

# How is Oppression Structural? Let Me Count the Ways

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Goal: Identify and distinguish between five broad kinds of structuralism about oppression

- Independent but compatible
- Different dimensions or versions of each
- Think about how they can fit together

The kinds of structuralism: (i) causal, (ii) normative, (iii) binding, (iv) class, (v) ameliorative

## I. Causal Structuralism

Answer to the question: “what causally explains oppression?”

Must appeal to social structures to explain oppression (vs. individual beliefs/ actions)

Dimensions:

- A. What counts as social structure?
  - Formal institutions (e.g. governments, banks, universities)
  - Informal or “soft” structures – social practices, social norms, culture
- B. Structures as explanatory entities vs. individuals as embedded in (and thereby constrained by) social structures
- C. Strength of the claim – exclusively, primarily, partly structural explanation

## II. Normative Structuralism

Shift from thinking about causal explanation to the kind or source of the wrong of oppression

Dimensions/ Versions:

- A. Who/ what is responsible for oppression? [Backwards-looking]
  - McKeown (2021), “pure structural injustice” – no identifiable perpetrator; sum of many individuals’ blameless actions
  - Mixed – unjust structural conditions, but there are also blameworthy individuals
- B. Different notions of responsibility
  - Not just backward-looking, but also thinking about accountability
  - Typically, do not go for any kind of pure normative structuralism in this sense
- C. The distinctive kind of wrong that oppression involves
  - E.g. “[A]lthough individuals in the dominant group will often have hostile or derogatory beliefs about the members of an oppressed group and act intentionally to thwart them, such attitudes are neither necessary nor sufficient for oppression and do not capture the nature of the injustice.” (Haslanger 2023, p. 13)

## III. Binding Structuralism

What oppression does to or is like for those who are oppressed

- Frye’s birdcage metaphor – relation between the wires of the cage
- Structure of barriers, harms, wrongs that together diminish the options and/ or reduce the well-being and/or limit the power of the oppressed
- Captured by the notion of the double-bind

#### **IV. Class Structuralism**

Oppression partly consists in or gives rise to a hierarchical structure of social relations between classes, or social groups

Related notions:

- Group-based
- Asymmetry
- Relationally-defined classes

Classic view: hierarchies of race, (socioeconomic) class, gender (etc.)

#### **V. Ameliorative Structuralism**

What needs to change; what should be the target of our interventions

- Could be understood as a re-statement of other kinds of structuralism – e.g. need to dismantle class structure
- Perhaps a better understanding – how exactly do we proceed?
  - Push for institutional reform, try to change the norms
  - vs. educating individuals, teaching individuals coping mechanism
  - Tricky to maintain this distinction

#### **VI. Connections Between Kinds of Structuralism**

Could hold (versions of) these all together, but need not

- E.g. Binding and Class Structuralism → Causal Structuralism → Normative and Ameliorative Structuralism
- Yet Madva (2016) argues Causal Structuralism -/-> Ameliorative Structuralism
- Or you could hold a strong version of normative structuralism (about the nature or kind of wrong) while thinking that individuals are going to factor into the causal explanation
- Or you could think that the best causal explanation is structural but some individuals are still blameworthy for supporting or reinforcing those structures

“Oppression is a structural problem and so requires a structural solution” – what kind of structural problem? In what sense does it require a structural solution?