approach described by Heydari Fard, which describes how individuals can be organized into larger social movements with the potential to disrupt the stability of the oppressive system.<sup>66</sup>

To be sure, more work needs to be done to fill out the positive picture. For now, I conclude that we should abandon traditional mixed views, and instead work on further developing this mixed version of pure explanatory structuralism about oppression.

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<sup>66</sup> (Heydari Fard 2024)

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