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Partly Wrong but Wholly Right:  
The Conceptual Conflation of Two Senses of Structure<sup>1</sup>  
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Abstract: An enduring debate within philosophy and the social sciences focuses on the unit of explanation for social phenomena. The two poles of this debate are often identified as methodological individualism and holism/structuralism. In this paper I will argue that at least some of the debate between individualism and structuralism within philosophy has been obscured by a conceptual confusion caused by inconsistencies and imprecision in the use of the term ‘structure’. To delineate two meanings, I introduce a distinction between parts-structuralist claims and whole-structuralist claims. Further, I will argue that the conflation of the two senses of structure lead to an unjustified inference from w-structuralism to p-structuralism and give a preliminary argument against p-structuralism. My aim in the paper is to show that clarity in our use of ‘structure’, particularly in relation to levels of explanation, can resolve at least some of the contemporary debate between individualism and structuralism.

Keywords: social explanation, structural injustice, oppression

## **I. Introduction**

Understanding our current world, especially the most tragic and painful parts, requires an appreciation of structural injustice. We cannot model or evaluate social reality solely by appealing to individual actions, like “Erin harmed Kyra, and Erin is responsible and blameworthy for that harm.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, interpersonal harms occur, but they are situated within a

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<sup>2</sup> Young (2011) calls this the liability model of moral responsibility and contrasts it with the kinds of responsibilities we have for addressing structural injustices. For more, see Chapter Four: A Social Connection Model.

larger set of social circumstances that structure the actions reasonably available to the actors, the understandings of the actions and reactions, and the opportunities and possibilities for repair.

The literature on structural injustice is wide and deep, and growing. It is wide in the sense that the concept of structural injustice is used in many different disciplines from political science and sociology to philosophy<sup>3</sup> and applied medical ethics, as well as by everyday people, community practitioners, activists, and organizers to understand the nature of the social world and their places and responsibilities within it. The literature is deep in the sense that it has a long and varied intellectual history—not always referred to as ‘structural injustice’, but often theorized. This breadth and depth poses a challenge for a philosopher who might prefer to give a unified theory relevant to many accounts. This will not be my aim here. Rather, I will offer a specific intervention into a contemporary debate in the literature in a way that I hope honors the various traditions, scholars, spaces, and places that use the concept.

An enduring and important debate in the literature on social explanation focuses on the unit of explanation for social phenomena. The two poles of this debate are often identified as methodological individualism<sup>4</sup> and holism/structuralism.<sup>5</sup> One of the primary questions is the role that individuals have in causing, maintaining, and ameliorating injustice. Structuralism often downplays the role of individuals. Imagine a claim like this: Instead of focusing on changing individuals, we should reimagine our institutions. Someone might reply: who is going to do the

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the development of the term by Young and its use in philosophy, see McKeown (2021).

<sup>4</sup> For a history and overview of methodological individualism, see Heath (2024). Notably, though connected to the debate that is the focus of this paper, this discussion focuses on a different set of literature and says very little about the contemporary debates focused on structural injustices.

<sup>5</sup> For a history and overview of methodological holism, see Zahle (2023). Again, this entry focuses on a different literature, though there are clear connections. See Heydari Fard (2024) for an overview of both, as well as a third alternative, “the complexity approach,” which allows for explanations that span various, interdependent levels of explanation.

reimagining? Of course, a structuralist is forced to reply that of course *someone* will have to do *something* to change the system, and the debate continues.

In this paper I will argue that at least some of the contemporary debate focused on social explanation within philosophy has been obscured by a conceptual confusion caused by inconsistencies and imprecision in the use of the term ‘structure’. More specifically, I aim to show two things. First, that in some cases the term ‘structure’ is used to identify *parts* of a whole, e.g. a maternity leave policy, while at other times ‘structure’ is used to identify the *whole*, e.g. patriarchy. Depending on the way the term is used, the same claim has different meanings. To delineate the two meanings, I will introduce a distinction between parts-structuralism (in which ‘structure’ refers to types of *parts*) or p-structuralism and wholes-structuralism (in which ‘structure’ refers to *wholes*) or w-structuralism to allow for greater clarity and genuine debates to rise to the surface.

Second, I will argue that the unwitting conflation of p-structuralism and w-structuralism often leads to an unjustified inference from w-structuralism to p-structuralism. W-structuralism is the view that phenomena like oppression<sup>6</sup> must be understood as patterned sets of relations<sup>7</sup>; specific wrong events are as they are in virtue of their relation to a larger whole. P-structuralism is the far more narrow claim that structural entities, like maternity leave policies, as a type are

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use Frye’s (1983) analysis of oppression in which oppression consists in constraints on action for particular identity groups that are patterned such that one’s available options in life are limited in ways that benefit another identity group. I take it that the argument I give here is compatible with at least some other accounts of oppression as long as those accounts have as a necessary condition patterned sets of relations (perhaps not of constraint on action but something else).

<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to use ‘relation’ throughout this paper. ‘Processes’ is another common term. I take it that a process is a type of relation. In discussing terminology, Young (2011, 53) writes, “I shall refer to these aspects of social relation more often as social-structural *processes* than as structures, in order to emphasize the dynamisms of action in institutional contexts.” ‘Practice’ is another term; Haslanger (2015, 3) writes, “social structures are best understood in terms of a network of practices.” This is consistent with Young’s (2011, 53) account in that social structures only exist “in action.”

the primary causal drivers that explain oppression rather than individual entities, like implicit biases. P-structuralism often uses ‘structural’ as a *contrast* to ‘individual’. W-structuralism, on the other hand, does not use ‘structural’ as a contrast to ‘individual’ and may use ‘structural’ interchangeably with ‘systemic’.<sup>8</sup> However, p-structuralist accounts at times use ‘system’ *both* to make a conceptual distinction between ‘structure’ and ‘system’ *and* interchangeably with ‘structure’. This makes it extremely difficult to parse p-structuralism from w-structuralism, and gives way to the faulty inference from w-structuralism to p-structuralism. Interestingly, p-structuralism requires at least some form of w-structuralism, but w-structuralism does not entail p-structuralism. The confused inference from w-structuralism to p-structuralism that arises out of the conceptual conflation of two senses of structure makes it extremely difficult to give clear answers to questions regarding the role individuals play in causing, maintaining, and addressing structural injustices, leads to disagreements that may be primarily caused by terminology use rather than genuine philosophical disagreement, and may further harm targets of oppression.

In the next section, Section II, I will offer a case analysis that illuminates some challenges that arise in discussions of structures. In Section III, I will review some of the ways that we (philosophers, community workers, and everyday people) talk about structures. This discussion will highlight the slippery nature of the term (a point Young 2011 also emphasizes), and I will show that there are two referents for the term ‘structure’: p-structure and w-structure. In Section IV, I will show that claims that appeal to p-structure and claims appealing to w-structure are different in content such that an utterance such as “racism is structural” will have different meanings depending on the sense of structure used in the claim. In Section V, I will argue against

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<sup>8</sup> Methodological individualists will reject w-structuralism on the grounds that all social systems are reducible to the individuals that make them up; the whole doesn’t point to, describe, or explain anything more than the sum of the individuals.

p-structuralism, which claims that structures (as an entity type) are the primary or only relevant *parts* within systems of explanation. I will argue instead for w-structuralism, which claims that our best explanations will focus on the ways that *parts* are structured within systems as *wholes*.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Case Analysis: Rachel's Education

In this section I will offer a case that highlights some of the complexities for thinking about structures and the ways that misunderstanding the nature of structural explanations can cause further harm to individuals and groups who are already targets of structural injustices.

Imagine a case like this:

Rachel has been working on her undergraduate degree for three and a half years. She has been experiencing mental health challenges and struggling in her classes. She has dropped some classes and not done well in others, and as a result, she still has about three more semesters of coursework to complete. Though she would like to finish her degree, Rachel decides that she can no longer continue and does not enroll in courses for next semester. When Rachel tells her friend Suni that she isn't going back, her friend assures her that it isn't her fault because college is messed up, and by that she means that there's something wrong with the structure of higher education.

Rachel feels some relief from Suni's explanation, but she hasn't told Suni the whole story. Rachel says to Suni, "Yeah, college is messed up, but it was really Dr. Miller who made it hard for me to stay in school." Rachel explains that Dr. Miller has been sexually harassing her for the past two years, and despite her requests for him to stop, he did not. Suni replies, "Ugh, the patriarchy is the worst." Rachel feels like Suni doesn't understand the real reason she couldn't finish her degree, which was Dr. Miller's behavior.

Suni's impulse to explain what happened by appealing to the patriarchy isn't inaccurate. She's right that the patriarchy will feature in the explanation of Rachel's experience. Dr. Miller's actions are situated within a larger patriarchal system that gives rise to the background conditions that make his harassment of Rachel possible. This system includes practices and procedures at

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<sup>9</sup> In her paper "Systemic and Structural Injustice: Is There a Difference?" Haslanger (2023, 3) maintains a similar distinction in which systems are "a set of things working together in a way that forms a whole" and structures are "the networks of relations that hold between the parts [within a system]." While this analysis adds to our understanding of systems and structures in relation to thinking about wholes and parts, it does not specifically address the conceptual confusion I address in this paper.

the institution, mental healthcare accessibility, power dynamics between faculty and students, ideologies and media that objectify women, norms of interaction that support Dr. Miller's behaviors, and internalized oppression that may keep Rachel from reporting or speaking out.

One benefit of Suni's explanation is that it makes it clear that it isn't Rachel's fault—there are larger structures at play that make her vulnerable to harm and limit her available options. Rachel is the target of oppression. However, Suni's explanation doesn't make it immediately clear that it is Dr. Miller's fault, either. Let's consider a case that centers Dr. Miller's wrongdoing:

After talking with Suni, Rachel decides to confide in another friend. Rachel shares with Elizabeth the exact same details about her experiences that she shared with Suni. Elizabeth firmly replies, "Dr. Miller is such a creep. He should be fired and put in jail. Then you could come back and finish up your degree." Rachel feels that although Elizabeth acknowledged the important role that Dr. Miller played in Rachel's challenges, she is missing the larger picture.

Elizabeth's response to Rachel is the all too common "bad apple" explanation. The implicit claim within these types of explanations is that injustice is caused by the wrongful attitudes and actions of individual people and that removing these people from their positions will ameliorate injustice. This kind of explanation highlights the importance of structural explanations because "bad apple" explanations like these are clearly insufficient for explaining why things happen the way that they do—especially harms that occur in patterned ways across space, time, and context.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Rachel is thinking, "What? Even if Dr. Miller is fired, I won't be able to come back—I'm too far behind, I can't take on any more student debt, and I'll be too embarrassed to show my

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<sup>10</sup> My use of the phrase, "why things happen the way they do" comes from the ways that Ruth Wilson Gilmore often talks about her work as a geographer. Learning from her work has shaped my understanding of structuralism. For a collected volume of essays, see Gilmore (2022). Haslanger's (2016) account of social structural explanation also couches explanations as answers to "why" questions.

face. Plus, the system that allowed Dr. Miller to harass me is still in place; nothing will have changed.”

Unfortunately for our abilities to support our friends, there are many mistakes we can make when navigating and recognizing structural harms while also validating the experiences of those we love. As highlighted above, the strong structural and strong individual reactions that are meant to support Rachel are two opposing extremes.

The strong structural reaction like the one given by Suni emphasizes the high-level system of patriarchy—the umbrella that organizes everything else. Appeals to systems like this are intuitive in some contexts. For example, in my ethics courses, “society” is the most common answer regarding who is to blame for complex social problems like housing insecurity, inflation, abortion access, and racism. When we give an explanation that focuses on high-level systems, we typically won’t need to include anything specific to the case, and we can explain lots of different things by appealing to the same system. We can appeal to the patriarchy not only to explain why Rachel won’t be able to finish her degree, but also why Suni is afraid to walk alone at night and why Elizabeth thinks it’s gross that her roommate doesn’t shave her legs.

On the other hand, we might emphasize individuals—their biases, dispositions, or behaviors—without appealing to the larger context. When we do this, we won’t have much to say about patterns of harm or the conditions under which that harm was made possible or even likely. In some cases of harm or wrongdoing, such as those that can be addressed using a liability model or one that is similar to the liability model, emphasizing individuals will be just fine. Appealing to the larger context isn’t necessary for understanding why things happened the way they did in that instance and there isn’t an interest in contextualizing that instance as participating in a pattern across space and time. However, failing to situate Dr. Miller’s actions within a structural

analysis won't explain that if it wasn't Dr. Miller, it would've been someone else (either harassing Rachel or another student). As Young (1990, 41) writes, "We cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions." Strong individualist explanations can't explain why young women persistently face sexual harassment in higher education across institutions in various places, spaces, and times.

Avoiding a strong individualist explanation and situating Dr. Miller's actions in context doesn't preclude us from asking questions about Dr. Miller's particular features that led him to be a predator. His occupancy of the faculty member role that is situated within the system of higher education does not determine that he will harass Rachel. Though the role is structured in such a way that makes this an available or attractive action, there are plenty of others who occupy that same role that do not participate in predatory behavior. This means there is something about Dr. Miller to investigate. Elizabeth is right; Dr. Miller is a creep.

My strategy thus far in my analysis of this case is informed by Harris' (2018, 274) argument for a descriptive actuarial account of racism. In this paper, he argues that description-first accounts of suffering and tragedy avoid the kinds of anomalies that can come from the search for a unified casual structure. He writes, "the approach foregrounds realities where contradictions are not resolved, true interests are not realized, and human nature nor powers, abilities, or capacities realized." This approach also allows us to begin our analysis of oppression in the lived experiences of people, while also allowing us to build a structural understanding of why things happen the way they do across time and space. The current dialectic in the individualist versus structuralist debate makes it difficult to reconcile the different aims present in the strong structural and strong individualist approaches. Instead, by allowing the lived

realities of human beings to foreground our discussions and observing how terms are used in different ways in various contexts, we can increase our clarity in ways that allow us to then give better explanations.

### **III. Parts & Wholes**

One primary layer of complexity for all cross-disciplinary work is that a particular (sub-) discipline may have a dominant way of using a term that is inconsistent with another (sub-)discipline. When these literatures come together, work needs to be done to avoid conceptual confusion and inferential errors. Related to this layer of complexity is that ‘structure’ and ‘system’ are often used *interchangeably* within and across pieces of writing. For example, in Young’s (1990, 41) account of oppression, she uses “systemic constraints,” “systemic character,” and “systematically reproduced” to describe structures. In describing Giddens’ (1979) view, Young (2011, 60) writes, “Structures are *properties* of social systems or collectivities.” In this section, I will highlight some of the myriad ways that ‘system’ and ‘structure’ are used. My purpose here is to highlight terminological and conceptual differences in the ways we use these terms across contexts.

#### *III.I Intervention*

I was recently at an awards event for a local non-profit whose mission is to reduce homelessness. In the opening remarks, there were many appeals to systems. In this case, ‘system’ was used as “the system,” as in *the* specific system that works to address housing insecurity. The primary sentiment was that the system is imperfect. There are many hoops to jump through to access housing, but swift action is vital; the prevention of homelessness when a person is on the brink of homelessness can reduce the risk for persistent or recurrent homelessness in the future. The discussion of the challenges within the homelessness prevention

system served as the introduction of the individual award winners. Although the system is clearly imperfect and perhaps even admittedly unethical as a whole, the introduction of the awards emphasized that individual people—the ones who navigate this complex and imperfect system—are the real champions of the work and worthy of celebration.

In this non-profit context, the term ‘system’ refers to the specific set of laws, policies, social roles, and practices that constrain and enable the prevention of homelessness. This is a fairly common way of using ‘the system’, especially as we identify difficulties for individuals in navigating the various requirements for “success” within the system, e.g. the foster care system, the criminal justice system, the healthcare system, etc. Often these systems are put in place to address or mitigate harms and injustices, and yet many times they fail to mitigate, and may even contribute, to further harm. ‘System’ used this way refers to a whole with various interlocking parts and can be used interchangeably with w-structure.

To connect this back to Rachel’s story, one relevant system (whole) might be the Title IX reporting system. The reporting system is created to prevent and address a host of harms, which it many times fails to do or do well. Within the functioning of this system, there may be an individual in a role (part) who is extremely helpful (or not) in aiding Rachel’s ability to navigate the Title IX system. Like the homelessness prevention system, individuals play an important role in supporting targets of oppressive systems in navigating the systems that are meant to address the harms that arise from those oppressive systems.

### *III.II Theory*

A central question within the literature on structural injustice has been the relationship between individuals, structures, and systems. The aim is to make sense of the ways that individuals are at the same time enabled and constrained within systems, as well as agents that

matter for how things turn out. It is a mistake to think that structuralists think that individuals don't matter; as Young (2011, 60) argues, "Few theorists of social structures deny that individual actors produce them." And yet, this question is a focus within the literature.

For example, understanding the role of implicit bias in explaining various forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism, among others, has been a central issue in the individualism versus structuralism debate. Many have argued that a focus on implicit bias misses the point—the real cause of oppression is structural, not individual (Banks & Ford 2011; Haslanger 2015). Others have responded that implicit biases are an important part of the picture (Bicchieri 2016, Madva 2016, Soon 2020). Soon (2020, 1858) claims that their approach to implicit bias "helps us see structure and individuals as two components of a dynamical system." By situating implicit biases as social memory schemas that are internalized by individuals, we can see the ways that implicit bias is a structural entity and something that exists in the heads of individuals. This approach highlights the possibilities for including individuals in a structural account of injustice (see Davidson and Kelly (2018) for a similar approach focused on the internalization of social norms).

Within dynamical systems, the parts are co-constitutive and fundamentally relational. The entities are what they are only in relation to each other, and they mutually support the nature of the other through feedback loops. Thus, for Soon (2020, 1872), "individuals and structures independently influence each other. Individual interactions create a social schema, which then is internalized into individual heads, and so on in a feedback loop." On Soon's view, individuals and structures are the constitutive, relational parts of the whole system.

For a similar view focused on white ignorance, building from Mills (1997) among others, Martín's (2020) account argues that we should hold a structural view of white ignorance. On this

view, white ignorance is produced and maintained by systems that give rise to racial injustice and this ignorance plays an active role in sustaining the system that produces this injustice.

Individual instances of ignorance are in the minds of people, and we should think of this ignorance as participating in ignorance that is a structural part of a system that produces racial violence.

These views are connected to Haslanger's (2012, 2015, 2016) view that systems (wholes) are made up of practices that conform to schemas in response to resources (all various parts). Schemas are *internalized* by individuals and individuals *behave* in patterned ways, but individuals are in an important sense not constitutive of the social structure, though the actions of those individuals allow for its existence.<sup>11</sup> For Haslanger, systems are structured parts; social structures are the networks of relations that are produced by actions that are constrained by the available material and conceptual resources. On her account, individuals and structures are not both entities with systems. Structures are *relations* within the system, and individuals produce and are constrained by the structures but are not themselves the relations (but are what is related).

Within this context, how should we conceptualize the parts and wholes for Rachel's experience? Perhaps the system in Rachel's case is Higher Education, while the structures are Title IX policies and the offices that enact those policies, and one of the individuals is a specific Title IX coordinator at her school. One difference between Soon's emphasis and Haslanger's is that Haslanger's might conceptualize the Title IX coordinator as enacting the structured parts of the system (whole) through their behaviors rather than as a part of the system.

### *III.III Envisioning*

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<sup>11</sup> Also similar to Young (2011, 53, 59-62) who asserts that structures exist only through action or are produced by the actions of individuals.

In a discussion of the political modernization proposed as a method for eliminating racism, Ture and Hamilton (1967, 41) lay out a terminology for understanding structures and systems:

We should at this point distinguish between ‘structures’ and ‘system’. By system, we have in mind the entire American complex of basic institutions, values, beliefs, etc. By structures, we mean the specific institutions (political parties, interest groups, bureaucratic administrations) which exist to conduct the business of that system. Obviously, the first is broader than the second. Also, the second assumes the legitimacy of the first. Our view is that, given the illegitimacy of the system, we cannot then proceed to transform that system with existing structures.

Like in the previous two contexts, ‘system’ is used to refer to wholes and ‘structures’ are the parts of that whole. Consistent with Soon, ‘structures’ are meant to refer to specific types of parts within the system, namely the institutions within the system (not the individuals). Ture and Hamilton do not discuss individuals in this passage, but an understanding of individuals as parts of the system is consistent with the overall view.

### *III.IV Application to the Case*

Each of the contexts focus on different levels of explanation; some focus on the bigger picture, while others are more specific. In Rachel’s case, Suni appeals to the high-level system of patriarchy, which partly shapes the lower-level system of higher education, as well as Rachel’s particular institution, mental healthcare systems, Title IX policies and enforcement, student loans, and so on. This big picture explanation can remain in place even when we zoom in and give more fine-grained detail, but upon zooming in, a structure within the system of patriarchy may become the relevant system with relational parts that constitute that system.

Here’s how we might think of the relevant entities in Rachel’s case within the three discussed contexts:

#### *Intervention*

The System: Title IX (whole)

Individual: Title IX Coordinator (part)

### *Theory*

Dynamical System: Higher Education (whole)

Structure: Title IX policies and enforcement (parts)

Individual: Title IX coordinator (part)

### *Envisioning*

System: Patriarchy (whole)

Structures: Higher Education & Title IX policy and enforcement (parts)

On its face, we might see a tension in the various contexts because the same entities are labeled as systems (wholes) in some contexts while in others they are labeled as structures (parts).

However, the three contexts are focused on different levels of explanation due to the goals of the context. Zooming in and out from higher to lower-level explanations may change whether the entity in question is a whole or a part of that whole at that level of explanation.

Within the Intervention context, Title IX is the relevant whole, while in the Theory and Envisioning contexts, Title IX is a structure within a whole. Within the Envisioning context, Higher Education is a relevant structure (part), while the Theory context, it is the relevant system (whole). What we count as a whole or as a part can shift depending on the context and level of analysis. For example, Ture and Hamilton frame “the entire American complex” as the whole (in this passage), but of course “America” is a part of a larger whole whose relations give rise to states, governance, borders, citizens, etc. This can be confusing, but we can increase the clarity of our analysis through clearly identifying parts and wholes. My purpose in this paper is not primarily focused on motivating a particular use of the words ‘system’ or ‘structure’. Rather, my suggestion is that differentiating between parts and wholes reduces the potential for conflation and misinterpretation, especially across disciplines.

## **IV. Two Types of Structure**

As I have shown above, there are inconsistencies in the ways we use the terms ‘structure’ and ‘system’. This can lead to difficulties for resolving or even having meaningful conversations about the individualism versus structuralism debate within the literature on social explanation. My suggestion is that the conceptual confusion arises due to the deployment of two different senses of structure. I will flesh out the distinction between two types of structure: p-structure and w-structure.

#### *IV.I P-Structure and P-Structuralist Claims*

As shown above through discussion of the term ‘structure’, structures are often seen as parts of wholes. For example, remember that Soon (2020) thinks of structures as a component of dynamical systems alongside individuals, and Ture and Hamilton describe structures as the specific institutions within the larger American system. However, a stronger claim can be made while still thinking of structures as parts of a whole. This is that structures are the only kind of parts within a whole that are causally or explanatorily relevant (Martín manuscript). This is what I will call a p-structuralist claim. In an p-structuralist claim, the word ‘structure’ identifies the primary *entity types* in the causal chains that lead to oppression. Someone makes a p-structuralist claim about oppression when they argue that procedures, policies, laws, and institutions are the primary entities in the causal chains that lead to oppression.<sup>12</sup>

For contrast, a person makes a p-individualist claim if they argue that the primary types of entities in causal chains that lead to oppression are individual attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, or actions. I don’t focus on p-individualism because it is relatively uncommon in the

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<sup>12</sup> Note that one could make a p-structural claim about a specific case within a specific context for a particular aim. This doesn’t necessarily commit them to global p-structuralism. I am interested here in p-structural claims that center on explaining oppression across contexts and aims.

contemporary debate (Garcia (1996) is a notable exception)<sup>13</sup> and doesn't lead to the same conceptual confusions. This is because individualists don't make w-individualist claims and reject w-structuralist claims.

One reason to think that p-structuralist claims are being made within the individualist versus structuralist debate is that implicit bias is a common starting point. Structuralists worry that a focus on implicit bias misrepresents the kinds of entities that will be primarily featured in the causal chains that lead to oppression. Given that implicit bias is taken to be an individualistic entity, the primary contrasting class meant by "structural" is then non-individual entities, such as policies, laws, and even physical objects like roads and streetlamps and grocery stores. One way of being a structuralist is to make p-structuralist claims. Let's imagine that Rachel tells her story to another friend, Zainub, who is a p-structuralist.

Rachel shares her story with her friend, Zainub. This time she adds in some detail about the Title IX coordinator at her school. Rachel explains that the Title IX coordinator didn't seem to take her complaints seriously and was difficult to reach over email. He also missed their last meeting, which led Rachel to make a final decision not to return to school. Zainub replies, "That's awful. The Title IX coordinator is such a hard job, and they have so little institutional support. Our school needs to dedicate more resources to that office." Although Rachel agrees with Zainub, she feels like Zainub didn't acknowledge the role of the specific Title IX coordinator in failing to handle her case appropriately.

Zainub clearly identifies the ways that the Title IX coordinator is constrained and enabled by the existing relations within the system. The relations between his role and other features of the system make it unlikely that he will be able to fulfill the role's expressed purpose, and Zainub's reaction highlights that the unique facts about the Title IX coordinator would *not* be sufficient for understanding why Rachel's case was handled so poorly. However, her reaction also fails to explore any of the individual features of the Title IX coordinator that may have contributed to the

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<sup>13</sup> It is not the case that individualism of all types is a minority position in all literatures. For example, Heath (2024) writes, "there are very few social scientists who describe themselves as methodological holists."

poor handling of Rachel's case. Though Zainub's explanation is accurate in identifying the structures that constrain the Title IX coordinator, it doesn't give us any room to think about the individual. This makes Zainub's account a p-structuralist account of Rachel's experience.

#### *IV.II W-Structures and W-Structuralist Claims*

The second kind of structural claim is focused on the relations *between* entities that are parts of a whole system. These relations are patterned across time and space in ways that increase some people's vulnerabilities to harm. The system and the relation between parts can then be used to explain particular instances of harm, domination, and oppression. I take this to be the most basic and central claim of structural claims in the literature on structural injustice. I distinguish it here as a unique kind of claim to highlight the contrast between w-structural claims and p-structural claims.

With respect to the contemporary debate between individualism and structuralism, a conceptual confusion can arise easily when p-structuralist claims and w-structuralist claims are not distinguished from one another. For example, if I make the claim that "All oppression is structural," this claim could have one of two meanings. If I intend to make a p-structural claim, then I mean something like: The primary (or only) entities that will be present in the causal chain of oppression are structural entities like institutions, laws, policies, physical architecture, etc. If I intend to make a w-structuralist or systemic claim, then I mean something like: A necessary condition of oppression is that the vulnerability to harm for some groups of people is caused by hierarchical or unjust relations between entities of any type, e.g. individual persons, policies, laws, institutions, etc. These are very different claims! Confusion arises when 'structure' is used to mean both p-structure and w-structure or when p-structuralism is assumed to follow directly from an acceptance of w-structuralism. For example, we may be tempted to accept the position

that “changing people’s hearts and minds doesn’t matter” if we accept that “gender-based oppression is structural.” While we might accept a weaker version that *not all* hearts and minds will have to change for patterned sets of relations to change within a system, it doesn’t follow that *no one* will have to change their mind or their heart (afterall, some group of people is going to have to change the relations).

## V. Rejection of P-Structuralism

Much of the debate that I am concerned with in this paper has focused on the kinds of things we should talk about if we are interested in ameliorating oppression. We might hear questions like: Is it useful to change hearts and minds? Can we address racial inequity by making individuals “not racist” (in the sense of not holding overtly racist views)? Does implicit bias cause inequality in education? Does the average person’s ignorance regarding global affairs cause suffering? Do individuals even matter? It often seems like the structuralist answer is overwhelmingly: no. Banks and Ford (2011) write:

While we do not doubt the existence of unconscious bias, we do doubt that contemporary racial bias accounts for all, or even most, of the racial injustice that bedevils our society.<sup>14</sup> The racial injustices that most trouble us are substantive—educational failure, large-scale incarceration, segregated and impoverished communities—and stem from a complex interplay of economic, historical, political and social influences.

On my reading, this is a p-structuralist claim (denying that an individual part of a system, in this case implicit bias, is relevant for explaining racial injustice) followed by a w-structural claim (asserting that wholes, in this case the large-scale systems of housing, education, and criminal justice, are most relevant for explaining racial injustice). Individuals and their psychological

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<sup>14</sup> Of note here is that it seems like any appeal to individual-level entities or phenomena is often interpreted as an assertion of p-individualism or the view that the only entities in a causal chain are non-structural/individual entities, but including implicit bias in an account doesn’t require or even suggest that it is the only type of entity in the causal chain that explains a particular instance of harm or patterns of vulnerability to harm.

processes don't matter much for explaining oppression, and further, p-structuralism is necessary for or follows directly from w-structuralism.

But sometimes individuals do really matter. Haslanger (2020, 27) writes, "These are strategies [recounting the history of identities and renegotiating identity norms] that focus on thinking differently about ourselves. Such rethinking is, of course, tremendously important. But as I see it, the problem isn't primarily in our heads, but in the unjust structures in which we are embedded." There's a sense of being torn here—individuals are *tremendously important*. And yet there is still a clear tendency toward p-structuralism; the kinds of entities that matter are "not in the head"; they are non-individualistic entities. Similar to Banks and Ford above, the quick succession of p- and w-structural claims make it seem like the claims are the same kind of claim or that w-structural claims necessitate or provide evidence for p-structural claims.

To increase the clarity in the debate, Soon (2021) identifies two kinds of structural explanation: those autonomous from psychology and those that are not. For example, if we aim to explain ongoing racial housing segregation, our psychologically autonomous explanation will focus on the ways that policy shapes the available options in ways that incentivize the maintenance of segregation in ways that do not require any psychological phenomenon such as racial ill will or racist attitudes. In contrast, our psychologically non-autonomous explanation will also include the various ways that individual people have racist attitudes that may contribute to the decisions they make or what incentives they have, e.g. ideas of what counts as a "good school." These non-autonomous explanations will acknowledge that the ideas in the heads of individual people are related to non-individual features like material resource distribution, institutions, and norms. The distinction introduced by Soon is very helpful for clarifying the debate between individualism and structuralism because it helps us see that there are some

structural explanations that include psychological features. These kinds of explanations are consistent with making a w-structuralist claims about an experience, event, or phenomenon. However, only acknowledging the existence or role of non-autonomous social structural explanation requires making p-structural claims because it requires limiting the types of entities that one appeals to in giving their structural explanation. This is what we see in the quotes from Haslanger and Banks and Ford above.

My view is that the p-structuralist answer to the question, “Do individuals matter?” is a symptom of the conflation between p-structuralist claims and w-structuralism claims, as well as an inferential error regarding the relationship between p-structuralism and w-structuralism. The two kinds of claims are treated as the same claim when they are in fact very different in kind. P-structuralist claims are focused on parts and are about the kinds of entities that feature most prominently in explanations of or the causal chains that produce oppression, while w-structural claims are about wholes and focus on the relations between entities. W-structuralism is taken as evidence for p-structuralism, but this relies on a faulty inference.

As we saw with Rachel’s story above, it is important that we can give accounts of structural injustice that include both individuals and institutions. Let’s explore another example. For those who experience oppression based on body size, oppression structures their lives because people have anti-fat bias, norms around body size mean they receive social sanction, and some laws allow for or even support their mistreatment. At every turn, there are various entities that hang together to constrain options and shorten life, especially as it relates to anti-fat biases, ideologies, and policies within the healthcare system.

Just like Rachel will find it useful to appeal to Dr. Miller when explaining her experiences, fat people will appeal to individual people and their beliefs and (in)actions to

explain their experiences and the experiences they share with others. Like Rachel will appeal to Dr. Miller's internalized ideologies that participate in and support the objectification of women as sexual objects available for domination, fat people will also give an account of *why* anti-fat beliefs and attitudes are so pervasive. This explanation will appeal to structural entities like ideologies, ignorance, conceptual resources, medical school curricula, and more. Further fat people will likely appeal to individual dispositions not to challenge oppressive relations and increased vulnerabilities to harm or domination, and even if these individual-level dispositions are a part of a pattern, the individual dispositions still have a role to play in the explanation they will give of their oppression. Taken together, the appeals to various entity types and the patterns of relations between them will constitute a w-structural account of fat oppression.

Giving an account of oppression requires w-structuralist claims. These kinds of claims allow us to see that the harms and vulnerabilities to harm are patterned, persistent, and pervasive. We might think of Frye's (1983) birdcage metaphor for oppression here: it isn't any one wire (entity) but the pattern of interlocking wires that work together to constrain action that is oppressive. However, these w-structuralist claims decidedly do not require or even include p-structuralist claims. They do not make p-structural claims because the accounts explicitly appeal to and intentionally include what *counts as* non-structural entities (individuals and their attitudes, beliefs, and actions) within their w-structuralist claims.

As we saw in the case of Suni's reaction to Rachel, dismissing Dr. Miller from her explanation could very likely lead to a failure of recognition of Rachel's experience. For this reason, I want to make the stronger claim that explanatorily sufficient accounts of oppression will not be p-structuralist. Rather, our accounts ought to be pluralistic about kinds or types of entities that are present or could be primary within the casual chain of oppression while

emphasizing that our most pressing social problems are structural in the w-structuralist sense. These accounts will appeal to individual entities like beliefs and dispositions as causally important parts of the patterned relations that constitute oppression right alongside structural entities like laws and the built environment. Distinguishing between p-structuralism and w-structuralism allows us to highlight the various levels of explanation that we might want to engage, as well as the ways in which the same entity will be a *part* at one level of explanation and a *whole* at another level. Seeing this clearly allows us to avoid the limitations of p-structuralism while fully embracing a structuralist account of oppression.

## **VI: Structures All the Way Down**

I have argued that we ought not make p-structuralist claims. However, one might object that the *only* available entities to which one can appeal within an explanation are structural entities, which seems to justify a p-structuralist claim or approach to social theorizing. There just aren't any existing individual entities as a type! In other words, when we identify a human person as an individual entity in terms of entity-type, we've just made a mistake. For example, a revolutionary thinker and organizer, James Boggs emphasized, "It is only in relationship to other bodies, and many somebodies, that anybody is somebody" (Lee 2013). While we use the term 'individuals' to point out tokens, individual human persons are not tokens of individual entities with respect to their type. Instead, they are structural entities with respect to their type: individual human persons are structural entities.

We can also do this for entities that are typically described as individualistic entities like biases, attitudes, beliefs, and actions. This is similar to the strategy Soon (2020) takes up for implicit bias. While implicit biases are in the heads of individual people, Soon writes, "...associations between concepts and stimuli exhibit patterns of stability across individuals in a

given environment. Stability means that certain concepts tend to reliably activate together among different individuals” (Soon 2020, 1869). We can reconceptualize the individual entity as a structural entity, as suggested by Martín (manuscript).

This “structures all the way down” approach sounds like p-structuralism; however, most of the time, it is not. Rather, it is a confirmation of w-structuralism; all (or almost all) entities are fundamentally relational and existing only within interlocking patterns within systems (as parts of wholes that are wholes with parts and whose wholes are parts of other wholes). Rather than excluding individual human persons from the analysis, this approach emphasizes the structural nature of individuals. Rather than affirming p-structuralism, we see a further rejection of ‘individuals’ as the contrast class for ‘structures’ as individuals turn out to be structures, too!

We might think this completely resolves the debate between individualism and structuralism with respect to the conceptual conflation of the two senses of structure. But, as a practical matter of language use patterns, I don’t think so. The fundamentally relational view of persons does not justify claims like, “Individuals don’t matter for explaining oppression” or “Implicit biases are not relevant to explaining racism.” One might reply, well what I mean is: individual persons—when operating with a mistaken ontology about the nature of persons—*wouldn’t matter* for explaining oppression, but individuals thought of this way don’t exist; individuals are parts (which are also wholes with parts) within wholes (which may also be parts of wholes). The view I present in this paper is compatible with this latter claim as it is not a true p-structuralist claim as I have described. However, the “shortcut” version—“Individuals don’t matter”—is disguised as falling out of w-structuralism in ways that lead to the conceptual conclusion that I addressed in this paper.

## **VII: Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that many philosophers (and those in other disciplines) are conflating two senses of structure in their analyses. This conflation causes them to make a faulty inference from systemic or w-structural claims to p-structural claims or to assume that giving an account of structural injustice requires that we adopt the view that the only or most important *parts* of a system for explaining injustice will be non-individualistic entities. I have instead given an argument for a structuralism that does not constrain the kinds of entities that can figure in accounts of oppression and acknowledges that the same entity will at times be a part and other times a whole, depending on the level of explanation one is most interested at a particular time. This intervention will allow for greater clarity in the individualism versus structuralism debate in social structural explanation and allow us to give dynamic description-first accounts of oppression that honor the lived experiences of those who experience oppression.

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