

Structural Racism and the Explanation of Durable Racial Inequality

César Gherardo Cabezas Gamarra

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
under the Executive Committee  
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2020

© 2020

César Gherardo Cabezas Gamarra

All Rights Reserved

## **Abstract**

### Structural Racism and the Explanation of Durable Racial Inequality

César Gherardo Cabezas Gamarra

I argue that structural racism offers a unique explanation of durable racial inequality. However, the lack of consensus over the meaning of structural racism makes it difficult to theorize its explanatory power. To overcome this challenge, I develop an account of structural racism in terms of racially oppressive social structures. Structural racism explains durable racial inequality insofar as it motivates agents who benefit from relations of race-based advantage/disadvantage to act in ways that preserve those advantages. This motivational effect of structural racism ensures the support of enough advantaged agents to maintain racial inequality. I develop this explanatory claim with reference to a recent sociological case study of a U.S. high school in which white parents support social practices that reinforce racial disparities in students' educational attainments. Given its explanatory power, structural racism is key for developing a comprehensive analysis of the resilience of racial inequality, and for devising effective strategies to solve this social problem.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Conceptualizing (Structural Racism) .....	9
1.1. Racism in Public Discourse .....	9
1.2. The Philosophical Debate on Racism: Three First-Order Questions and Two Second-Order Questions.....	11
1.2.1. Shelby's First Second-Order Question: A Pluralist and Ameliorative Proposal.....	14
1.2.2. Shelby's Second Second-Order Question: Clarifying Personal v. Political Morality and Individual v. Structural Racism.....	19
Chapter 2: What are Social Structures? .....	26
2.1. The Holist Conception of Social Structure .....	27
2.2. The Practice Theory Conception of Social Structure .....	30
2.3. Some Clarifying Remarks on the Practice Theory Tradition.....	33
2.4. A Working Account of Social Structure: Bringing Together the Two Traditions .....	40
2.5. What Role do Social Structures Play in Social Explanation?.....	42
Chapter 3: What is Oppression? .....	48
3.1. Oppression is Structural.....	51
3.2. Oppression is Relational .....	57
3.2.1 Oppression is a Social Relation between Social Groups.....	57
3.2.2. Privilege: The Correlate of Oppression.....	62
3.3. Oppression is Durable.....	70

3.4. The Normativity of Oppression .....	78
Chapter 4: What is Structural Racism? .....	82
4.1. Structural Racism and the Centrality of Hierarchical Racial Schemas.....	83
4.2. Structural Racism, Racialized Groups and Racialized Positions.....	88
4.3. Structural Racism Reproduces Oppressive Relations between Racialized Groups .....	97
Chapter 5: Structural Racism and Other "Racisms" .....	103
5.1. What is Racism? A Second Approximation to the Debate .....	103
5.2. Racism: Ideological, Individual, Institutional, and Structural .....	105
5.2.1. Ideological Racism.....	107
5.2.2. Individual Racism .....	110
5.2.3. Institutional Racism .....	115
5.2.4. How Are Ideological, Individual and Institutional Racism Involved in the Reproduction of Structural Racism.....	121
Chapter 6: How Structural Racism Explains Durable Racial Inequality .....	130
6.1. The Individualism-Holism Debate.....	130
6.1.1. The Ontological Individualism-Holism Debate .....	130
6.1.2. The Methodological Individualism-Holism Debate.....	133
6.2. What is a Structural Explanation?.....	137
6.2.1. Lisa's Case Revisited.....	138
6.2.2. How do Structural Explanations Work?.....	141
6.2.3. A Preliminary Overview of my Structural Explanation .....	143
6.3. The Riverview High Case .....	144

6.3.1. Assessing Other Explanations of the Racial Achievement Gap at Riverview High ...	147
6.3.2. The Tracking System and its Role in Reproducing the Racial Achievement Gap at Riverview .....	152
6.3.3. Positional Interests and their Application to the Riverview High Case .....	155
6.3.4. Riverview High, Structural Racism and Emergent Properties .....	157
6.4. How Structural Racism Explains Durable Racial Inequality: The Riverview High Case	161
6.4.1. What is the Explanandum? .....	162
6.4.2. What is the Explanans? .....	163
Conclusion .....	172
Bibliography .....	176

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my doctoral adviser Robert Gooding-Williams for his generosity in terms of intellectual and professional guidance, encouragement, support, and for first introducing me to the possibility of studying racism from a philosophical perspective. I am also very grateful to Frederick Neuhouser for his intellectual guidance in the early years of my doctoral studies and for his initiative in fostering a community of social philosophers at Columbia from which I benefited immensely. Many thanks also to Michele Moody-Adams and Axel Honneth for investing their time in this dissertation, as well as in various insightful philosophical conversations throughout my time at Columbia. My sincere gratitude to my external examiner, Tommie Shelby, whose work on the philosophy of racism helped me move this project forward numerous times. Many thanks also to the members of the NYC Social Philosophy Dissertation Group—Yarran Hominh, Eric Bayruns García, Annette Martín, Laura Martin, Philip Yaure, and Daniel Brinkerhoff Young—for much needed peer support, as well as generous and thoughtful feedback at various stages of this dissertation. Thanks also to Conor Cullen, Thimo Heisenberg, and Kirun Sankaran for significant discussions about the topics in this dissertation. Muchas gracias también a mis padres, Dalila Gamarra y César Cabezas, y a mi hermano Álvaro Cabezas por su cariño y apoyo incondicional durante todos estos años. And finally, thank you to Ornella Friggitt, for her unwavering intellectual and emotional support at several key moments in the writing of this dissertation, as well as for filling my years as a doctoral candidate with joy, laughter and love.

## Introduction

The concept of structural racism is paramount in contemporary discourse on race. Claims such as “racism is a structural problem”, “racism is a system of privilege and domination”, and “structural racism explains anti-black police brutality” are now common currency in conversations about race. Those who employ the concept of structural racism regard it as a helpful tool for expanding the traditional lay understanding of racism as individual race-based prejudice and discrimination. The claim that racism is structural entails that a full-fledged understanding of this phenomenon ought to consider the role that institutions and social structures play in its reproduction.

Despite its promise in helping us attain a better understanding of racial matters, structural racism remains an elusive and vague concept. Part of the problem is that structural racism has become a catch-all term for a variety of positions that challenge the traditional conceptualization of racism as individual race-based prejudice and discrimination. To list only a few examples, the concept of structural racism has been used to refer to:

- a) A system of racial oppression that has negative effects on people of color (e.g. mass incarceration of black people in the U.S., the racial achievement gap in education, the racial wealth gap).
- b) The negative effects themselves.
- c) A property of institutions and social structures (e.g. the Ferguson Police Department as a structurally racist institution).
- d) An explanation of racial inequality in societies with a history of racial injustice.

All of these conceptualizations of structural racism contribute to a better understanding of how racism operates today. However, the lack of consensus over the meaning of structural racism has



led to conceptual confusion, which has caused some to question its usefulness in the context of anti-racist theory and practice. Moreover, the lack of a unified account of structural racism has led to criticisms that misconstrue how anti-racist activists employ the concept in their political practice.

For instance, Adolph Reed Jr. has criticized 'structural racism' as an abstract neologism that works to promote a professional-managerial class politics in non-white communities. According to Reed, the concept of 'structural racism' is part of a brand of anti-racist politics that foregoes the need for a cross-racial transformative agenda in order to pursue racial parity for non-white elites within neoliberalism. Pace Reed, I argue that structural racism is best understood as a concept that shed light on the structural mechanisms behind the reproduction of racial disadvantage, whose effects are most devastating for non-white non-elites. The concept of structural racism is a useful tool for anti-racist activists that seek to denounce the vast inequalities in education, health care, housing, employment, and so on, that systematically harms non-white and working-class communities. Pace Reed, social criticism that draws on the concept of structural racism often calls for a transformation of the economic, social, political and juridical structures characteristic of neoliberalism. The concept of structural racism comes out of a brand of anti-racist politics that aims to describe the workings of these structures as a first step towards disarticulating them. Surely, the neoliberal brand of anti-racist politics that Reed describes does exist, but it is a mistake to associate it with the concept of structural racism.

Unfortunately, the diverse and often contradictory understandings of structural racism in the collective imagination make it a common target of critiques that misconstrue its contribution to anti-racist theory and practice. Just like the concept of structural racism has become a catch-all term for a variety of non-individualist conceptualizations of racism, it has also become the go-to

target for arguments (straw-man and otherwise) against such views. As things stand, the concept of structural racism is at risk of becoming an empty concept without a generally agreed upon or intelligible definition. This lack of conceptual clarity makes it difficult to employ 'structural racism' as a tool for theorizing about race. In addition, the conceptual fog surrounding it invites misplaced criticisms that further delegitimize its use in anti-racist practice.

In response to this dilemma, the overarching aim of this dissertation is to vindicate the usefulness of the concept of structural racism for anti-racist theory and practice. I take up this project in two parts—the first conceptual and the second explanatory. In chapters 1-5, I show that structural racism is an internally coherent concept that need not lead to conceptual confusion. To this end, I develop a unified and clearly articulated definition of structural racism. In doing so, I take up the tradition of critical theory as the "self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age." In this respect, my articulation of the concept of structural racism incorporates as much as possible the insights of several generations of anti-racist activists and engaged scholars who have developed the concept in their political practice. One limitation of this approach is that there are multiple accounts of structural racism in the conceptual reservoir, which do not necessarily form a coherent whole. Moreover, since the concept of structural racism was (and continues to be) developed in the context of political practice, existing accounts sometimes sacrifice theoretical precision for the sake of political expediency (and rightly so). For this reason, the work of offering a self-clarification of the political tradition that developed the concept of structural racism also involves piecing together the best insights from this tradition to form a precise and internally coherent account. The goal of this project is not merely theoretical, however. Offering an internally coherent account of structural racism will also serve to prevent further misguided criticisms of the anti-racist tradition that has developed this concept in the context of their political practice.

Furthermore, if one contribution of the concept of structural racism to anti-racist praxis is to enhance our understanding of racially oppressive social structures with an eye towards disarticulating them, the account that I develop here also furthers that goal. In particular, I offer an explanation of what motivates well-meaning agents to support racially oppressive social structures.

In my view, structural racism refers primarily to a global system (or social structure) of race-based oppression. In this sense, 'structural racism' is another label to refer to the phenomenon otherwise known as global white supremacy. However, 'structural racism' can also refer to other racially oppressive social structures at the national and sub-national levels. For instance, it is common to refer to U.S. police departments, the U.S. educational system, and to the United States as a whole as racist social structures. In this more general sense, the concept of structural racism refers to racially oppressive social structures at the global, national, or sub-national levels. While a full-fledged account of structural racism would require analysis at the global level—i.e. global white supremacy—such a complex and demanding task is outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I will clarify the concept of structural racism by elucidating how it operates at the national and sub-national levels in the U.S. context. In other words, I will examine what it means to describe the United States, as well as U.S. institutions such as police departments and the educational system, as racially oppressive social structures. In this way, I hope to offer a theoretical apparatus that can serve as a starting point for analyzing structural racism in other contexts—global, national, or sub-national.

In chapter 6, I spell out the distinct contribution of the concept of structural racism for racial theorizing—namely, its explanatory power. To put it simply, structural racism offers a structural explanation for the durability of racial inequality in racialized societies, such as the

United States. Durable racial inequality is the result of a dynamically stable system of racially oppressive social structures that organizes social agents in racially oppressive social relations. In the United States (and elsewhere), racially oppressive social structures influence the agency of individuals such that they organize their social activity in ways that harm non-whites while simultaneously benefitting whites. This racially disparate allocation of harms and benefits, which structural racism makes possible by virtue of its effects on human agency, partially explains the persistence of racial inequality in the United States and other racialized societies. The task of chapter 6 is to spell out this structural explanation of durable racial inequality and to show that it fills an explanatory gap in alternative explanations of durable inequality.

In Chapter 1, I situate my conceptual project of defining structural racism within the larger debate over the meaning of racism. I distinguish between conceptual disagreements in public discourse and in philosophy. At the level of philosophical disagreement, I follow Tommie Shelby's reconstruction of the debate in terms of three first-order questions and a meta-debate over how to adjudicate between first-order disputes. The first-order questions are "what is racism?", "what makes racism morally objectionable?", and "what is the appropriate practical response to racism?" After presenting my position on the meta-debate, I clarify that the conceptual project of my dissertation does not directly address first-order debates about the morality of racism or the appropriate practical response to it. Rather, the focus of my conceptual project is closer to the "what is racism?" question. However, the aim of my conceptual project is not to define racism simpliciter, nor is it to adjudicate whether we ought to use the term 'racism' in an individualist or structuralist sense. The scope of my conceptual project is more specific. My overarching aim is to answer the question "what is structural racism?"

In Chapters 2 and 3, I give an account of two concepts that are central to my theory of structural racism: social structure and oppression. In Chapter 2, I build on theories of social structure in the holist and practice theory traditions to develop a theory of social structures as networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. I also discuss the role that social structures play in social explanation. In particular, I explain how social structures influence individuals by constraining, enabling, and motivating their actions. In chapter 3, I build on the work of Ann Cudd to define oppression as an intergroup relation whereby a social structure (or a system of social structures) harms one group (or groups), while simultaneously benefitting another group (or groups).

Chapter 4 builds on the conceptual building blocks developed in chapters 2 and 3 to offer a detailed account of structural racism in terms of racially oppressive social structures. My account highlights the features that distinguish structural racism from other systems of oppression—namely, the centrality of the process of racialization, the creation and reproduction of racialized groups, and the constant evolution and adaptation of ideas about racial hierarchy.

In chapter 5, I discuss the connection between my account of structural racism and other influential conceptualizations of racism in the literature. I discuss in detail various philosophical accounts of racism at the level of individuals, ideologies and institutions. In doing so, I show that my account of structural racism incorporates the main insights from existing theories of individual, ideological and institutional racism. I also show why a full-fledged structural racism explanation of durable racial inequality must examine the causal mechanisms between racially oppressive social structures on the one hand, and racist individuals, ideologies, and institutions on the other. This will turn out to be crucial when I move on to the explanatory project of my dissertation.

In Chapters 6, I substantiate my claim that structural racism contributes to a better explanation of the durability of racial inequality in racialized societies. In order to narrow down the explanandum, I focus on a single representative case: racial inequality in education (otherwise known as the racial achievement gap). To add even more specificity, I introduce a recent sociological case study of the racial achievement gap at a middle-class Midwestern suburban public school (Riverview High). My task in this chapter is to give a concrete example of the explanatory power of the concept of structural racism backed up by empirical research. In this case, I will show that theorizing Riverview High as a racially oppressive social structure is key for explaining the persistence of its racial achievement gap.

I briefly revisit the debate between individualist and holist (or structural) accounts of social explanation. I distinguish between strong and weak accounts of structural explanations, and I identify my structural racism explanation as a weak structural explanation. In a nutshell, my explanation argues that the persistence of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High is partially explained by the interest of white parents in maintaining school practices that benefit their children to the detriment of non-white students. To clarify this explanatory claim, I introduce the concept of positional interests, which are interests that stem from an agent's position in a social structure and motivate them to act to secure their social position. In the case of Riverview High, white parents and their children occupy a position in the school structure whereby they benefit from practices of disciplining and educational tracking that simultaneously disadvantage non-white students. As the case study makes clear, the persistence of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High is largely explained by white parents acquiring a stake in these inequality-producing practices and blocking any attempts at changing them.

I also explain the connection between structural racism and the positional interests of white parents at Riverview High. I argue that white parents' positional interests are an emergent property of racially oppressive social structures. By emergent properties, I mean properties that social structures have in virtue of the social relations among their members. Emergent properties are the result of the social relations among the individuals that make up the structure. These properties are not possessed by the individual members apart from their participation in the social structure. Emergent properties, such as positional interests, are an example of the distinct explanatory power of social structures. Thus, one of the causal mechanisms whereby structural racism ensures the durability of racial inequality is via positional interests that motivate privileged agents to act (or fail to act) in ways that maintain practices that reproduce racial inequality.

Following weak methodological holism, I argue that positional interests are a causally efficacious feature of structural racism, which nevertheless operates non-deterministically through the agency of individuals. The positional interests of white parents at Riverview High are emergent properties of structural racism that influence but do not determine the behavior of individual parents. Thus, this dissertation shows that structural racism is an internally coherent concept that plays a distinctive role in the explanation of durable racial inequality, and is therefore a valuable concept for anti-racist theory and practice.

# **Chapter 1: Conceptualizing (Structural Racism)**

## **1.1. Racism in Public Discourse**

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of structural racism has gained prominence in everyday discourse on race in the United States and elsewhere. Claims such as “racism is a structural problem”, “racism is a system of privilege and domination”, and “structural racism explains anti-black police brutality” are now common currency in conversations about race. Of course, the idea that racism is a structural phenomenon is not a new one. The structural view of racism has a longstanding pedigree in anti-racist activism and scholarship, as well as in the lay discourse of blacks and other non-white groups. The conceptualization of racism as a structural phenomenon is grounded in the everyday experiences of people of color, who face an array of institutional, cultural and interpersonal dynamics that systematically subject them to unjustly inflicted harms (e.g. violence, psychological harms, unjust disadvantage—economic and otherwise) on account of their race. To people of color who face these race-based constraints on a systematic basis, it is not difficult to embrace the view that racism operates, to paraphrase Rawls, at the level of the basic structure of society.

And yet, the mainstream view of racism in the everyday discourse continues to focus on individuals rather than social structures. In lay discourse, racism is still taken to refer primarily to individuals and their beliefs, intentions, actions, and the like. In this dissertation, I will sometimes refer to this mainstream view of racism in public discourse as the racism-as-prejudice view. I have chosen this designation because it best captures the diverse (and yet limited) range of phenomena that the mainstream view of racism picks out. I will expand upon the concept of prejudice in chapter 5. For now, I will just note that the psychological concept of prejudice refers to individual-level attitudes that have cognitive, affective and behavioral components. Together, the three



components of the psychological concept of prejudice capture all the instances of racism on the mainstream view in public discourse. In other words, in this view, racism amounts to race-based prejudice, which may take cognitive, affective or behavioral forms. The cognitive component of racism (or race-based prejudice) refers to mental states of individuals, such as explicitly held beliefs or doctrines of racial difference and hierarchy, racial stereotypes, and implicit associations between members of a racially oppressed group and a negative attribute (e.g. associations of black people with criminality). The affective component of racism-as-prejudice captures the range of negative emotions (e.g. hostility, disgust fear, indifference) that racially prejudiced individuals have towards members of a different race. Finally, the behavioral component captures the behavior or behavioral dispositions that stem from standing in the aforementioned cognitive and affective states. In most contexts, this component of race-based prejudice refers to racially discriminatory behavior.

In recent years, there has been a healthy development away from the traditional fixation on overt racial bigotry as the mark of racism. For most of the twentieth century, the representation of racist individuals in the public imagination was that of an overtly bigoted (often working-class and/or uneducated) person.<sup>1</sup> The recent popularization of research on implicit bias has allowed for a more subtle understanding of how racism operates at the level of individuals. Implicit bias research has shown that racism need not always be explicit, consciously held, or even actualized in discriminatory behavior. Instead, it is possible (and in fact common) to hold racist attitudes and act on them without conscious awareness—perhaps even in an automatic fashion.

---

<sup>1</sup> As David Wellman aptly points out, the association of individual racism with working-class and uneducated whites allowed middle-and-upper class whites (including the white researchers who developed the psychological concept of racial prejudice in the second half of the twentieth century) to distance themselves from the problem of racism. See David Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism, 2nd edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Despite its contribution to our understanding of the intricacies of individual racism, implicit bias research has little to say about how racism works at the level of social structures.<sup>2</sup> In this context, talk of racist social structures is often misunderstood and even ridiculed in public discourse. The dismissal of the concept of structural racism comes from both the right (e.g. D'Souza 1995) and left (e.g. Reed 2018) ends of the political spectrum. Part of the challenge of offering a viable account of structural racism in public discourse is that it goes against the foundational assumptions of the racism-as-prejudice view. Whereas the mainstream view conceptualizes racism as an attribute of individuals and their beliefs, emotions, and actions, a structural account moves beyond the level of individuals in order to theorize how social structures contribute to the reproduction of race-based oppression. Whereas the mainstream account focuses on blaming or exculpating individuals for their racist beliefs, emotions and actions, a structural account focuses on the structural effects of racial oppression on the life chances of people of color. Given these discrepancies in foundational assumptions, attempts to cash out the structural view of racism in mainstream discourse often end up with proponents of both views talking past each other.<sup>3</sup>

## **1.2. The Philosophical Debate on Racism: Three First-Order Questions and Two Second-Order Questions**

Thankfully, the task of vindicating an account of structural racism becomes less onerous once we leave the domain of lay discourse for that of philosophy. This is not to say that the

---

<sup>2</sup> In fact, even the small gains that implicit bias research has attained for our understanding of racism have come under criticism. Given implicitly biased agents' lack of conscious awareness or intentionality, some deny that implicit attitudes and discriminatory behavior based on them are racist. There are philosophers who come close to taking this position. E.g. Neil Levy, "Am I Racist? Implicit Bias and the Ascription of Racism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 268 (2017): 524-551. However, this line of argumentation is most often found in everyday discourse as a form of defending one's moral purity from the "sin of racism". As I will show later, the debate over racism has gone astray due to a focus on individual moral condemnation and exculpation.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Blauner, "Talking Past Each Other: Black and White Languages of Race," *American Prospect* (Summer 1992): 55-64.

structural view of racism is paramount in philosophy. In fact, many of the early philosophical attempts to conceptualize racism share the assumptions of the racism-as-prejudice view. It is only recently that the wave of the debate has shifted in favor of the structural racism view. Even then, none of the current offerings in the philosophical literature put forth a full-fledged account of structural racism. One of the goals of this dissertation is to fill that gap. At this point, it would be helpful to clarify what I take to be the central questions in the philosophical literature on racism, and how my conceptual project of developing an account of structural racism fits therein.

In this regard, Tommie Shelby offers a helpful starting point.<sup>4</sup> According to Shelby, the philosophical literature on racism revolves around three first-order questions:

1. What is racism?
2. What makes racism objectionable?
3. What is the appropriate practical response to racism?

The first question has to do with the *conceptual* task of articulating a precise definition of racism. The second question has to do with the *normative* task of identifying what is morally troubling about racism. Finally, the third question has to do with anti-racist *practice*—in other words, it is a question about kinds of response to racism are justified, permissible or praiseworthy.

In addition, Shelby identifies two further methodological or second-order theoretical disagreements. In his words, "[the first] second-order disagreement [is] about how to settle first-order disputes over the meaning of the term "racism" [...] The other second-order disagreement is over whether the three core questions about racism are best approached from the standpoint of *personal* morality or *political* morality. This debate is sometimes thought to come down,

---

<sup>4</sup> Tommie Shelby, "Racism, Moralism and Social Criticism", *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 158 (2014): 58.

ultimately, to a choice between treating *individual* racism or *institutional* racism (sometimes called "structural racism") as the primary unit of analysis in (normative, not explanatory) matters of race".<sup>5</sup>

While Shelby's layout of the philosophical terrain is illuminating, I need to clarify how it fits with my project in this first part of the dissertation. Given that my task is conceptual, my project comes closest to Shelby's "what is racism?" question. However, I do not intend to define the concept of racism *simpliciter*. Rather, my particular interest is in answering the narrower question "what is structural racism?" My project does not presuppose that we ought to analyze racism from a structuralist perspective, nor does it discount alternative conceptualizations of racism. Developing accounts of individual racism or ideological racism are equally important projects for furthering our understanding of race. Although the focus of my conceptual project is to answer the question "what is structural racism?", I also take a position on the normative question of what makes structural racism morally objectionable. On this question, I adopt the standpoint of political morality, which highlights the relation between structural racism and unjust social relations—in particular, relations of race-based oppression and domination.

Adopting Shelby's layout of the philosophical terrain is also helpful because it allows me to take a stance on two important second-order debates in the philosophical literature on racism. While my focus is on answering the first-order question "what is structural racism?", I will briefly present my position on the second-order questions of how to adjudicate between competing conceptualizations of racism, and whether to take individual racism or structural racism as the primary unit of analysis. Clarifying my views on these second-order debates will enable me to

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. In order to avoid confusion, I cash out this distinction in terms of individual racism vs. structural racism from now on. Later, I will show that there are important differences between institutional and structural racism.

better situate my project within the larger philosophical literature on racism. After doing so, I will offer a first sketch of my first-order account of structural racism, which I will develop into a full-fledged theory over the course of this dissertation.

### 1.2.1. Shelby's First Second-Order Question: A Pluralist and Ameliorative Proposal

Shelby's first meta-question is about how we should resolve first-order disagreements over the meaning of the term racism. In other words, it is a second-order debate over how to assess the correctness or superiority of a particular answer to the "what is racism?" first-order question—or in my case, the "what is structural racism?" question. In this regard, I take a *pluralist* stance according to which the success of any given account of racism depends on whether it successfully addresses the theorist's interests and aims in asking the question. Taking a pluralist stance does not mean that anything goes when it comes to defining racism. On the contrary, pluralism allows us to make our pre-theoretical assumptions and interests explicit. Once the theorist's project is fixed, particular answers to the question may prove to be inadequate if they fail to meet that project's goals. Moreover, getting clear on the scope and aims of our theoretical projects may help prevent potential misunderstandings. In my case, it is important to highlight that the scope of my project is limited to defining the concept of structural racism and not that of racism *simpliciter*. Moreover, my particular interest lies in developing an account of structural racism that can contribute to racial theorizing because of its explanatory power. Thus, my pluralistic stance allows me to regard other projects that focus on defining individual racism or ideological racism as potentially correct and equally important for racial theorizing. Likewise, I have no in-principle reason to object to other accounts of structural racism whose aims differ from mine—for instance, if they were to focus on the normative rather than the explanatory implications of structural racism.

Sally Haslanger distinguishes three kinds of projects a philosopher may be up to when asking a question of the form "what is X?"<sup>6</sup> First, an *analytic* project aims at articulating and clarifying our concept of X by exploring its nuances.<sup>7</sup> This project often follows the method of reflective equilibrium. In the first stage, we identify the range of typical applications of the concept, as well as the generally agreed-upon principles that are thought to govern its use. In the second stage, we seek to arrive at a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept, that accommodate both the applications and the principles. The method allows for cases and principles to be weighted according to their centrality or importance to the concept in order to arrive at a reflective equilibrium. This methodology is what usually goes by the name of "conceptual analysis" in the analytic tradition in philosophy. Jorge Garcia's work exemplifies the analytic approach to answering the "what is racism?" question. Garcia identifies principles that (he thinks) govern our use of the concept of racism (e.g. racism is always immoral).<sup>8</sup> He then proceeds to analyze how current applications of the concept of racism—as a group of beliefs, as a system of social subjugation, as a field of discourse, as a mode of behavior, and as ill-will or disregard—fit with these principles. After discarding other accounts of racism that fail to accommodate the principles, he concludes that the only viable application of the concept is that of racism as race-based ill-will or disregard. While Garcia's method of reflective equilibrium leans heavily on the

---

<sup>6</sup> Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 223-225, 342-354.

<sup>7</sup> Haslanger's typology labels this first type of project as "conceptual projects". Given that I am already using the term 'conceptual' to characterize my overarching aim of answering the question "what is structural racism?", I have chosen to label this particular approach to answering a "what is x?" question as an "analytic project". The reason is that this project follows the methodology of "conceptual analysis" in analytic philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> J.L.A. Garcia, "Current Conceptions of Racism: A Critical Examination of Some Recent Social Philosophy," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (1997): 5-42.

side of the principles, he does consider several applications of the concept in his conceptual analysis.

A second approach to answering questions of the form "what is X?" is the *descriptive* project. In this approach, the focus is not on capturing the nuances of our concept of X, but on the extension of the concept. A descriptive project seeks to clarify the phenomena that we track in our everyday use of the concept by drawing on empirical or quasi-empirical methods. For this reason, Haslanger also refers to this project as a naturalistic one. One example of the descriptive or naturalistic approach in the philosophical literature on racism is the work of Luc Faucher and Edouard Machery. In "Against Jorge Garcia's Moral and Psychological Monism," Faucher and Machery argue against a division of labor in which philosophers focus on conceptual analysis and psychologists are concerned with empirical methods. Instead, Faucher and Machery argue that psychology (and the empirical sciences more generally) can play a central role in philosophical debates about the racism concept. As an example, they draw on psychological research on emotions to show the limitations of Garcia's account of racism. According to Faucher and Machery, Garcia's account of racism does not offer a sufficiently rich description of the range of emotions that characterize racism. Garcia's conceptual analysis focuses exclusively on the emotions of hate and malevolence. By contrast, Faucher and Machery, following a naturalistic approach, draw on empirical psychological research to show that racism also stems from other emotions, such as fear, disgust, anger and envy. Their project employs empirical methods to clarify the phenomena (in this case, the emotional states) that we track with the lay concept of racism.

Finally, an *ameliorative* project to answering a "what is x?" question focuses on the pragmatics of our conceptual practices. This approach foregrounds pragmatic considerations such as: What is the point of having this concept? What cognitive and practical tasks do we want the

concept to accomplish? Are our current concepts effective in accomplishing these goals? Ameliorative projects aim at improving our conceptual resources by developing a better understanding of our (legitimate) purposes for having a concept, and changing our conceptual practices accordingly. Of course, ameliorative projects must be informed by our ordinary usage of the concept (after all, we want the concept to remain recognizable), as well as by empirical research, so there is a limit to its revisionary implications. At the same time, given its pragmatic nature, an ameliorative project to a "what is x?" question also has a stipulative element: given our purposes, we can stipulate that *this* is the phenomenon that we need to be talking about when we use X. As a result, considerations of ordinary usage and empirical research are important but not overriding.

As I mentioned earlier, I take a *pluralist* stance regarding the adequacy of particular answers to the "what is racism?" question—or more specifically, to the "what is structural racism?" question. In my view, an answer to questions of this sort is successful if it meets the goals of the theorist's project. Analytic, descriptive and ameliorative projects may all yield correct and equally satisfying answers as long as they meet the theorist's respective aims. In my view, analytic, descriptive and ameliorative projects can all contribute to our understanding of the concept of structural racism (and racism, more generally).

Apart from this *pluralist* stance regarding the adequacy of competing accounts of racism, my own project follows an *ameliorative* approach. In my view, the point of having a concept of racism (or in my case, a concept of structural racism) is to help us understand the dynamics of race-based oppression in order to devise better practical interventions. In other words, my interest in developing an account of structural racism stems from a desire to make sense of the array of oppressive harms faced by people of color (e.g. mass incarceration, police violence, race-based



disparities in wealth, education, and health care). In this sense, my ameliorative project is driven by practical anti-racist considerations—I aim to develop an account of racism that can contribute to the emancipatory project of overcoming racial oppression by granting us a more nuanced understanding of how it operates. For the purposes of this project, an adequate account of structural racism must seek to identify the phenomena that contribute to durable racial inequality and explain the causal paths whereby they do so. For this reason, I devote chapter 6 to issues of social explanation. In that chapter, I clarify how structural explanations work and I develop my own structural explanation of the durability of racial inequality. In line with my ameliorative project, I do not stay at an abstract level of explanation. Instead, I focus on a highly specific case of racial inequality—the racial achievement gap in education—and seek to unveil the causal mechanisms that contribute to its reproduction.

Since my practical focus is on understanding the role that structural racism plays in the reproduction of race-based oppression, it is key to employ social theory and empirical social science to acquire a better understanding of the causal mechanisms whereby structural racism has these effects. In this sense, my project is also partially descriptivist insofar as I draw on empirical research to unveil the nature of racism. Like Faucher and Machery, I draw on psychological research—group position theory, in particular. In addition, I incorporate insights from sociological research on racism, as well as Charles Tilly's work on durable inequality. Drawing on these empirical and quasi-empirical resources is crucial for developing an account of structural racism that can satisfy the ameliorative goal of explaining the durability of racial inequality.

### 1.2.2. Shelby's Second Second-Order Question: Clarifying Personal v. Political Morality and Individual v. Structural Racism

Before taking a stance on Shelby's second meta-theoretical debate, I must make some clarificatory remarks. In explaining this second-order debate, Shelby identifies two distinct discussions that often run together. First, there is a debate over whether we should approach racism from the perspective of personal morality or political morality. Second, there is a question as to whether we should favor individual racism or structural racism as the primary unit of normative analysis. Shelby regards these debates as one and the same: proponents of personal morality favor individual racism, whereas proponents of political morality favor structural racism.

The disagreement between proponents of personal morality and political morality tends to follow disciplinary lines between moral and political philosophers, respectively. Shelby, aware of this sociological fact, argues that moral philosophers tend to tackle the first-order questions about racism "through the normative lens of *personal* morality, whose central subject is the ethics of individual character and interpersonal conduct", whereas political philosophers like himself tend to take the perspective of "*political* morality, [...] whose principal subject is the justice of institutional arrangements."<sup>9</sup> In setting up the dispute in this way, Shelby follows what Charles Larmore calls a moralist conception of political philosophy.<sup>10</sup> In this conception, political philosophy is a sub-discipline of moral philosophy, the latter of which deals with the good and the right more generally—not only in the political domain. As a sub-discipline of moral philosophy, political philosophy is primarily interested in elucidating the nature of justice as a moral ideal. Following this framework, I interpret Shelby as arguing that political philosophers focus on

---

<sup>9</sup> Shelby, "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism", 58 (emphasis in original).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Larmore, "What is Political Philosophy?" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2013): 276-306.

*political* morality, where the emphasis is on the justice of the social institutions that govern our social life, whereas (non-political) moral philosophers are primarily interested in *personal* morality, where the focus is on individual moral character and moral principles for interpersonal conduct.

Philosophers who favor the perspective of personal morality often presuppose that the most important normative task for an account of racism is to capture the strong moral condemnation implied in ascriptions of racism to individuals and their beliefs, emotions, actions and the like. Following this assumption, these philosophers define racism in terms of what makes all instances of racism a severe moral wrong: disrespect (Glasgow 2009), inferiorization and antipathy (Blum 2003), and vices like malevolence, injustice and moral disregard (Garcia 1996). Unlike advocates of personal morality, those who take the perspective of political morality do not take the fact of meriting strong moral condemnation to be the most important feature of racism. In fact, some defenders of the political view explicitly deny that all instances of racism are necessarily morally wrong (Shelby 2014, Mills 2003). Importantly, their point is not to trivialize the moral significance of racism, but rather to set the normativity of racism in the right context given their overarching philosophical interests. Those who favor political morality focus their interest on the deleterious effects of racism on social justice. In other words, they take the normative task of a philosophical account of racism to be a matter of clarifying the relation between racism and oppression, domination, and other forms of unjust social relations.

Given this breakdown, it is easy to see why Shelby claims that the personal v. political morality dispute maps onto the individual v. structural racism dispute. Personal morality's focus on individual moral character and the ethics of interpersonal conduct invites a normative focus on individual racism, whereas political morality's focus on the justice of institutional arrangements

invites a normative focus on structural racism. However, it is important to remember—as Shelby himself points out—that the personal/political morality debate maps onto the individual/structural racism debate only to the extent that we understand the latter as a *normative* debate over whether the moral significance of racism lies primarily at the level of individuals or social structures. There is a separate *explanatory* (or *descriptive*) issue that divides proponents of individual racism and structural racism, which has to do with which kinds of causal mechanisms (individual/micro-level or structural/macro-level) best explain the origin and persistence of racial inequality.<sup>11</sup> In this explanatory sense, the debate between the individual racism view and the structural racism view is orthogonal to that between personal and political morality. For instance, one could embrace the view that what matters most from the perspective of morality is individual moral character and the ethics of interpersonal conduct (i.e. personal morality), while simultaneously holding that the best explanation for durable racial inequality lies at the level of social structures (i.e. structural racism view). *Pace* Shelby, the personal v. political morality debate does not always map onto the individual v. structural racism debate. These come apart when the latter is understood as an *explanatory* rather than a *normative* debate. Thus, we should distinguish between two second-order debates regarding the primary unit of analysis for first-order accounts of racism. First, there is a normative dispute over whether considerations of personal morality or political morality have taken precedence when assessing the moral implications of racism. Second, there is an explanatory dispute over whether individual racism or structural racism provides a better explanation for the durability of racial inequality.

---

<sup>11</sup> Charles Mills, "Heart Attack: A Critique of Jorge Garcia's Volitional Conception of Racism," *The Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 59. Also see Alex Madva, "A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy," *Ergo, An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 27 (2016): 701-728.

The second-order normative dispute between personal morality and political morality is supposed to bear on all three of the first-order questions in the racism debate:

- 1) What is racism?
- 2) What makes racism morally objectionable?
- 3) What is the appropriate practical response to racism?

It is easy to see how the debate between personal and political morality bears on the normative question about what makes racism morally objectionable. To recap, that would be a matter of whether we prioritize individuals or social structures when assessing the morally troublesome features of racism. But how does this second-order normative dispute bear on the first-order debates over how to define racism and how respond to it appropriately? Without going into too much detail, the dispute between personal and political morality bears on the "what is racism?" question insofar as the moral wrongness (or at least, the moral significance) of racism is often taken as key for defining the concept. Thus, one's position on whether the most salient morally wrongful features of racism take place at the level of individuals or at the level of social structures will have implications for how one defines the concept. Finally, one's stance on the personal morality v. political morality dispute may have effects on the kinds of political activism and individual responses to racial oppression one regards as justified. For instance, if we take personal morality to be of utmost importance, we may be inclined to regard certain forms of political resistance to racism, such as disrupting public events or vandalizing racist monuments, as unjustified because they breach norms of interpersonal conduct. However, we may come to see

these practical responses to racism as potentially appropriate once we adopt a political morality perspective that highlights how our society has failed to secure just social relations.<sup>12</sup>

Having shown that Shelby's second meta-theoretical debate should be divided into two separate (one normative, the other explanatory) debates, I am now in a position to state my views on both debates. Insofar as my project takes up normative issues, I embrace the perspective of political morality. The focus of my normative concerns lies on how racism (and structural racism more specifically) contributes to unjust social relations, such as oppression and domination. However, this dissertation does not focus on normative issues. Since my ameliorative project aims at developing a better understanding of the workings of racial oppression, the emphasis of my account of structural racism will be on explanatory issues. Regarding this explanatory second-order debate, I embrace the structural racism view as the better framework for explaining the durability of racial inequality. As I show in later chapters, racially oppressive social structures play a crucial role in the maintenance of racial inequality. However, I do not deny the importance of individualist explanations of durable racial inequality. As I go on to show, a full-fledged structural explanation of the mechanisms of racial inequality requires an understanding of the interaction between individuals and social structures. At its best, a structural racism explanation of durable racial inequality must bring together explanatory factors at the macro-level (e.g. social structures) and micro-level (e.g. individuals).<sup>13</sup>

To recap, there are three second-order debates in the philosophical literature on racism that bear on my first-order project of defining the concept of structural racism. First, there is a debate

---

<sup>12</sup> Shelby undertakes this normative project in *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent and Reform* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> See Lawrence Bobo, "Reclaiming a Du Boisian Perspective on Racial Attitudes," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 186-202.

over how to assess the correctness and superiority of competing first-order accounts. Regarding this question, I advanced a pluralistic stance, according to which the success of any given account of racism (or in my case, structural racism) depends on whether the account adequately addresses the particular interests and aims of the theorist. In addition, I clarified that my interest in answering the "what is structural racism?" question stems from an ameliorative project driven by anti-racist considerations. The goal of my project is to develop an account of structural racism that contributes to a better understanding of the mechanisms behind the reproduction of racial inequality. In particular, my goal is to show that structural racism (the phenomenon, not the concept) plays a key explanatory role in the reproduction of racial inequality in racialized societies, such as the United States. The second meta-theoretical debate is a normative dispute over whether considerations of personal morality or political morality taken precedence when assessing the moral implications of racism. On this question, I take the perspective of political morality. Finally, the third meta-theoretical debate is an explanatory dispute over whether individual racism or structural racism provides a better explanation for the durability of racial inequality. On this question, I favor a structural racism framework, with the caveat that a full-fledged structural racism explanation of durable racial inequality must incorporate individual-level explanations. I address the explanatory issues raised by this meta-theoretical debate in chapter 6.

Having clarified the nature of my intervention in the philosophical debate on racism, I now turn to developing the conceptual tools required to unpack my definition of structural racism in terms of racially oppressive social structures. This definition has three main components, which I clarify in turn. First, structural racism refers to a subset of *social structures*. In chapter 2, I develop an account of social structure as networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by

individual agents through their participation in social practices. Second, structural racism refers to a subset of *oppressive* social structures.

Thus, I clarify the concept of oppression in chapter 3. As I go on to argue, one sense in which social structures "structure" the lives of agents is by arranging them in patterned social relations. I refer to social structures as *oppressive* when they "structure" (i.e. arrange) social groups in oppressive social relations. In my view, *oppressive* social structures reliably organize social groups in patterned social relations whereby some group (or groups) suffers from an unjustly inflicted harm, while another group (or groups) benefits from the same harm. Third, structural racism refers to *racially* oppressive social structures. Thus, I must show what distinguishes structural racism from other kinds of oppressive social structures. Armed with the concepts of social structure and oppression that I develop in chapters 2 and 3, I discuss the *distinctly racial* features of structural racism in chapter 4. At that point, I will be in a position to give a full-fledged account of structural racism.



## Chapter 2: What are Social Structures?

The concept of social structure is both central to social philosophy and extremely difficult to pin down. There are several competing accounts of social structure in the literature and no clear indication of a consensus within reach. In fact, much of the conceptual confusion surrounding the concept of structural racism stems from the social structure concept itself. However, the account of social structure I develop here is not meant to solve long-lasting disputes between holism, practice theory, and other competing theories of social structure. Rather, my guiding aim is to elaborate a working account of social structure that can help me unpack my definition of structural racism as racially oppressive social structures. Moreover, since I take structural racism to explain the durability of racial inequality, my working account of social structure must also clarify the ways in which social structures feature in social explanation.

I define social structures as *networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices*. I arrive at this definition via a critical engagement with the work of Sally Haslanger. I have three reasons for using Haslanger's work on social structure as an anchor point. First, she brackets the theoretical minutiae of the social structure debate for the sake of developing a theory of social structure that can shed light on structural oppression. This approach is compatible with my guiding aim of developing a theory of social structure that contributes to our understanding of structural racism, rather than getting bogged down in the intricacies of the social structure debate.

Second, although she does not immerse herself in the social structure debate, her work replicates the divide between two important frameworks for theorizing social structure—holism and practice theory. In fact, Haslanger advances two distinct theories of social structure, which correspond to the aforementioned traditions in the social structure debate. However, Haslanger has

yet to unify her two theories of social structures into a comprehensive account. Starting from Haslanger's disjunctive account of social structure will allow me to discuss the key features of both traditions and to offer my proposal for bringing them together.

My third reason for engaging with Haslanger's work is that she highlights the role that social structures play in social explanation. Clarifying the link between social structure and social explanation is crucial because, as I argue in later chapters, the distinctive theoretical contribution of the concept of structural racism is its role in explaining the durability of racial inequality in the U.S. and other racialized societies. While I disagree with Haslanger's particular views on this point, I find her framing helpful for introducing my own views on the matter. To put it simply, while Haslanger argues that social structures feature in social explanation by constraining the agency of individuals, I claim that a complete account of the explanatory role of social structures must also consider the ways in which they enable and motivate individual agency. In particular, the idea that social structures motivate individual agents to act (or fail to act) in certain ways is crucial for properly theorizing structural racism and its role in reproducing durable racial inequality.

In developing my working account of social structure, I will make constant reference to a specific example of a social structure—namely, a school. I adopt this strategy for two reasons. First, I aim to complement the inevitable theoretical abstractness of discussing the concept of social structure with a concrete description of the phenomena to which the concept refers. Second, theorizing a school as a social structure will prove helpful for future chapters, where I will focus on structural racism taking place in the realm of education.

## **2.1. The Holist Conception of Social Structure**

According to Haslanger, social structures are networks of social relations. This includes relations between people and relations to material things. For instance, a school is a social structure

made up of a network of social relations between teachers, administrators, custodians, students, parents and so on. In addition, a school structure includes the relations between the aforementioned agents and the material world (e.g. students reading textbooks, a chemistry teacher using lab materials to explain a concept). This definition of social structure follows a longstanding tradition in social theory of describing social structures as complex wholes made of interconnected parts.<sup>14</sup> This holist conception of social structure relies on the analogy of society with biological organisms, which dates back at least to Plato and whose modern iteration can be traced to 19<sup>th</sup>-century sociologists like Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim. According to the holist tradition, human societies—as well as other social structures, such as the U.S. health care system, corporations or schools—have a general structure similar to that of biological organisms. Most importantly for our purposes, social structures—like biological organisms—are wholes whose normal functioning relies on its parts relating to one another in relatively stable ways.

A common way to develop the holist conception today is to theorize the parts that make up the structural whole as nodes standing in complex relations to other nodes in a network. In the case of social (as opposed to biological) structures, nodes are often theorized in terms of social positions. To go back to my guiding example, a school qua social structure is a complex whole made up of social positions (i.e. nodes) standing in complex relations to one another. The social positions of 'parent', 'teacher', 'administrator', 'custodian' and 'student' are the nodes, and the whole network of relations among them (e.g. student-to-teacher, parent-to-teacher, teacher-to-administrator) constitutes the school as a social structure. In addition, each social position stands in particular relations to material resources that contribute to the proper functioning of the social structure. For instance, students and teachers make use of school facilities, such as furniture,

---

<sup>14</sup> Sally Haslanger, "What is a (Social) Structural Explanation?," *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1 (2016): 118.

supplies, and equipment, on a day-to-day basis. Custodians clean and maintain these facilities to ensure the seamless functioning of the school structure. If social structures are networks of social relations, these include relations among social positions, as well as relations between social positions and material resources.

In addition, there are rules, duties and prerogatives associated with each social position in the social structure. Among other things, the social position of 'teacher' entails a duty to submit students' grades to school administrators, a prerogative to discipline 'students', as well as rules that govern the application of that prerogative (e.g. corporal punishment is not an acceptable form of disciplining). As this example makes clear, it is impossible to describe the rules, duties and prerogatives associated with each position in the structure without making reference to the whole network of social relations. Being a teacher in a school structure is to occupy a social position whose rules, duties and prerogatives stem from the network of social relations among teachers, students, administrators, custodians, parents and the school's material resources.

It is important to distinguish between the social positions in the structure and the individuals who occupy such positions. Individuals may partake in different social structures and therefore occupy several social positions. The person that occupies the position of 'parent' in their family, may also occupy the position of 'administrator' in a school, and the position of 'goalkeeper' in their amateur soccer team. Moreover, the rules, duties and prerogatives associated with a social position do not necessarily attach to individuals apart from their occupying the position in question. While an individual may have the authority to discipline others qua schoolteacher, they probably will not have the same prerogative qua goalkeeper of their amateur soccer team. Thus, when we speak of social structures as complex wholes made of interrelated parts, the parts in question are social positions, not the individuals who happen to occupy the position at any given time. To return

to our running example, Mark, a substitute teacher, literally acts as a stand-in for Ricardo, the regular teacher, when the latter is unable to enact the social position of the schoolteacher. In principle, whether Mark or Ricardo occupy the node of 'teacher' on any given day does not matter for the normal functioning of the school structure as long as they observe the rules, duties and prerogatives associated with the social position. To sum up the holist view, social structures are complex wholes consisting of a network of social positions standing in relatively stable relations to one another and to material resources. Or, to go back to Haslanger's definition, social structures are networks of social relations.

## **2.2. The Practice Theory Conception of Social Structure**

Haslanger offers an alternative definition of social structures—namely as networks of interdependent social practices.<sup>15</sup> Even though she does not make it explicit, this alternative account of social structure stems from a different tradition of structuralist thinking; one that emphasizes the interdependence between structure, culture, and agency. While Anthony Giddens' structuration theory is the starting point of this 'practice theory' approach to social structures, Haslanger draws most explicitly on the work of William Sewell—albeit with some revisions. Following Sewell, Haslanger defines social practices as interdependent schemas and resources when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time.<sup>16</sup> Building on this account of social practice, Haslanger defines social structures as networks of interdependent social practices. In order to unpack Haslanger's second account of social structure, I must first clarify the concepts of 'schema', 'resource' and 'social practice'.

---

<sup>15</sup> Sally Haslanger, "What is a Social Practice?," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 82 (2018): 246, fn. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Sally Haslanger, *Critical Theory and Social Practice* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2017), 21.

Haslanger defines schemas as “clusters of culturally shared mental states and processes, including concepts, attitudes, dispositions and such, that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought and affect.”<sup>17</sup> On a psychologistic reading of this definition, schemas refer to the psychological states of individuals that form the basis of our interaction with the world via cognitive, affective and behavioral dispositions. One example of such psychological schemas is our association of sharks with danger, as well as the mental states and processes that stem from that association. If we are swimming in open water and we spot a triangular object, we will tend to associate it with a shark fin and hence, with danger. Here, the schema is the psychological association [triangular object in open water → danger]. This psychological association guides our interaction with the world in many ways. Among other things, it elicits an affective reaction (i.e. fear), a cognitive reaction (i.e. the belief "I am in danger!"), and a concomitant behavioral reaction (i.e. fleeing). Psychological schemas inform how we interpret the world and how we respond to it.

Importantly, not all psychological schemas are explicitly or consciously held. Research on implicit bias shows that humans make psychological associations and act on them without conscious awareness—perhaps even in an automatic fashion. As the Implicit Association Test (IAT) shows, white people tend to associate black people with criminality. This association elicits affective (e.g. fear) and behavioral (e.g. avoidance, alertness) reactions even if they don't explicitly hold the belief "black people are dangerous". Thus, psychological schemas can (and in fact, often do) guide people's interpretation of and interaction with the world without their conscious awareness.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

While this psychological interpretation offers a helpful explanation of how schemas guide the behavior of social agents, the schemas that partially make up social practices are not reducible to mental states and processes, whether explicit or implicit. In addition to psychological schemas, there are cultural schemas at the level of the social environment. Cultural schemas include shared social meanings, conceptual repertoires and symbolic resources. One way to spell out the relation between psychological schemas and cultural schemas is to think of the former as an instantiation of the latter at the level of individual psychology. For example, cultural schemas about blackness in the U.S. include narratives, media representations, and social imaginaries that associate black people with criminality. These cultural schemas at the level of the social environment trickle down to individuals in the form of psychological associations between black people and criminality, which then guide their interpretation of and interaction with black people.

Resources refer to “things of all sorts—human, nonhuman, animate or not—that are taken to have some (positive or negative) value (practical, moral, aesthetic, religious, etc.)”<sup>18</sup> For Haslanger, something is a resource to the extent that participants in a social practice interpret it as having (positive or negative) value. The value assigned to a resource varies according to the practice in question. For instance, in the context of the practice of agriculture, a grasshopper may be seen as a negative resource (i.e. a pest), but in a culinary context, it may be seen as a positive resource (i.e. a delicacy). The example above shows how resources are constitutively and causally dependent on schemas; grasshoppers are only interpreted as a (positive) resource to the extent that agents operate with culinary schemas. Moreover, the stable production of grasshoppers as a culinary delicacy causally depends on the existence of culinary schemas that frame them as a valuable resource in a market economy. This causal and constitutive dependence goes both ways.

---

<sup>18</sup> Haslanger, *Critical Theory and Practice*, 22.

As Sewell argues, “resources are embodiments of schemas [and] therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well”.<sup>19</sup> The recurring presence of grasshoppers in high-end cuisine influence participants in that practice to adopt the psychological schema or association [grasshopper → delicacy]. To recap, Haslanger offers a second account of social structure as networks of social practices, which she defines as sets of interdependent schemas and resources.

### **2.3. Some Clarifying Remarks on the Practice Theory Tradition**

Earlier I argued that the practice theory tradition emphasizes the interdependence between structure, culture and agency. I am now in a position to substantiate this claim. In this view, social structures are "relatively stable frameworks for social agency" that are at the same time the "product of coordinated behavior".<sup>20</sup> Social structures make it possible for large groups of individuals to coordinate their behavior by means of social practices. How do social practices contribute to human coordination? The answer lies in an important (if sometimes underemphasized) tenet of the practice theory tradition; namely, that social practices can enable human coordination because they are embodied in individual agents. That Haslanger thinks of social practices as embodied in individuals is clear from the following quote:

"Social practices are patterns of learned behavior that enable us [...] to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining and eliminating a resource [...] due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource[s] in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 13.

<sup>20</sup> Haslanger, "Social Practice," 246.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.



Social structures, qua networks of social practices, enable human coordination over the management of collective resources because the schemas that guide our interpretation and interaction with those resources are embodied in us in the form of patterns of learned behavior and dispositions. It is because similar schemas guide our behavior, that we can coordinate our action in a relatively stable way. In other words, culture—which Haslanger sometimes refers to as shared meanings, cultural schemas, or *techne*—is the embodied feature of social structures (and social practices, in particular) that enables large groups of individual agents to coordinate their behavior.<sup>22</sup>

But how does culture become embodied in individual agents as patterns of learned behavior and dispositions? The precise mechanism whereby culture influences individual behavior is a matter of contention among practice theorists. Earlier, I provided one explanatory account influenced by implicit bias research. In that story, exposure to anti-black cultural schemas (e.g. media representations, popular narratives, social imaginaries) leads individuals to adopt anti-black implicit (and sometimes explicit) attitudes, which in turn elicit racially discriminatory behavior.

A potentially complementary explanation of how culture becomes embodied in individual agents emphasizes the role of rules. As I discussed earlier, there are rules, duties and prerogatives that attach to each social position in a structural whole. We may think of cultural schemas as rules that regulate the behavior of agents occupying particular social positions. In fact, in Giddens' original formulation, social structures consist of rules and resources. It was Sewell who revised the theory in terms of schemas and resources. These rules need not be formally stated prescriptions. They may also include informal precepts, as well as unspoken and taken-for-granted assumptions

---

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Greenwald and Linda Krieger, "Implicit Bias: Scientific Foundations," *California Law Review* 94 (July 2006): 945-967.

about how socially positioned agents ought to behave. In this view, individuals absorb culture through their adoption of the rules that regulate the network of social practices in which they are enmeshed. Since the rules are not always formally stated (in fact, they seldom are), social coordination relies on socially positioned agents' tacit knowledge of the rules and the routinized character of social life.<sup>23</sup> It through their day-to-day participation in social practices that agents acquire tacit (and sometimes explicit) knowledge of the rules and patterns of behavior associated with their social position, and become disposed (as if out of habit) to follow them.

To return to our running example, a school is a social structure that organizes the collective action of students, teachers, custodians, parents and administrators in a relatively stable way. Students attend classes, study and take exams. Teachers prepare lessons, teach, discipline students, and attend parent-student conferences. Administrators schedule classes, process teacher payrolls and student tuition payments, and so on. The amount of social coordination that is required for a school to function normally cannot be overstated. Qua social structure, a school is a network of interconnected social practices, which include the practice of classroom learning, the practice of disciplining students, the practice of organizing class schedules, among others. To simplify our analysis, let us focus on the practice of classroom learning.

In this social practice, there are a few features of social coordination that often remain unnoticed, but which are nevertheless crucial for a class to take place at all. Students must be responsive to the teacher's instructions. The teacher must be able to enforce some degree of authority to enforce their instructions. Even if not all students are paying attention, there must be a minimum degree of orderliness and quietness for a class to take place at all. The normal

---

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

functioning of the class depends on teachers and students reliably following these unspoken and taken-for-granted rules.

But what ensures that students and teachers who participate in the classroom coordinate their actions such that these minimum requirements are reliably met? The answer lies in the patterns of learned behavior and dispositions that the social practice of classroom learning inculcates in its participants. As a result of participating in this social practice, students and teachers come to adopt similar cultural schemas, which help them in coordinating their behavior so as to create a functional classroom. Thus, students who are acquainted with the practice of classroom learning will be disposed to follow the teacher's instructions and to contribute to maintaining a minimum level of orderliness and quietness.<sup>24</sup> By continuously participating in the practice of classroom learning, students come to interiorize these rules (e.g. sitting at their desks upon entering the classroom, obeying the teacher's instructions, keeping quiet during lectures) as psychological schemas that guide their behavior and interactions with other participants and material resources in the practice. It is these schemas, qua instilled patterns of learned behavior and dispositions to act them out, that reliably ensure that a classroom with dozens of students attains the degree of coordinated agency necessary for the practice of classroom learning to be possible at all.

While social structures enable coordinated human agency via embodied cultural schemas, the relation of dependence also goes the other way around. Social structures are recursively constituted by the repeated coordinated behavior of individuals acting in accordance with the

---

<sup>24</sup> The fact that these patterns of learned behavior are inculcated by the social practice of classroom learning becomes evident when we consider how students from non-traditional backgrounds find it difficult to act according to these expected patterns of action, and are therefore regarded as "disruptive" to the classroom. Certainly, from the perspective of those already involved in the practice, they do disrupt what is otherwise a seamless (but also impressive) social coordination effort. However, as I show later on, racist cultural schemas may also influence teachers' perceptions of what counts as "disruptive behavior".

structure's cultural schemas. This is the central idea in Anthony Giddens's theory of social structure, which he describes as the *duality of structure*. Put simply, the duality of structure points to the fact that social structure is both the precondition and the outcome of collective human agency. It is the precondition insofar as embodied cultural schemas (which are one feature of social structures and social practices) enable coordinated human action, but social structure is also the recursive outcome of human agency insofar as individual agents constantly reproduce the structure by organizing their behavior in accordance with the structure's schemas. Giddens' notion of *recursivity* aims to capture the fact that social structures are constantly being reproduced by the repeated coordinated behavior of individual agents guided by cultural schemas. Thus, social structures are part of a recursive—that is, a constantly repeated—process whereby individual agents rely on a structure's cultural schemas to organize their action with respect to resources, while simultaneously reproducing that very social structure that "structures" their action. As mentioned earlier, students and teachers rely on embodied cultural schemas to coordinate their collective action in the classroom. By the same token, when students and teachers employ these schemas as guiding frames for their behavior in the classroom, they further entrench those very schemas as informal and taken-for-granted rules of the practice. By participating in the practice of classroom learning and following its cultural schemas, students and teachers effectively reproduce the practice, as well as reinforce the schemas that make it possible. While this example corresponds to the social practice of classroom learning, we can understand the recursivity of a school structure as a whole in a similar way. As a network of interrelated social practices, a school's functioning requires even more complex coordination of human agency. Still, cultural schemas help students, teachers, parents, administrators, and custodians who participate in the network of social practices that constitute the school structure to coordinate their actions accordingly. In addition to classroom

cultural schemas, there are cultural schemas that guide agent's behavior in parent-teacher conferences, disciplining practices, class scheduling, school recesses, among other social practices that jointly constitute the school as a social structure.

Of course, social structures are not only embodied in individual agents; they are also embodied in the material world. After all, social structures allow agents to coordinate their behavior with respect to resources, which includes material resources. As such, social structures are not just frameworks for collective agency—they also have a material reality.<sup>25</sup> To return to our running example, a school structure includes buildings and learning facilities, recreational spaces, books, teachers, among other material resources. Cultural schemas not only guide school agents in their interaction with other participants in the structure, they also impact how they interact with the material resources of the school structure. Some of the schemas that govern students' behavior in the classroom are explicitly linked to the classroom's material resources.<sup>26</sup> For example, think of students' disposition to sit at their desks (as opposed to sitting on the floor, or standing up) upon entering the classroom; or their tendency to face the teacher and/or blackboard during class.

Importantly, social structures (and cultural schemas, in particular) may lead agents to manage resources in ways that lead to alarming inequalities, not only within the structure in question but also across multiple structures. It is well-known that the U.S. educational system allocates—and here it is crucial to remember that the structure is only able to "act" through our recursive collective agency—resources in ways that lead to alarming inequalities between white, and black and Latinx students with respect to grades, dropout rates, and college completion rates.

---

<sup>25</sup> Haslanger, "Social Practice," 246.

<sup>26</sup> Notice that here I am counting teachers as a material resource that contributes to the school structure's goal of educating students. In this sense, teachers may be considered akin to books and learning facilities, in that they are resources that the school structure relies on to fulfill its educational goal.

While problematic in itself, this so-called racial achievement gap in education also has a significant impact on other social structures, such as the U.S. labor market and the criminal justice system. The racial disparity in educational attainment puts black and Latinx people at a disadvantage in a highly competitive U.S. labor market and contributes to high unemployment and underemployment rates among these groups. As a result, cash-strapped Latinx and black people in the U.S. are at an increased risk of getting involved with the criminal justice system—a problem compounded by various racist dynamics within this social structure, such as racial disparities in policing, arrests and sentencing.<sup>27</sup> I will have more to say about the U.S. education system and the racial achievement gap in future chapters. For now, I will tie up the remaining loose ends in my account of social structure.

With that in mind, I want to clarify my mention of the U.S. educational system as a social structure. So far, I have illustrated my account of social structure with reference to a school. By contrast, the U.S. educational system is a much more complex social structure that encompasses all K-12 schools, technical schools and universities across the country. It also includes several governmental and non-governmental organizations at the local and national level that operate in the education sector (e.g. the US department of education, the Barnard Contingent Faculty union). Still, both the school that I have been describing so far, as well as the U.S. educational system are examples of social structure. This is because social structures exist at various scales of social reality (e.g. global, national, sub-national level, and even local).<sup>28</sup> The school structure that I have been describing so far is an example of a social structure at a local scale. By contrast, the U.S. education

---

<sup>27</sup> In addition, the school-to-prison pipeline exacerbates the risk of black students to become involved in the criminal justice system by setting up school practices that disproportionately target black students for discipline, punishment and police intervention.

<sup>28</sup> Moon-Kie Jung, *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing U.S. Racisms Past and Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 35.

system is a social structure at a sub-national scale. Further examples of social structures at a sub-national scale include the aforementioned U.S. labor market and the US criminal justice system. I will not dwell on what I take to be the boundaries between global, national, sub-national and local scales of social structure. The key point is that social structures exist at varying degrees of social complexity. Therefore, it is equally reasonable to conceptualize a local school and the global financial system as social structures. Of course, the more complex the structure, the more difficult it is to lay out the network of social relations that constitute it. Still, just like the local schools that partially comprise it, the U.S. educational system is also a network of social relations among teachers, students, custodians, parents, administrators, as well as the material resources that agents occupying these social positions employ in order to advance the structure's educational goal.<sup>29</sup> For the sake of clarity, I will continue to illustrate my account of social structure with reference to a relatively simple local school structure. The reader should keep in mind, however, that it is possible to analyze social structures of a larger scale with the same theoretical framework.

## **2.4. A Working Account of Social Structure: Bringing Together the Two Traditions**

Earlier, I praised Haslanger's analytical reconstruction of two important traditions for thinking about social structure—holism and practice theory. However, Haslanger's work on social structure remains as fragmented as the two traditions that she draws on. Up to this point, I have discussed her two accounts of social structures—one in terms of networks of social relations, the other in terms of networks of social practices—separately. But how do these two seemingly

---

<sup>29</sup> Given its complexity, we should probably also add politicians, investors, and philanthropists (among others) to the list of social positions that make up the U.S. educational system. Of course, educating the citizenry is not the goal of all agents who occupy social positions in the U.S. educational system. Politicians aim to earn votes for upcoming elections, and investors in for-profit schools aim to get returns on their investments.

competing definitions come together into an internally coherent account of social structure? After all, these two definitions of social structure correspond to two sides of a protracted debate between the organicist tradition—which emphasizes social relations—and the practice theory tradition—which emphasizes the interaction between social structure, culture and agency. While Haslanger offers a helpful reconstruction of both traditions, she does not give a direct answer as to how to merge them into a unified account. However, she does leave a helpful hint—namely, to conceptualize social practices as constituting social relations.<sup>30</sup>

In my view, it is through their participation in social practices that individual agents relate to each other and to material resources so as to constitute the network of social relations that is social structure. In other words, social practices situate individual agents as nodes in the networks of social relations that make up social structures. If social structures are networks of social relations among socially positioned agents and the material world, social practices (and cultural schemas in particular) are the means through which agents enmesh themselves in these social relations.

In addition, social practices contribute to the stability of the social relations that make up the social structure. Social structures (and social relations) are relatively stable because they are embodied in individual agents as patterns of learned behavior that enable them to coordinate their collective action with respect to the structure's resources—in other words, because of our involvement in social practices. Agents tend to follow the rules, duties and prerogatives associated with their social position in the network of social relations because the structure's cultural schemas motivate them to coordinate their behavior in that way. Furthermore, social practices themselves are relatively stable because of the aforementioned looping effects between schemas and resources.

---

<sup>30</sup> Haslanger, "Structural Explanation", 125.



To recap, social structures are networks of social relations. Social relations situate individual agents as occupants of social positions that stand in particular relations to one another and to the structure's resources. Social structures, qua networks of social practices, are relatively stable because the cultural schemas that partially constitute them become embodied in individual agents—whether it be via implicit and explicit psychological attitudes, or via rule-following. Cultural schemas guide socially positioned agents' relations to one another and to the structure's resources. Together, schemas and resources make up social practices. It is through their participation in (i.e. acting in accordance with the schemas of) social practices that individual agents reproduce the networks of social relations that make up social structures. In short, social structures are networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. I arrived at this working account of social structure by synthesizing the two strains of Haslanger's work on social structure. However, where I part ways with Haslanger is in how we conceive of the explanatory power of social structures.

## **2.5. What Role do Social Structures Play in Social Explanation?**

Haslanger's account of social structure not only seeks to describe what social structures are. It also aims to clarify the role that social structures play in social explanation. For Haslanger, the distinctive explanatory role of social structures is that they impose social constraints on our action.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, Haslanger follows other philosophers who theorize the effects of social structures on agents in terms of agential constraints. In particular, Haslanger argues that social structures constrain the agency of individuals by altering their choice architecture. This account presupposes a rational choice model of individual behavior, and theorizes social structures as constraining an individual's choices by altering the expected utility of the strategies available to

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

them. Haslanger—following Susan Moller Okin and Ann Cudd—illustrates this point with the case of Lisa, a woman who is effectively forced (from the perspective of a utility-maximizing agent) to quit her job after having a baby. Sexist social structures—such as the labor market, the caregiving system, the corporation she works for, and the heteropatriarchy more generally—make Lisa's other options less attractive or even outright unavailable (e.g. having her male partner quit his job instead, leaving the baby in daycare). For instance, faced with the need to procure caregiving for the baby, Lisa could take maternity leave. However, like 88% of U.S. women, Lisa would have to forego her salary for the duration of her leave.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, since the U.S. government only guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave, the solution would only be temporary. This option becomes even less attractive once she factors in the negative impact it would have on her career advancement prospects. Given that sexist social structures limit the options available, Lisa finds herself in a situation where the most rational (i.e. utility-maximizing) decision is to quit her job after having a baby.

Not all accounts of structural constraint presuppose a rational model of the actor, however. Amie Thomasson argues that social structures can also constrain the behavior of individuals by means of social norms. According to Thomasson, social norms can guide the behavior of socially positioned agents by channeling the ways in which they navigate the social world. Social norms not only inform which options we are inclined to pursue, but they also affect which options show up to us as "live options" for pursuing, and which options are not noticed at all.<sup>33</sup> This filtering of options often happens in ways that are not consciously chosen or even acknowledged by the agents

---

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Traister, "Why Women Can't Break Free from the Parent Trap," *New Republic*, February 2, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/120939/maternity-leave-policies-america-hurt-working-moms>.

<sup>33</sup> Amie Thomasson, "Structural Explanation and Norms: Comments on Haslanger," *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1 (2016): 137.

themselves. Thus, social norms and habits of perception and engagement with the world can structurally constrain the behavior of individuals whether or not individuals operate according to the rational model of the actor. In fact, Thomasson's discussion of social norms is reminiscent of the action-guiding rules that I discussed earlier, and is perfectly compatible with my working account of social structure.

Less discussed in the philosophical literature is the way in which social structures influence the agency of individuals by enabling them to act in particular ways. To the extent that individuals partake in social structures, they occupy a particular position in the structure's network of social relations. As I mentioned earlier, there are roles, duties and prerogatives that attach to social positions in a social structure. Social structures enable individual agency insofar as they make it possible for socially positioned agents to perform certain roles and to have certain prerogatives. In other words, social structures open possibilities for action for individuals, which they would not have outside of the social relations that make up the structure. For instance, a university is a social structure that enables those socially positioned as professors to perform certain actions that are not available to those outside the structure. The university structure enables professors to give lectures, hold office hours, assign coursework to their students, etc. The university structure also gives professors access to certain prerogatives and powers. Professors have the prerogative of assigning grades to their students. They also have some degree of authority over their students within the context of the university structure. As a result, professors stand in an asymmetrical power relation with respect to their students—a position they would not occupy were it not for the university structure. This example illustrates how social structures do not merely constrain the agency of those who participate in them, but also open new possibilities for action. In short, social structures also enable human agency.

If the idea that social structures enable human agency is rarely discussed in the philosophical literature on social structure, the claim that social structures motivate individual behavior is absent altogether. Here, it helps to contrast structural constraint with structural motivation. While structural constraints make certain options unavailable or less desirable, structural motivation leads socially positioned agents towards specific ways of acting. In some instances, these structural effects on agency are really two sides of the same coin. To go back to Lisa's case, it is because sexist structures constrained her other options that she was rationally motivated to quit her job after having a baby. In this case, the structural motivation to quit her job after having a baby is the result of a rational decision-making process in which sexist social structures effectively foreclosed her other options for action (e.g. lack of affordable daycare in her community).

In some cases, however, social structures can motivate individuals to take a particular course of action even if other options for action remain easily available. In such cases, structural motivation is not reducible to structural constraint as in Lisa's case. In fact, these cases of structural motivation constitute a distinct way in which social structures influence human agency. There are several mechanisms whereby social structures can motivate individual agents. In this dissertation, I focus on structural motivation that stems from the interests that attach to agents' social positions. Thus, a foundational thesis of this dissertation is that agents who occupy a privileged position in an oppressive social structure are structurally motivated to act in ways that sustain their advantages. Agents who benefit from oppressive social structures acquire an interest in safeguarding those privileges, as well as the structures that bring them about. I refer to interests of this kind as positional interests because they attach primarily to privileged social positions in oppressive social structures, and only attach to individual agents insofar as they occupy such

positions. These positional interests motivate privileged agents to act (or fail to act) in ways that sustain oppressive structures, even if such agents are not constrained by the structure and could act otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

I have now discussed three ways in which social structures influence the behavior of individual agents. Social structures exert their influence on individuals by constraining, enabling and motivating their agency. These effects of social structure on individual agency constitute the explanatory power of social structures. Whereas Haslanger limits her account of the explanatory power of social structures to structural constraint, I argue that a full-fledged account of the role that social structures play in social explanation must also consider how they enable and motivate individual agency.

This expanded account of the explanatory power of social structures turns out to be crucial for my analysis of structural racism. As I claimed earlier, the distinctive contribution of the concept of structural racism for racial theorizing is that it helps to explain durable racial inequality in racialized societies like the United States. As I go on to argue in later chapters, a key causal mechanism whereby structural racism (i.e. racially oppressive social structures) contributes to the durability of racial inequality is by motivating agents who benefit from such inequality to act (or fail to act) in ways that sustain it. This feature of structural racism remains hidden if we only think in terms of structural constraints, as Haslanger seems to do. Instead, we must take seriously the idea that racial inequality is largely sustained by the actions (and omissions) of individual agents motivated to sustain their race-based privileges, which depend on the maintenance of the racial status quo. In future chapters, I substantiate these claims by drawing on empirical and theoretical

---

<sup>34</sup> I develop my account of positional interests in chapter 6.

research in the social sciences. In addition, I expand on my account of the role of social structures and positional interests in social explanation.

Here, my aim was to introduce an important difference between my working account of social structure and Haslanger's—namely, the idea that social structures not only constrain, but also enable and motivate individual agency. In addition, I developed a working account of social structure that brings together the key insights from the organicist and practice theory traditions. In this view, social structures are networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. Individual agents recursively constitute social structures through their collective action. At the same time, their collective action is influenced by those very social structures. Social structures are not mere epiphenomena of human activity; they also have the power to influence that activity by constraining, enabling and motivating human agency. As Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past".<sup>35</sup> Social structures are a human creation, but they also partially constitute the social circumstances within which humans exercise their agency. With this working account of social structure in place, I can now continue to spell out my theory of structural racism as racially oppressive social structures. The next step is to clarify the concept of oppression.

---

<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 595.

## Chapter 3: What is Oppression?

Earlier I claimed that a social structure is oppressive when it organizes social groups in oppressive social relations. More specifically, oppressive social structures reliably organize social groups in social relations whereby some group (or groups) suffers from an unjustly inflicted harm, while another group (or groups) benefits from the same harm.<sup>36</sup> This definition of oppressive social structures closely resembles Ann Cudd's influential account of oppression.<sup>37</sup> Cudd defines oppression as a situation in which four conditions are satisfied:<sup>38</sup>

- 1) The harm condition: there is harm that comes out of an institutional practice.
- 2) The social group condition: the harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm in (1).
- 3) The privilege condition: there is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in (1).
- 4) The coercion condition: there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.

I am sympathetic to Cudd's framework for theorizing oppression. In this chapter, I complement her theory of oppression with a detailed discussion of three central features of oppression: its structural nature, its relationality, and its durability. In other words, I develop an account of oppression as a *structural* phenomenon that denotes a *durable* social *relation* between

---

<sup>36</sup> Of course, given the duality of structure, we should always keep in mind that social structures are both the precondition and the outcome of collective human action. Thus, when I attribute social structures with the ability to "organize" social groups, there is no need to posit social structures as self-standing supra-individual entities. At the level of ontology, it is individual agents who organize themselves in oppressive social relations. And yet, they are only able and motivated to do so because they coordinate their collective action within the context of a social structure. I expand on my views on this matter in chapter 6, where I discuss the individualism-holism debate as it pertains to ontology and social explanation.

<sup>37</sup> Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

social groups. I choose to focus on these features of oppression because they play a key role in how racially oppressive social structures operate. While these three features are present in Cudd's theory of oppression to varying degrees, the focus of her analysis lies elsewhere. This chapter complements her account by elaborating on—and sometimes revising—her remarks on these three features of oppression.

Cudd's overall framework highlights the structural nature of oppression. Although she does not employ the language of relationality, I show how Cudd's social group condition and privilege condition address two aspects of the relationality of oppression. First, oppression is a relation between social groups. Second, oppression is relational because the oppression of one group entails a corresponding privilege for another group. Finally, one of the aims of Cudd's coercion condition is to explain the durability of oppression. According to Cudd, oppressive social structures are durable because they constrain the agency of the oppressed in ways that lead them to reproduce their own oppression. While my remarks on the structural and relational nature of oppression complement Cudd's, I disagree with her explanation of the durability of oppression. This may seem to entail that I reject Cudd's coercion condition. However, this is not entirely true.

In Cudd's theory of oppression, the coercion condition has normative and explanatory implications. On the normative side, coercion explains why oppression is unjust. On the explanatory side, coercion explains why oppression is so enduring. For Cudd, oppression is unjust by definition. To make a claim of oppression is to show that the harms involved are unjustified. Cudd's coercion condition offers a particular theory of the injustice of oppression. It claims that oppression is unjust because it is caused by coercion. In other words, oppression is unjust insofar as it results from social structures that constrain agents' possibilities for action. As I show in 3.4., Cudd considers coercion (and therefore oppression) to be unjust because it violates the autonomy



of agents, as well as egalitarian principles of justice. I am sympathetic with Cudd's explanation of the injustice of oppression. Therefore, I endorse her coercion condition to the extent that it deals with normative considerations.

On the explanatory side, the coercion condition aims to explain why oppression is so enduring. According to Cudd, the key to explaining the durability of oppression are indirect psychological and material forces that coerce the oppressed to act in ways that sustain their own oppression—she calls this process "oppression by choice".<sup>39</sup> From this perspective, explaining the durability of oppression is a matter of showing how oppressive social structures enlist the coerced cooperation of agents who should be the first to resist them. Earlier I stated that I disagree with Cudd's explanation of the durability of oppression. This is not because I reject that coercion plays a role in the reproduction of oppression. Rather, I take issue with Cudd's claim that coercing the oppressed to sustain their own oppression is the key to explaining the durability of oppression. As I show in 3.3., it is equally important to consider how the voluntary choices of privileged agents contribute to the durability of oppression. On this explanatory question, I disagree with Cudd's focus on coercion.

To sum up, this chapter builds on Cudd's theory of oppression in order to offer a descriptive account of oppression as a structural, relational and durable social process. I start with Cudd because her *Analyzing Oppression* is the most comprehensive take on this issue available in the literature. Along the way, I also refer to other accounts of oppression that bear on important issues under consideration. In fact, as the ensuing discussion will make clear, my description of oppression as a structural, relational and durable social process follows the general philosophical consensus on the nature of oppression. As with my discussion of the social structure concept, my

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 146, 183.

goal here is not to offer a novel theory of oppression or to adjudicate on lingering philosophical debates on oppression. Rather, my aim is to articulate a working account of oppression that can serve as the basis for making sense of structural racism in terms of racially oppressive social structures. If I take issue with Cudd's explanation for the durability of oppression, it is only because this turns out to be crucial for understanding the resilience of structural racism.

### **3.1. Oppression is Structural**

In this dissertation, I treat oppression as primarily a structural phenomenon. In other words, I take oppressive social structures as the basic unity of analysis. To clarify my position, it is helpful to follow Haslanger's distinction between agential and structural theories of oppression.<sup>40</sup> While agential (or individualist) accounts of oppression focus on acts of moral wrongdoing by individual agents, structural accounts of oppression focus on unjust collective arrangements that distribute power unjustly. According to Haslanger, agent oppression involves an agent or agents (i.e. the oppressor(s)) abusing their power to harm others (i.e. the oppressed) wrongfully.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, structural oppression involves social structures that organize social relations in ways that lead to illegitimate power imbalances.<sup>42</sup> Inevitably, such power imbalances are the breeding ground for an unjust social environment in which dominant agents can exact benefits from their advantageous social position at the expense of subordinate agents.

Haslanger's distinction between agential and structural accounts of oppression is reminiscent of the meta-theoretical debate between personal morality and political morality (see 1.2.2). As a brief reminder, the focus of personal morality is the ethics of individual character and

---

<sup>40</sup> Sally Haslanger, "Oppressions: Racial and Other," in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 311-338.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

interpersonal conduct, whereas the focus of political morality is the justice of institutional arrangements. If we understand Haslanger's distinction through this lens, the difference between agential and structural accounts of oppression boils down to the theorist's particular normative interests. The choice between an agential and a structural approach depends on whether we prioritize individual wrongdoing or political injustice as the morally troublesome feature of oppression.<sup>43</sup> For agential accounts of oppression, the focus of moral assessment are individual agents, their actions, intentions, and the like. Thus, these accounts are most interested in questions of personal morality such as: who counts as an oppressive agent? Does oppression require intentionality on the part of the oppressor? Is this particular agent or group morally blameworthy for enacting or contributing to oppression? By contrast, structural accounts of oppression focus on questions of political morality such as: what makes oppression an unjust collective arrangement? What is the relation between oppression and illegitimate power imbalances in society? How is oppression linked with the everyday injustices that oppressed people face in their interaction with the major structures of society?

Looking through the lens of the personal/political morality distinction clarifies that the choice between agent oppression and structural oppression is a question of normative priorities. I do not deny the importance of agential accounts that emphasize questions of oppression and individual wrongdoing. However, given my interest in structural racism, I choose to focus on the political aspects of the normativity of oppression and thus I embrace a structural approach to analyzing oppression. So far, I have offered a *normative* explanation for my focus on structural oppression. Oppression is structural insofar as some (but certainly not all) of its normatively salient

---

<sup>43</sup> Haslanger articulates this normative distinction in terms of moral theory v. political theory. However, she fails to offer a clear explanation of the boundary between the two. For this reason, I prefer to depict the normative distinction in terms of the personal/political morality framework introduced in 1.2.2.

features bear on the justice of our collective arrangements. The second sense in which oppression is a structural phenomenon has to do with *explaining* how it operates. In this second sense, oppression is structural because social structures are crucial to explain how oppression functions and why it is so durable.

Oppression often operates in the interactions between the oppressed and the major social structures of society. For instance, black people in the United States experience their oppression in their encounters with social structures such as the criminal justice system, the health care system, the housing market, the education system, and the state more generally. To stick to the first example, for black people in the United States, being oppressed partially means that they must face a criminal justice system that reliably ensures over-policing of majority-black neighborhoods, subjecting black people to unnecessary police stops, searches and excessive force, as well as race-based disparities in arrests, convictions and length of prison sentences. This example illustrates how oppression often operates through social structures that systematically subject members of oppressed groups to unjust harms. Thus, if we are to understand how oppression operates, we must pay attention to the causal role of social structures in subjecting the oppressed to unjust harms.

My focus on oppressive social structures does not deny that oppression causally depends on the actions of individual agents. The oppression of black people in the criminal justice system stems from the joint (but not necessarily concerted) action of many (but not necessarily all) police officers, juries, judges, politicians, and so on. An adequate theory of oppression must recognize that oppressive social structures play a causal role only because individual agents participate in and reproduce those structures. In fact, this follows from my account of social structures. In chapter 2, I defined social structures as networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. Following this definition, we can

think of the U.S. criminal justice system as a network of social relations among individual agents occupying the social positions of police officer, juror, judge, politician, citizen, and so on. The U.S. criminal justice system is a racially oppressive social structure insofar as it subjects black citizens to over-policing, unnecessary stops, searches and excessive force, as well as race-based disparities in arrests, convictions and length of prison sentences. However, this social structure can only have these effects because agents who occupy social positions within the structure act according to racialized schemas, such as the association of black people with criminality. The action-guiding schema [black person → criminality] partially explains why agents that occupy the position of police officer tend to subject black citizens to over-policing, unnecessary stops, searches, arrests and excessive force. The same schema helps explain why agents that occupy the positions of juries and judges tend to make decisions that perpetuate racial disparities in convictions and length of prison sentences.

This example illustrates the benefits of taking a structural approach to explain the workings of oppression. Focusing on the causal role of social structures in reproducing oppression is key because social structures, such as the criminal justice system, the education system, and the health care system have an enormous impact on the life chances of all members of society. Unfortunately, these social structures are often guided by schemas that encourage agents to act in ways that unjustly harm members of oppressed groups. In other words, the aforementioned social structures are a focal point in the causal reproduction of oppression. Moreover, analyzing oppression from a structural perspective helps explain the participation of individual agents in the reproduction of oppression. As I mentioned earlier, social structures are causally efficacious only because of human agency. At the same time, in order to explain the actions of individual agents who reproduce

oppression within the structure, we must pay attention to their position in the structures and the action-guiding schemas that govern the structure.

I have proposed two reasons to adopt a structural approach to analyzing oppression—one normative and one explanatory. I will now show that Cudd also chooses to emphasize structural oppression. Her definition makes it clear that she thinks of oppression as a fundamentally institutional phenomenon. She summarizes her view on oppression as "an institutionally structured harm perpetrated on groups by other groups using direct and indirect material and psychological forces that violate justice".<sup>44</sup> For Cudd, institutions are the primary source of oppression. However, it is equally plausible to read Cudd as proposing a theory of oppression as a fundamentally structural phenomenon. For one thing, it is common for philosophers and social theorists to use the terms 'institution' and 'social structure' without drawing a clear distinction between the two. This practice is linked to the lack of consensus regarding the concept of social structure. Cudd herself uses 'social structure' and 'institution' interchangeably throughout her book. Moreover, she defines institutions as "formal and informal *social structures* and constraints, such as law, convention, norms, practices and the like".<sup>45</sup>

If I am correct that Cudd uses 'institution' and 'social structure' interchangeably, it turns out that three out of four of her conditions for oppression shed further light on its structural nature.<sup>46</sup> Oppression is (1) a harm *caused by social structures*, (2) *perpetrated* on a social group *through social structures*, and which (3) *benefits* another group *through social structures*. Even the fourth condition (i.e. oppression results from unjustified coercion or force) sometimes involves social

---

<sup>44</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 26 (emphasis mine).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 (emphasis mine).

<sup>46</sup> If my reading of Cudd on this point is mistaken and she rejects theorizing oppression as a fundamentally structural phenomenon, I am happy to part ways with her in this respect.

structures. Oppression may result from an agent exercising unjustified force or coercion on others. However, oppression may also obtain from social structures arranging the social environment in ways that unjustly constrain the actions of the oppressed.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes, the constraining power of social structures may effectively force the oppressed to act in ways that sustain their own oppression, even in the absence of overt violence or coercion. As we discussed earlier, social structures may have this constraining effect on agents by altering their choice architecture, or by affecting their habits of perception and action via social norms. Thus, this fourth condition specifies a key causal mechanism whereby social structures perpetuate oppression. As such, I will get back to it when I discuss the durability of oppression in 3.3. In 3.2., I will dig deeper into Cudd's second and third conditions of oppression, as well as how they relate to her account of social groups. Before that, I will sum up my position vis-à-vis agential and structural accounts of oppression.

Like Cudd, I adopt a structuralist approach to analyzing oppression. Thus, I focus on social structures that organize social groups in asymmetrical power relations. Still, my account of oppression also has an agential component. This is because the maintenance of oppressive social structures relies on the actions (and omissions) of individual agents who partake in such structures. This goes beyond the claim that oppression involves individuals abusing their power to harm others. Individual agents' contribution to oppression may also take the form of unintentional actions, unintended consequences of past actions, or even omissions (e.g. lack of action in the face of injustice). Still, even when I pay attention to the causal role of individual agents in reproducing oppression, I do so from a structural perspective. That is, I analyze the ways in which oppressive

---

<sup>47</sup> Here we can see that Cudd's analysis of the causes of oppression includes both agents and social structures. Of course, given my account of social structure, the only way in which social structures can "arrange" and "constrain" is through the actions of individual agents.

social structures constrain, enable and motivate individual agents to act (or fail to act) in ways that reproduce those very structures.

### **3.2. Oppression is Relational**

Another key feature of oppression is its relational nature. Oppression is fundamentally a social relation between people. More precisely, oppression is a social relation between social groups. This is captured by the second and third conditions in Cudd's account of oppression. Oppression denotes an intergroup relation whereby (2) one group suffers from a structurally caused harm, which at the same time (3) benefits another social group. In other words, oppression is a social relation that involves oppressed groups and privileged groups. Thus, oppression is relational in at least two ways. First, it denotes a *social relation* between social groups. Second, oppression is relational insofar as it always entail a *correlative* social process—namely privilege.

#### 3.2.1 Oppression is a Social Relation between Social Groups

The claim that oppression is a social relation among social groups entails that social groups—rather than individual agents—are the basic unit for analysis of oppression. When we think of the oppressed, we often have oppressed social groups in mind. Oppressed social groups in the United States include black people, women, LGBTQ people, Muslims, Latinxs, and so on. Given the importance of social groups for analyzing oppression, it is crucial to clarify what I mean by social groups. Once again, I will take Cudd's theory of social groups as a starting point. Cudd defines social groups as "collection[s] of persons who share (or would share under similar circumstances) a set of social constraints on action".<sup>48</sup> For Cudd, constraints include "facts that one does or ought to rationally consider in deciding how to act or how to plan one's life, or facts

---

<sup>48</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 44.



that shape beliefs and attitudes about other persons".<sup>49</sup> As this definition suggests, Cudd's account of social groups hinges on a more general theory of explaining human action—namely, rational choice theory. Cudd considers social group membership as a social constraint that affects individuals' rational decision-making and consequent behavior via penalties and rewards.

It is important to highlight that Cudd uses the term 'constraint' in a normatively neutral sense.<sup>50</sup> Cudd urges us to think of constraints as guides or frames for human behavior, which may be positive or negative, just or unjust. Thus, both penalties and rewards may be considered 'constraints' on agency insofar as they shape agents' intentions and actions. While some constraints are biological, psychological, and physical, social group membership belongs to the class of *social* constraints. Social constraints are social in virtue of their social origin—that is, the fact that they result from social action, whether intentional or not. Examples of social constraints include "legal rights, obligations and burdens, stereotypical expectations, wealth, income, social status, conventions, norms, and practices".<sup>51</sup> Insofar as members of socially significant groups share similar social constraints (e.g. stereotypes of women as overly emotional, associations of black people with criminality, harsher disciplinary methods for black and Latinx students), their action is also affected by a similar structure of rewards and penalties. For instance, given the systematicity of anti-black police violence, black people in the US have an incentive to be extremely cautious in their interactions with the police. Following Cudd, black people in the US count as a social group insofar as they face similar social constraints on their action, such as long-lasting racial inequality, anti-black attitudes, stereotypes, violence, and marginalization.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 41.

Social groups are collections of individuals that share similar social constraints, which alter the rewards and penalties that form the background of action. According to Cudd, group membership need not be voluntary or even acknowledged, nor do group members need to identify with the group. What makes an agent a member of a social group is whether they face the same social constraints on their action. To continue with the previous example, there are Caribbean immigrants in the US who do not identify as black, but who are nevertheless treated as black and are therefore subject to anti-black police violence. In their case, their membership in the social group "black in the US" is non-voluntary. And yet, they face similar social constraints in their encounter with police officers as those who voluntarily identify as black. Moreover, for new immigrants who are not acquainted with the US racial landscape, they may even be unaware that they count as black in the US. Still, they will face similar social constraints as other members of the group.

In fact, oppressed social groups tend to be non-voluntary insofar as membership in these groups is often socially rather than individually determined. To continue with the example of black people in the US, membership in this social group is the result of recursive social practices that categorize and sort individuals into "races" primarily on the basis of phenotypical traits. Thus, to be a member of the social group "black in the US" is the result of being labeled as such by society and to be treated accordingly—for instance, to be at a higher risk of suffering from police violence. As discussed earlier, whether one identifies with the social group "black in the US" does not change how one will be perceived and treated by the criminal justice system and society more generally. This is not to deny that many black people in the U.S. do self-identify as black, which makes their group membership become voluntary. The key point is that, insofar as we are interested in oppression and the constraints it places on social agents, the focus is on socially

imposed group membership. Thus, when I refer to social groups as the basic unit for analyzing oppression, I have in mind the thin sense of social groups as collections of people who share socially imposed constraints on their action—regardless of their attitude (e.g. identification, rejection, ignorance) towards the group.

Even though oppression is a relation between social groups, its effects manifest themselves at the level of agents' personal experiences. The experience of being oppressed includes a variety of harms such as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.<sup>52</sup> Although personal, the experience of being oppressed involves harms that agents suffer *qua members of an oppressed social group*. In other words, we do not relate to oppression as atomistic individuals. Rather, our relation to oppression is mediated by our social positioning, which is influenced by our membership in socially significant social groups. This is because oppression targets social groups. Part of what it means for oppression to target social groups is that the harms of oppression affect members of a social group *systematically*. Earlier I argued that oppression often takes place in the everyday interactions between members of oppressed groups and the major social structures of society. Being oppressed entails that one's personal experience of oppression is not an isolated incident, but a part of a wider social structure that makes it likely that other members of the group are similarly affected.

To return to an earlier example, the criminal justice system in the United States systematically targets black people for over-policing, unnecessary stops, searches and excessive force, as well as race-based disparities in arrests, convictions and length of prison sentences. The countless and recurring examples of black people being subject to police brutality are not isolated

---

<sup>52</sup> I take this non-exhaustive list of the harms of oppression from Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39-65.

incidents, but rather an indication of the systematic targeting of black people as a group by a racially oppressive criminal justice system. The systematicity of anti-black police violence does not mean that every black person will be subject to police brutality during their lifetime. However, it does mean that black people are at a higher risk of having violent or even deadly encounters with the police in virtue of their membership in an oppressed social group. Once again, given the relationality of oppression, social groups are the basic unity of analysis. Oppression targets individual agents on the basis of their social group membership.

Importantly, the criminal justice system is not only a *racially* oppressive social structure. Other social groups also suffer from systematic police violence. For instance, transgender people are 3.7 times more likely to experience police violence compared to cisgender people.<sup>53</sup> They too are members of a social group harmed by systematic police violence. Thus, the criminal justice system reproduces both anti-black and anti-trans oppression. There are individual agents who are oppressed by the criminal justice system in virtue of being black *and* in virtue of being trans. In such cases, their oppression is exacerbated by their membership in two oppressed social groups. In fact, transgender people of color are 6 times more likely to experience physical violence from the police than white cisgender people.<sup>54</sup> Offering a full-fledged analysis of intersectionality is beyond the purview of this dissertation. However, given my emphasis on oppression as a probabilistic relation (one which raises the chances of members of oppressed social groups to suffer from unjust harms), I must make one clarification. The intersectionality of oppression is not merely a *quantitative* question of how much one's membership in multiple oppressed groups increases one's probabilities to suffer unjust harm. An intersectional analysis of the criminal justice

---

<sup>53</sup> National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, "Fact Sheet of Anti-Trans Hate Violence" in [https://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncavp\\_transhvfactsheet.pdf](https://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncavp_transhvfactsheet.pdf), accessed May 20, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. The study did not offer a statistic for experiences of police violence among black transgender people.

system—to take one example of an oppressive social structure—must pay attention to the *qualitative* differences in how black trans people experience police violence, as opposed to both black cisgender people and white trans people.<sup>55</sup> The intersectionality of oppression highlights the importance of analyzing oppression primarily as a relation among social groups. In order to understand the complexity of oppression, we must explore the ways in which agents' multiple group memberships affect their interactions with the major social structures of society.

### 3.2.2. Privilege: The Correlate of Oppression

The second sense in which oppression is relational is that it always entails a *correlative* phenomenon—namely, privilege. That is to say, for every oppressed social group, there is a correlative social group that benefits from that oppression. To put it differently, oppression is always correlated with privilege. Every oppressive social structure is simultaneously a social structure of privilege. The difference between the two lies in the agent's relation to the structure, which stems from their membership in the oppressed or privileged group, respectively. If oppression is a social relation among social groups, the groups in question are an oppressed group—the one that is harmed by the oppressive social structure—and a privileged group—the one that benefits from that harm.

According to Cudd, the existence of a privileged group is a necessary condition for oppression. In Cudd's view, to be privileged is to be a member of a social group that gains materially or psychologically from oppression.<sup>56</sup> Importantly, the privileged do not always seek, want or even notice their benefits. In fact, oftentimes these benefits are unavoidable for them. Cudd illustrates this claim with the example of John Stuart Mill's attempt to give up his oppressive male

---

<sup>55</sup> For an elaboration of this point in the case of women of color, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

<sup>56</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 195.

conjugal rights upon marrying Harriet Taylor. Despite Mill's grand gesture, he was effectively unable to give up these rights because the law did not recognize such an act, which meant that he could always reclaim them in the future. Despite his feminist commitments, Mill was unable to renounce his male privileges. Of course, the benefits of privilege are not restricted to rights. These benefits also include material resources such as wealth, income, access to affordable health care and housing, as well as psychological resources such as positive social stereotypes about one's group.

Privilege is the flip side of oppression because one group's preferential access to material and psychological resources is contingent on denying equal access to those same resources to other groups. This is because resources, such as access to affordable health care, are scarce. When the health care system allocates its scarce resources in ways that privilege one social group, other social groups become unable to access those same resources. Moreover, group-based inequalities in access to health care lead to group-based unequal health outcomes, which further harms members of oppressed groups. Earlier I defined social structures as networks of social relations that enable human coordination over the management of collective resources. One feature of oppressive social structures is that they arrange the distribution of scarce resources unequally in ways that advantage privileged group members and disadvantage oppressed group members. This systematic conferral of advantages and disadvantages is at the root of group-based inequality and is a mark of oppressive social structures.

Alison Bailey clarifies the connection between privilege and advantage.<sup>57</sup> In her view, to have an advantage is "to have a skill, talent, asset, or condition acquired—either by accident of

---

<sup>57</sup> Alison Bailey, "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (1998): 104-119.

birth or by intentional cultivation—that allows a person or a group to [...] bring themselves forward.”<sup>58</sup> Privilege is a subset of advantage. In particular, privileges are unearned advantages that are conferred systematically to members of dominant groups. By contrast, earned advantages are the result of intentional cultivation by the agent. Examples of earned advantages include learning a second language and working hard in order to afford to live in a neighborhood with a good school system.<sup>59</sup>

However, the line between privilege and earned advantage is not always clear. Oftentimes, privilege makes it easier to earn advantages. Being able to afford a house in a middle or upper-class neighborhood may be an earned advantage that stems from years of hard work, but it is also contingent on several factors, such as student loans, financial literacy, and getting a well-paying job. Given the existence of a racial wage gap, being white increases one's chances of getting a well-paying job. This is particularly true for middle and upper-class whites who can rely on personal connections to land a good job. This (admittedly simplified) example illustrates how race and class privilege can make it easier for members of those groups to earn advantages. By contrast, being a member of an oppressed group can constrain one's ability to earn advantages despite one's hard work. The racial wage gap and the importance of personal connections in hiring increase the difficulty of finding a well-paying job for black people. Even those who are able to find stable and well-paying work may not be able to benefit from their years of hard work. Redlining makes it difficult for families of color that can afford to live in middle or upper-class neighborhoods to move into those areas. Racial biases among mortgage lenders and landowners increase the barriers

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

of entry for families of color, which in many cases prevents them from actualizing their earned economic advantage.

To recap Bailey's definition, privilege refers to unearned advantages that are granted automatically to members of dominant groups, and which other agents had to earn. Advantages such as assets, skills, or statuses, allow agents to advance their interests in the relevant social contexts. Having access to unearned advantages improves the life chances of members of privileged groups. However, even earned advantages often bear the mark of privilege and oppression. This last point is important to address the common misconception that a person is not privileged if they worked to earn some of the advantages that they have. One benefit of being a member of a privileged group is that one's unearned advantages in one domain will make it easier to earn advantages in other domains. By the same token, being oppressed entails that one's group membership will oftentimes make it more difficult to earn advantages and to use them to advance one's interests.

One important lesson from Cudd and Bailey is that privilege and oppression have to do with control over resources. Here we find another connection between oppression and social structures. Earlier I argued that social structures enable human coordination over the management of collective resources. To have an advantage is to have control over resources that are positively valued within a given social structure, and which allow the owner to advance their interests within that structure. Having control over resources that allow one to advance one's life goals is not necessarily problematic. However, there is cause for concern when social structures are set up in ways that make it easier for some groups to accumulate resources and the advantages they come along with them. Being privileged allows one access to unearned advantages and makes it easier



to earn further advantages. Being oppressed makes it more difficult to earn advantages and to benefit from the advantages one manages to earn.

Economic resources, such as wealth, are a powerful source of advantage in multiple social structures. Wealthy agents have access to better quality health care, are able to afford to live in a safe neighborhood with a good school system, can afford better legal representation, and so on. In addition, other types of resources—or capital—also serve as a source of advantage in many social contexts.<sup>60</sup> Social capital, such as having access to a network of personal connections, can be a key advantage in the job market. Cultural capital is another source of advantage. For instance, having practical knowledge of the bodily dispositions, modes of self-presentation and manners of speech characteristic of a corporate environment gives agents an edge in that particular social structure. Finally, human capital such as skills that are positively valued in the job market can also give agents an advantage in securing a job.

The varieties of capital that allow agents to advance their life goals partially explain why privilege is often invisible to its beneficiaries.<sup>61</sup> The advantages conferred by economic capital are tangible and easy to quantify in most social contexts. By contrast, other resources such as social and cultural capital are similarly advantageous, but are often ignored or outright invisible to members of privileged groups. To take the example of class privilege, having privileged access to influential social networks and cultural know-how is seldom a matter of reflection for upper class agents. For many such agents, being able to rely on these resources is taken for granted and almost expected. Accordingly, when they draw on these resources to secure a high-paying job or a business opportunity, they seldom reflect on the role that class privilege played in their

---

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 31ff.

<sup>61</sup> Bailey, "Privilege," 112.

achievement. As I mentioned earlier, privileged agents not only benefit from their unearned advantages, but can also draw on their privileges to earn further advantages in several aspects of their life. Thus, one reason why privilege often remains invisible to its beneficiaries is that it can mask itself as an earned advantage. In addition, many forms of privilege are not easy to trace or quantify. Privilege often works as an "invisible weightless knapsack" that allows one to navigate the world more easily, but which one takes for granted and therefore fails to reflect upon.<sup>62</sup>

So far, I have described privilege in terms of special access to resources that improve the life chances of members of privileged groups. Bailey categorizes these as *positive privileges* because they benefit privileged agents by granting them additional opportunities than those available to oppressed agents.<sup>63</sup> The additional opportunities granted to privileged agents have a correlative effect on oppressed agents—it puts them at a disadvantage in the competition for scarce resources. For instance, the positive privileges accorded to men in the workplace (e.g. the "boy's club" phenomenon) put women at a disadvantage in the competition for career advancement, and partially explain the gender wage gap. Thus, positive privileges are a key source of durable inequalities based on gender, race and other salient social categories. The existence of positive privileges harms members of oppressed groups by putting them at an unfair disadvantage in the competition for resources needed to advance their life projects. Moreover, benefitting from unequal access to resources places privileged agents in a good position to acquire more resources over the course of their lives. Privilege breeds privilege to the point where the lines between earned and unearned advantages becomes blurred.

---

<sup>62</sup> Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*, Working Paper no. 189 (Wellesley, MA: Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1998).

<sup>63</sup> Bailey, "Privilege," 115.

Securing special access to resources is not the only way whereby privileged agents acquire unearned advantages over the oppressed. Bailey also considers *negative privileges*, which refer to privileged agents' immunities to the systematic barriers imposed on the oppressed.<sup>64</sup> The unearned advantages of the privileged are not reducible to the additional opportunities granted to them. Privileged agents also benefit from not having to deal with the barriers that constrain the agency of oppressed agents. Men have an unearned advantage over women in the competition over career advancement not only because of their additional opportunities (e.g. privileged access to informal, all-men networking opportunities), but also because they are immune to the barriers that hamper women's career development (e.g. negative stereotypes of women as unreliable workers who value family over career). Thus, privilege is the flip side of oppression in at least two senses. Positive privileges grant additional opportunities to privileged agents, which are not available to oppressed agents. Negative privileges shield privileged agents from the barriers that constrain the life chances of the oppressed. In both cases, privileges are unearned advantages that members of dominant groups can rely upon to get an edge in advancing their life projects.

Let us now return to the example of Lisa (see 2.5), the working mother, to illustrate the points I have made about the relationality of oppression. Oppression is a social relation between social groups—one which suffers a structurally caused harm, and another which benefits from that same harm. Oppressive intergroup relations have correlative effects on the groups involved. Under conditions of oppression, the social structures that harm members of oppressed groups are the very same structures that benefit members of privileged groups.

The harm that Lisa faces is an instance of a larger problem afflicting working mothers (and women, more generally) as a social group—namely, the gender pay gap. In the U.S. (and

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

elsewhere), women are paid less than men, even after accounting for differences in hours worked, occupations chosen, education, and job experience. The gender pay gap harms women by reinforcing gender economic inequality. However, the harms associated with the gender pay gap are not restricted to the economic realm. Differences in pay also affect the relations of power within heterosexual households. The gender pay gap makes many women become economically dependent on their men partners, which grants the latter significant leverage in decision-making regarding household division of labor, household expenses, as well as the life projects household members. In addition, women's economic dependence on their men partners makes it easier for the latter to behave abusively with little to no consequences. Outside the household, men benefit from the gender pay gap by earning higher salaries than their women co-workers. In other words, men as a group benefit from the very same social structures that harm women as a group—this is a paradigmatic feature of oppressive intergroup relations.

Women as a social group are harmed by the gender pay gap. Women constitute a social group insofar as they face similar constraints on their action due to the effects of the gender pay gap. Moreover, the gender pay gap is largely caused by social structures. While the gender pay gap may have its origin in individual gender-based discrimination in the workplace, today most of the gap is explained by structural factors.<sup>65</sup> Whether it be inflexible hours in the workplace (which harms women the most), cultural norms regarding who takes time off when children arrive, or lack of affordable daycare, sexist social structures contribute to the reproduction of the gender pay gap by constraining women's options in the workplace. Thus, women like Lisa are members of an oppressed social group insofar as they face similar social constraints on their action, which are

---

<sup>65</sup> Michael J. Coren, "The Roots of The Gender Pay Gap Are Deeper Than Discrimination," *Quartz*, March 12, 2019, <https://qz.com/1567008/the-systemic-reasons-why-the-gender-pay-gap-increases-over-time/>

imposed by sexist social structures. At the same time, men as a group benefit from women's oppression. To focus on economic oppression only, men in the workplace derive many privileges from the gender pay gap. On average, men get paid more than women for the same work, which gives them an edge in realizing their financial goals. The unearned advantages of men in the workplace are not limited to salary differentials among peers. Men also benefit from gender inequality in hiring, promotion, and retention, all of which amount to a significant unearned advantage in their career advancement. Finally, as Lisa's case illustrates, our society's sexist social structures make it highly difficult for women to have children and advance their career. Men are also negatively privileged insofar as they do not face the same obstacles as Lisa and other working mothers.

### **3.3. Oppression is Durable**

Earlier I claimed that the harms of oppression are systematic, rather than one-off occurrences. One reason for the systematicity of oppression is that, once it is in place, it tends to endure over time. Cudd tackles this feature of oppression under the guise of the endurance question—that is, "how oppression endures over time in spite of human's rough natural equality?"<sup>66</sup> According to Cudd, oppression theorists have always tried to answer this question by showing how the oppressed are induced to participate in reproducing their own oppression rather than resist it. From this perspective, answering the endurance question is a matter of explaining how oppressive social structures co-opt those agents who should in principle be the first to resist them. Cudd embraces this victim-centric explanation for the durability of oppression. In her view, the endurance of oppression is best explained by material and psychological forces that coerce the

---

<sup>66</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 21.

oppressed to act in ways that further their own oppression.<sup>67</sup> Thus, Cudd's answer to the endurance question is linked to her fourth condition of oppression—the coercion condition. This condition states that oppression is always caused by unjustified force or coercion.<sup>68</sup> On her view, oppressive social structures are long-lasting because they manage to coerce oppressed agents to act in ways that reproduce their own oppression. Cudd argues that the coercion of oppressed agents functions primarily through indirect economic and psychological forces.<sup>69</sup> She develops this view in her explanation of the durability of women's economic oppression, which she illustrates with the aforementioned case of Lisa, the working mother (see 2.5).<sup>70</sup>

Lisa's decision to quit her job after having a baby was influenced by her membership in an oppressed social group, which constrained her other options (e.g. having her husband quit his job instead, leave the baby in daycare). An important source of her constrained choice is the fact that, given the existence of a gender pay gap, it made financial sense for her, rather than her husband, to quit her job to take care of the baby. In making this constrained choice, Lisa not only incurs the harms associated with becoming economically dependent on her husband, she also unwittingly contributes to the reproduction of the gender pay gap. By quitting her job, Lisa reinforces the stereotype that women are unreliable workers who value family over career. As Cudd argues, there is evidence that the stereotype of women as unreliable workers constitutes a significant obstacle to closing the gender pay gap.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, given that most working mothers in our society share Lisa's agential constraints, they also tend to make the same constrained choice of quitting their job,

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 149.

which further entrenches their economic oppression. Cudd focuses her attention on this vicious cycle whereby women face structural constraints that coerce them into making individually rational choices (i.e. quitting their job after having a baby) that have suboptimal results for them as a group (i.e. reinforcing the gender pay gap).

The vicious cycle works as follows. Sexist social structures constrain the options available to working mothers in a way that effectively coerces them into the choice of quitting their job after having a baby. In turn, the aggregate effect of working mothers making this constrained choice is to reinforce sexist stereotypes that partially maintain the gender pay gap. According to Cudd, this vicious cycle is an example of the indirect economic forces that explains the durability of oppression—in this case the economic oppression of women.<sup>72</sup> This explanation emphasizes how oppressive social structures become durable by constraining members of oppressed social groups to act in ways that reproduce the very structures that oppress them. As Haslanger puts the point, Lisa's choice is the result of a larger system of social structures that oppresses women (and working mothers, in particular) by altering their "choice architecture" so that "it is rational for them to choose options that keep them subordinate".<sup>73</sup> At the same time, this very same system of social structures benefits men by further entrenching their economic advantage over women, along with the power advantages that stem from the economic dependence of their women partners. In her view, this vicious cycle is an example of the indirect economic forces that explains the durability of oppression—in this case the economic oppression of women.<sup>74</sup>

According to Cudd, indirect forces of oppression reproduce group-based inequalities through the choices and decisions of members of oppressed groups, who are co-opted into making

---

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>73</sup> Haslanger, "Structural Explanation," 124.

<sup>74</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 148.

individual choices that bolster their own oppression.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, direct forces of oppression work through the intentional actions of members of dominant groups on members of subordinate groups. The distinction between direct and indirect forces of oppression boils down to a distinction between constraints on the oppressed that come from the outside (i.e. direct) or from the inside (i.e. indirect). Accordingly, Cudd also refers to the indirect forces of oppression as "oppression by choice".<sup>76</sup> The gender pay gap is an example of an indirect economic force of oppression because it co-opts the oppressed by making it rational (from the perspective of a utility-maximizing agent) for them to make choices that reinforce the ongoing economic inequality between dominant and oppressed groups. In addition, there are psychological indirect forces of oppression. These forces also operate by enlisting the cooperation of oppressed agents to ensure the durability of oppression. In contrast to indirect economic forces, indirect psychological forces operate by coercing subordinate agents—via indoctrination, manipulation and adaptation to unfair social circumstances—to adopt noxious schemas and stereotypes that reinforce their oppression.<sup>77</sup> Cudd cites shame, low self-esteem, belief in sexist and racist schemas, and adaptive preferences as examples of indirect psychological forces of oppression. Indirect forces of oppression, both economic and psychological, are key in Cudd's explanation of the durability of oppression. In her view, oppressive social structures are durable because they coerce the oppressed into reproducing the very structures that oppress them, thus rendering resistance to oppression difficult to motivate or maintain.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 146, 154-7.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 158, 183.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 146.



Thus, Cudd's explanation for the durability of oppression focuses on the causal mechanisms (i.e. the indirect economic and psychological forces of oppression) that undermine the prospect of resistance to oppression among its victims. In other words, oppressive social structures are enduring because they make it difficult for the oppressed to resist them. Here the focus is on the structural constraints (i.e. constrained choices, internalized noxious schemas and stereotypes, among others) that the oppressed face when trying to overcome oppression. Cudd's focus on the victims of oppression is consistent with other explanations of the durability of oppression. Marilyn Frye's metaphor of the birdcage similarly illustrates how oppressed agents often face "double binds" that reduce their options to a very few, all of which "expose them to penalty, censure or deprivation".<sup>79</sup> Like Cudd, Frye is interested in how oppressive social structures constrain the choices of the oppressed to the point where all the options available to them end up further entrenching their oppression in one way or another. Titus Stahl agrees with Frye and Cudd that the durability of oppression stems from the structural constraints that it imposes on oppressed agents and which make it "disproportionately costly for them to change or leave the practice (compared to other groups)."<sup>80</sup> In fact, Stahl argues that a defining feature of oppressive social structures is that they make it particularly difficult for their victims to struggle against their oppression.

I agree with Cudd, Frye and Stahl that oppressed agents face many obstacles in their struggle against oppression. Of particular interest are those obstacles that work through the choices and desires of subordinate agents under conditions of oppression. Whether it be by setting up double binds, altering their choice architecture, or imbuing the minds of the oppressed with noxious schemas and stereotypes, oppressive social structures regularly enlist the cooperation of

---

<sup>79</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>80</sup> Titus Stahl, "Collective Responsibility for Oppression," *Social Theory and Practice* 43, no. 3 (2017), 477.

oppressed agents, which makes it especially difficult to mount an effective resistance against it. Certainly, oppression by choice, which results from indirect economic and psychological forces of oppression that operate through the choices and decisions of the oppressed, contributes to the resilience of oppression. However, I disagree with Cudd's claim that oppression by choice is the key to explaining why oppression is so enduring.

This particular claim stems from a very sensible intuition. Since oppression harms oppressed agents the most, they should be the most interested in resisting it. However, if oppressive social structures can somehow enlist the cooperation of oppressed, then it is easy to understand why it is so enduring. Privileged agents benefit from oppression and therefore have no material interest in resisting it. Since we can presuppose that privileged agents will support oppression actively or passively, the key to explaining the endurance of oppression is to explain how "oppression by choice" is possible. Cudd is not alone in following this intuition. In the preface to *Power: A Radical View*, Steven Lukes frames his influential account of power as an answer to the classic puzzle of why subordinate groups comply with (i.e. fail to resist) their subordination.<sup>81</sup> Like Cudd, his explanation of the resilience of unjust social processes such as oppression and domination hones in on the actions of the victims of these injustices. I agree that explaining how the oppressed come to contribute to their own oppression can help us understand why oppression is so enduring. However, I believe that it is equally important to analyze the role of privileged agents in reproducing oppression. As Lukes makes clear, theorists of oppression tend to take for granted that members of privileged groups will contribute to the reproduction of oppression because it is in their interest to do so. However, if the goal is to explain what makes oppression so

---

<sup>81</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 10. Along the way, Lukes reads Gramsci and Tilly as addressing the same puzzle in their accounts of hegemony and domination, respectively.

enduring, it is also important to account for their active and passive role in maintaining oppression. Moreover, many members of privileged groups would deny that they intentionally contribute to the reproduction of oppression. In the particular case of structural racism in the United States, which is the focus of this dissertation, many white people would deny their participation in the maintenance of racial oppression. They would certainly not accept that they seek to maintain racial oppression in order to continue to benefit from it.

In light of this, I will focus on explaining the causal mechanisms that lead members of privileged groups to lend their support (active or passive) to the reproduction of oppression. In particular, I will explain how racially oppressive social structures motivate privileged agents to participate in social practices that ensure the durability of racial oppression. My explanation of the durability of oppression differs from Cudd's in that I focus on the actions of the privileged rather than those of the oppressed. However, just like Cudd, I am interested in developing an explanation of how oppressive social structures influence agents to act in ways that sustain oppression. Cudd is interested in how oppressive social structures constrain the agency of the oppressed to the point of effectively coercing them to reproduce their own oppression. By contrast, I am interested in how oppressive social structures motivate privileged agents to contribute to the maintenance of oppression. Both of these explanations are important in explaining the endurance of oppression. Cudd is certainly right that "oppression by choice" contributes to the endurance of oppression. However, in this dissertation, I focus my attention on the equally important explanatory role of privileged agents' contribution to the maintenance of oppression.

Where I disagree with Cudd is on her claim that "oppression by choice" is the key to answering the endurance question of oppression. Ultimately, as with any explanatory question, it is an empirical matter whether the endurance of oppression is best explained by the actions of the

privileged or the oppressed. In most cases, including the gender pay gap, both play a key explanatory role. Women's constrained choice of quitting their job after having a baby may contribute to the reproduction of the gender pay gap, but so does gender inequality in hiring, promotion and retention, as well as a workplace culture that permits and even rewards sexist behavior. The fact that these well-known contributing factors to the gender pay gap continue to be paramount in most workplaces points to a generalized lack of concern to close the gender pay gap among men in positions of power. In fact, many men dislike and even actively resist recent advances in implementing gender-based affirmative action and addressing long-standing sexist practices in the workplace. Men tend to regard these efforts as unfair and unnecessary, when in fact they merely seek to address the privileges men have held in the workplace for so long. The pervasiveness of this defensive reaction suggests that many men are committed to the continuation of the gender pay gap—not necessarily, because they seek to harm women, but because they benefit from it. In other words, men have a positional interest in maintaining the gender pay gap, and are therefore motivated to oppose attempts at bridging the gap (see 2.5 and 6.3.3). Thus, a complete explanation of the durability of women's economic oppression must also explore the causal role that men (i.e. the privileged group) play in the reproduction of the gender pay gap. Importantly, men's causal role is not limited to their participation in re-enacting gender inequality in hiring, promotion, and retention, or in maintaining a sexist workplace culture. Men also contribute to the endurance of the gender pay gap when they resist (or fail to support) policies aimed at bridging the gap. In chapter 6, I will advance a similar explanation of the endurance of racial inequality that focuses on the active role of the beneficiaries of structural racism.

### 3.4. The Normativity of Oppression

I will end this chapter with a brief explanation of the normativity of oppression. Earlier I mentioned that oppression is a normative concept—it denotes a structural injustice. As Cudd defines it, oppression is a structurally caused harm that targets a social group, while simultaneously benefitting another social group. However, this by itself does not suffice as a definition of oppression. We also need to explain what makes oppression unjust. Cudd's coercion condition fulfills this normative requirement. In her view, the harms of oppression are unjust because they stem from unjustified force or coercion. This requirement brings to mind the image of the tyrant who exercises violence (i.e. force) or the threat of violence (i.e. coercion) on their subjects. However, coercion and unjustified force may take other forms. In particular, Cudd is interested in oppression that results from social structures that coerce oppressed people into making choices that reinforce their subordination.

According to Cudd, coercion involves cases where agents make choices that are not fully free or voluntary due to the unacceptability of other available options.<sup>82</sup> The paradigm case of coercion is that of a victim of a mugging. The victim has can choose to give the mugger their money or to fight back and risk losing their life. When the victim chooses to give their money to the mugger, they (rightly) feel that they were compelled to act in that way by the unacceptability of their other options. Coerced agents are put in a situation where they had "no choice" but to act as they did.

According to Cudd, the vicious cycle laid out in Lisa's example is unjust because women in her position are coerced to act in ways that reinforce their economic oppression. In other words, Lisa's choice to quit her job after having a baby is not voluntary, but coerced—she was compelled

---

<sup>82</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 125.

to act in that way by the unacceptability of her other choices. For Cudd, coerced choices are unjust because they violate the autonomy of the agent, as well as principles of justice.<sup>83</sup> The vicious cycle whereby women's coerced choice to quit their job after having a baby reinforces sexist stereotypes that reproduce the gender pay gap harms women's autonomy because it leads to fewer and worse life choices for them.<sup>84</sup> In addition, Larry and other men in a similar social position do not have to face the same set of constraints on their agency; and in fact, they benefit from these constraints insofar as they coerce women into maintaining the gender wage gap and the male privileges that stem from it. This gender-based asymmetry in available life choices and power violates egalitarian principles of justice and further explains the oppressive nature of coercion.<sup>85</sup>

I will now recap my account of oppression as a structural, relational, and durable phenomenon. Oppression denotes an intergroup relation whereby a social structure (or a system of social structures) harms one group (or groups), while simultaneously benefitting another group (or groups). The harms of oppression include exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, violence, among others. Moreover, oppressive harms are always unjust insofar as they are inflicted through unjustified violence or coercion. Relatedly, oppression often entails asymmetrical power relations between the groups involved. This results from the unequal distribution of harms and benefits in the intergroup relation, which congeals into relations of dependence and subordination—as in the economic dependence of unemployed and underemployed women on their men partners.

While agential accounts of oppression focus on individual agents abusing their power to intentionally harm others, my structural account of oppression highlights the mechanisms whereby

---

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

social structures distribute harms and benefits among social groups in ways that generate asymmetrical power relations between the groups. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the role that individual agents play in the functioning of these structural mechanisms. Earlier, I defined social structures as networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. If social structures arrange intergroup relations so as to distribute harms and benefits unequally, it is only because individual agents who participate in those structures organize themselves in this way. Individual agents create and recreate oppressive social relations by participating in social practices that harm one group, while simultaneously benefiting another group. Lisa's boss contributes to gender oppression by instituting inflexible working hours, which makes it impossible for her to take care of her baby without having to quit her job. Lisa's constrained choice to quit her job also contributes to gender oppression by reinforcing sexist stereotypes that underlie the gender wage gap. Of course, as Lisa's example makes clear, agents' role in reproducing oppressive social structures are often mediated by the effects of already existing social structures on their agency. In Lisa's case, her decision was influenced by sexist social structures that constrained her agency by limiting other available options.

Thus, a full-fledged account of structural oppression requires an explanation of how social structures recreate oppressive social relations through the actions of individuals. In other words, we need an analysis of the mechanisms whereby social structures influence individual agents to act in ways that reproduce oppressive social relations. As I suggested earlier (see 2.5), philosophers have so far focused on the mechanism of structural constraint (i.e. Lisa's constrained choice to quit her job) and to a lesser extent on structural enablement (i.e. the gender pay gap that enables men to exercise asymmetrical power in heterosexual partnerships). One of the distinguishing

contributions of this dissertation is to explore a third mechanism—namely, how oppressive social structures motivate members of social groups that benefit from oppression to act (or fail to act) in ways that sustain these structures in order to safeguard the benefits they derive from them. In chapter 6, I build on this mechanism of structural motivation in order to explain the durability of racially oppressive social structures. We now turn to chapter 4, where I will draw on the conceptual tools I developed in chapters 2 and 3 (i.e. social structure and oppression) to offer a full-fledged account of structural racism in terms of racially oppressive social structures.



## Chapter 4: What is Structural Racism?

The aim of this chapter is to develop my account of structural racism as racially oppressive social structures. In chapters 2 and 3, I clarified the concepts of social structure and oppression. Thus, at this point, we have a good understanding of what oppressive social structures are. These are long-lasting networks of oppressive social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. Social relations are oppressive when one or more social groups suffer from structurally caused harms, which at the same time benefit a privileged group within the structure. The last piece of the puzzle is to explain what distinguishes structural racism from other oppressive social structures. In other words, the focus of this chapter is to articulate the distinctly *racial* nature of racially oppressive social structures. I will discuss three salient features that make racially oppressive social structures distinctly *racial* phenomena, and which distinguish them from other kinds of oppressive social structures:

1. In racially oppressive social structures, hierarchical racial schemas are central in framing how agents interpret and respond to the world. Central to these schemas is the doctrine of racialism, which forms the basis for the racialized practices of categorization and differential treatment that produce racial hierarchy.
2. In racially oppressive social structures, the influence of the hierarchical racial schemas described in (1) fundamentally transforms the relations among socially positioned agents within the structure. As a result, the social positions that make up the structure become embodiments of racial hierarchy. In other words, they become racialized positions.
3. Racially oppressive social structures reproduce oppressive social relations between social groups defined on the basis of the hierarchical racial schemas in (1).

## 4.1. Structural Racism and the Centrality of Hierarchical Racial Schemas

Structural racism results from recurring racialization processes whereby the concept of race becomes a significant category for sorting human populations and organizing social life.<sup>86</sup> Drawing on Omi and Winant, Bonilla-Silva argues that racialization processes “[extend] racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.”<sup>87</sup> According to one well-accepted historical narrative, the modern concept of race became a significant category for classifying human populations in the context of European projects of colonization, imperialism and slavery. In this context, racial categories such as 'Negro' and 'Indian' were created and mobilized to justify these domination projects. According to the pseudo-scientific doctrine of racialism, human groups could be classified into smaller groups called ‘races’, where members of a ‘race’ were thought to share “certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of any other race”.<sup>88</sup> Racialism attributed a shared biological essence to members of a racial kind, which was supposed to explain similarities in visible characteristics (e.g. skin color, hair, shape of face) as well as behavioral, cultural, and moral tendencies. Moreover, these racial essences were regarded as fixed, passed on through bloodlines, and as the basis for justifying the oppressive treatment of some ‘races’ such as “Negros” and “Indians”.

It is important to dwell on the claim that racial kinds originate from racial ideologies developed in the context of European projects of domination. Science has shown racialism to be a

---

<sup>86</sup> The folk concept of race draws on differences in phenotypical traits, hereditary lines and continental origin to sort humans into hierarchically ordered racialized groups.

<sup>87</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 40. See also his “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997), 465-480.

<sup>88</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 54.

false doctrine insofar as there are no shared biological racial essences that can explain the shared characteristics attributed to 'races'. Race eliminativists like Appiah infer from this fact that 'races', understood as human populations sharing the aforementioned biological essences, do not exist. One possible implication of race eliminativism is that we should give up race-talk altogether. The concept of race is not only harmful but it fails to refer to anything in the world, and thus we should consign it to the dustbin of history. Although race eliminativism is correct that 'races' as defined by the doctrine of racialism do not exist, it is not clear that we should give up race-talk altogether. A guiding assumption of this dissertation is that race continues to matter today despite the falsity of racialism.

According to Laurence Blum, there is a sociohistorical consensus among philosophers of race that there exist social groups that roughly correspond to the 'races' of racialism.<sup>89</sup> Blum calls them 'racialized groups' and clarifies that they are not the biological 'races' advanced by racialism. And yet, racialized groups are "genuine intergenerational collectivities characterized by distinctive historical and social experiences, and generally current social locations."<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, these groups were and continue to be deeply affected by the doctrine of racialism. While racialized groups do exist, they are not biological groups, but social groups. Their unity does not stem from a shared biological essence, but from a shared sociohistorical experience. However, racialism continues to wrongly characterize members of racialized groups as sharing a racial essence that determines their behavioral, cultural and moral tendencies. For non-white racialized groups such as blacks, their alleged racial essence is often linked to claims of inferiority in mental and other important human capacities, which are used to justify race-based hierarchies. Thus, the racial

---

<sup>89</sup> Lawrence Blum, "Racialized Groups: The Sociohistorical Consensus," *The Monist* 93, no. 2 (2010): 298-320.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

schemas of racialism have a dual effect: they form the basis for the categorization of human beings into racialized groups, and they justify racial hierarchy under the auspices of the alleged inferiority of non-white groups. Racialism has these effects in the social world even if it is a false doctrine.

Michael Hardimon's account of 'socialrace', which corresponds to 'racialized groups' in Blum's framework, sheds light on this point.<sup>91</sup> Hardimon distinguishes between 'racialized race', which is the concept of 'race' according to the doctrine of racialism, and 'socialrace'. 'Socialraces', just like Blum's racialized groups, are social groups falsely thought to be racialist races. 'Socialraces' are the result of a widespread societal belief that there exist racialist races. Even though there is no referent for racialist races in the natural world, racialist thinking still manages to create social groups that roughly correspond to racialist races. This is because the widespread belief that some groups are racialist races leads society (i.e. individuals and social structures) to treat people differently on the basis of their putative racialist race. For example, the schemas of racialism include the beliefs that black people are violent, lazy, and simple-minded. Guided by these schemas, individuals and social structures treat black people differently. In the context of policing, the widespread stereotype of black people as violent makes them subject to increased scrutiny by other (primarily white) citizens, as well as more likely to suffer from violent and even deadly encounters with the police. In the context of employment, the widespread stereotype of black people as lazy and simple-minded makes them subject to race-based discrimination in hiring, as well as more likely to face difficulties in securing promotions and avoiding terminations due to downsizing.

---

<sup>91</sup> Michael O. Hardimon, "Four Ways of Thinking about Race," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 26 (2019): 103-113.

Thus, racialism creates social races by influencing society to categorize human beings into social groups that correspond to nonexistent 'racialized races' and to treat them differently on the basis of that categorization. While this categorization relies on false beliefs (e.g. the existence of racial essences), it still manages to create social races "through the differential treatment their members are given because they are believed to be members of racialist races."<sup>92</sup> Moreover, once the social construction of social races takes place, people will be likely to continue to believe that racialist races do exist. The existence of social races will make it appear as if racialist races exist because it will give them an illusory referent in the social world. The referent is illusory because racialist races refer to biological kinds whereas social races refer to social kinds. Still, this illusion would be enough to ensure the persistence of the belief in racialist races.

Moreover, even if the widespread belief in racialism starts to wane (which seems to be the case today), the practices of categorization and differential treatment that create social races will be likely to continue as they have already become entrenched in society. This is not only a matter of social inertia, but also a result of the hierarchical nature of the racialization process. As I mentioned earlier, the doctrine of racialism is founded on the assumption that there is a natural hierarchy among racialist races that stems from the racial essences of each group. Whites are thought to be superior in important human capacities (e.g. intellectual, characterological, moral, aesthetic) which warrants their position at the top of the racial hierarchy. By contrast, non-whites are thought to be lacking in these important human capacities, which explains their inferiority to whites. According to racialism, this alleged racial hierarchy at the level of biology justifies organizing the social world following the same racial hierarchy, with whites at the top and non-whites at the bottom. To return to an earlier example, Europeans drew on the alleged biological

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 105.

inferiority of blacks, and Native Americans to justify the imposition of a racially ordered colonial society in the Americas, with whites at the top and blacks and Native Americans at the bottom. While the biological racial hierarchy advanced by racialism is false, the social racial hierarchy that ensued from it is very real. Several centuries after the end of the colonial projects in Latin America and the United States, these societies maintain an unequal distribution of economic, political and symbolic resources that benefit whites and disadvantage blacks and Native Americans. Thus, the transformation of an illusory biological racial hierarchy into a social racial hierarchy brings with it an array of advantages for the privileged social group (i.e. whites). As a result, whites acquire a positional interest that motivates them to defend this social racial hierarchy in order to safeguard their race-based advantages they derive from it (see 2.5 and 6.3.3). This positional interest—whether implicit or manifest—is key for explaining the resilience of race-based social hierarchy in post-colonial societies in the Americas. Whites not only have a doxastic motivation (i.e. the belief in racialism) to engage in practices of racial categorization and differential treatment. In addition, they have a positional interest—an interest that stems from their position of racial privilege in the social racial hierarchy—in participating in these practices in order to ensure the continuation of racial social hierarchy from which they benefit. Thus, even if widespread belief in racialism is on the wane, the process of racialization—which includes practices of racial categorization and differential treatment—is likely to continue because of the material and psychological rewards that result from any social racial hierarchy.

Moreover, as many racial theorists have argued, racialism is not really on the wane. Instead, the content of racialism has changed in order to adapt to a shifting political, cultural and economic

context, as well as to shed its now debunked biological claims.<sup>93</sup> Today, it is helpful to distinguish between classical biological racialism and contemporary cultural racialism. Cultural racialism maintains the key claims of classical racialism—namely, that racialist races have a shared essence, that this essence determines the behavioral, moral and cultural tendencies of members of racialist races, and that these essentialist difference among racialist races justifies the existence of a racial hierarchy. However, unlike classical racialism, cultural racialism argues that the shared essence of racialist races is grounded on culture rather than biology. Cultural racialism relies on cultural narratives (e.g. black cultural pathologies, the disintegration of the black family) and stereotypes (e.g. blacks' lack of individual motivation) about non-white groups to justify the persistence of a racial hierarchy. While its content is different from classical racialism, cultural racialism plays the same role of justifying practices of categorization and differential treatment that reinforce racial hierarchy.

## **4.2. Structural Racism, Racialized Groups and Racialized Positions**

The second distinctly racial feature of racially oppressive social structures is that they impact individual agents differently in virtue of their membership in racialized groups and their racialized positions within the structure. Here, I will make a distinction between racialized groups and racialized positions. Racialized groups are social groups in Cudd's sense of collections of people who share socially imposed constraints on their action. As discussed in the previous section, racialized groups are the result of recurring racialization processes whereby human agents are categorized into hierarchically ordered races and subject to differential treatment on the basis

---

<sup>93</sup> Lawrence Bobo, James Kluegel and Ryan Smith, "Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler, Anti-Black Ideology," in *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, ed. Steven Tuch and Jack Martin (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 15-42.

thereof. From now on, I will use 'racialized group' to refer to 'races' as socially constructed social groups. I choose Blum's 'racialized groups' over Hardimon's 'socialrace' to describe this phenomenon because it makes explicit the link between the social construction of race and the processes of racialization. These social groups result from processes of racialization whereby human agents become subject to practices of racial categorization and differential treatment justified by the doctrine of racialism.

To use Cudd's terminology, racialized groups are non-voluntary social groups insofar as membership in these groups is socially rather than internally imposed. Thus, to be a member of a racialized group has nothing to do with whether one identifies with or is even aware of one's membership in the group. To recall the example from 3.2.1, the black Caribbean immigrant is a member of the racialized group "black" in the United States in virtue of being categorized as black and being subject to differential treatment on the basis thereof—including being more likely to suffer from a violent or even deadly encounter with the police. Whether he personally identifies as black or is even aware of the subtleties of racial categorization in the United States will not affect his membership in the group and its concomitant effects on his life chances.

In this definition, the concept of racialized group only accounts for the external features of racial identity. To be black is more than being classified as black and being subject to various forms of unjust and unequal treatment. Being black may also entail "identifying oneself as black and to make choices, formulate plans, and express concerns in light of one's identification of oneself as black".<sup>94</sup> These and other internalist features of racial identity are certainly important, but my account of racialized groups does not intend to capture them. Here, I am specifically interested in the external (i.e. socially imposed) impact that oppressive social structures have on

---

<sup>94</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams, "Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy," *Constellations* 5, no. 1 (1998), 23.



agents that are socially categorized as black, white, and so on. As I show later, racialized group membership can have substantial effects on the social position of individual agents within the various social structures of society.

Paul Taylor also offers an externalist account of racialized groups. He defines racialized groups such as black and white as “probabilistically defined populations that result from the white supremacist determination to link appearance and ancestry to social location and life chances.”<sup>95</sup> For Taylor, to be black amounts to being more likely to live in substandard or overcrowded housing, or lack health insurance, or be unemployed, than someone who belongs to the racialized group white. For Taylor, racialized groups amount to human populations defined by statistical correlations with respect to the distribution of resources, differential treatment and other measures of racial stratification. Racially oppressive social structures reproduce racialized groups when agents within these structures engage in practices of racial categorization and race-based differential treatment that cause the aforementioned statistical correlations.

Taylor's contribution is to theorize the differential treatment that stems from racialization in terms of probabilities. This is helpful because it clarifies what it means to be subject to differential or unequal treatment because of one's racialized group membership. For example, what do mean when we claim that black people in the US lack access to good-quality affordable housing? It certainly cannot mean that every black person lives in substandard or overcrowded housing. By and large, middle-and-upper-class blacks will not have this problem.<sup>96</sup> Rather, we

---

<sup>95</sup>Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 89-90. He uses the term 'race', but in my reading, he is defining the same phenomenon as Blum's 'racialized group' and Hardimon's 'socialrace'.

<sup>96</sup> Still, they are likely to face other housing-related obstacles in virtue of their racialized group membership. Redlining limits their chances of being approved for a mortgage in high-value neighborhoods. Even if they are able to move in, the prospect of white flight and the ensuing depreciation of real estate and social services in majority black neighborhoods will have a negative impact on their wealth and lifestyle.

mean that for those who are already at risk of not securing good-quality affordable housing (e.g. the poor), being black will increase their chances of living in substandard or overcrowded housing. Even among the black poor, some will be able to secure good-quality affordable housing. However, the point remains that, at the aggregate level (i.e. the level of statistical probabilities), being black decreases one's chances of securing good-quality affordable housing. Thus, the impact of racially oppressive social structures on racialized groups must be analyzed in terms of statistical correlations between racialized groups (e.g. whites, blacks) and the distribution of resources and differential treatment in the major social structures of society.

The actual racialized groups that compose a racially oppressive social structure, as well as the tenor of their social relations, vary according to historical and geographical context. In this dissertation, I focus on structural racism in the contemporary United States. In this particular context, the most relevant racialized populations are Whites, Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans, although the list should probably also include ethnic and religious groups (e.g. Latinxs, Muslims) which do not correspond to racist races, but which are nevertheless subject to processes of racialization in the American context.

Let us now turn to racialized positions. Unlike racialized groups, racialized positions are not social groups. Rather, racialized positions refer to social positions within a social structure, whose relations to other social positions are heavily influenced by social practices of racial categorization and differential treatment based on racialism. I have previously established that the stability of networks of social relations partially stems from agents' tendency to act in accordance with the schemas of the social practices in which they participate (2.4). When the schemas of racialism influence agents' social practices, their social relations (and consequently, the social positions within the structure) are likely to reflect patterns of race-based differential treatment.

While racialized groups help us understand the statistical effects of structural racism at a society-wide level, racialized positions allow for a nimbler theorization of how race affects individual agents in specific social structures, and social practices within those structures.

In this context, it is important to remember that racialized groups are actually existing social groups subject to racial categorization and differential treatment. Apart from their ontological status, racialized groups also serve a methodological purpose. Racialized groups are the social groups that fulfill Cudd's second and third conditions of oppression. Non-whites constitute the many groups that suffer the harms of racial oppression (social group condition) and whites are the social group that benefits from racial oppression (privilege condition). By contrast, racialized positions (like social positions) are theoretical constructs. They help us capture the nuances of the social relations that obtain among members of varying social structures and social practices. Racialized positions shed light on the myriad ways in which members of racialized groups can be affected (positively or negatively) within specific racially oppressive social structures. Racialized positions account for the fact that the effects of racial oppression on members of racialized groups will vary according to their participation and social positioning in the many social structures that make up society.

To illustrate this concept, I will return to the running example of chapter 2—a school. A school is a social structure that is made up of a network of relations among social positions (e.g. teacher, student, parent, administrator), as well as relations between social positions and the structure's material resources (e.g. students' relation to their desks or the blackboard). Qua social structure, a school is also a network of interconnected social practices, which include the practice of classroom learning, the practice of disciplining students, the practice of organizing class schedules, among others. Agents who occupy positions within the structure participate in these

practices by following the schemas that govern each of these practices and coordinating their collective behavior accordingly. For example, the practice of disciplining requires students to follow the schemas of good classroom behavior, such as getting to class on time, not having private conversations, and respecting the instructor. In turn, instructors are expected to enforce these rules by calling out students who violate them and taking disciplinary action suited to the student's misconduct. The proper functioning of the practice of disciplining relies on the students and the instructor reliably acting in accordance with the duties and prerogatives attached to their social positions, as well as the schemas that govern the practice.

Let us now focus on the practice of school discipline in order to unveil the theoretical value of racialized positions. As we will see, race plays a key role in how the practice of school discipline unfolds in many schools in the United States today. Notice how my focus has narrowed down not just to the level of a school structure, but even to the level of one of the many practices that take place in schools—namely, the practice of school discipline. Earlier I offered an idealized description of this practice as a social coordination effort among agents socially positioned as students and teachers. Students follow the rules of good classroom behavior and teachers enforce these rules by disciplining students in accordance with their degree of misconduct. The scenario I depicted earlier is idealized insofar as it bracketed the ways in which racial schemas (to take only one kind of identity-based prejudices) influence the behavior of agents who occupy social positions in the practice.

In order to show the impact of race on the practice of school discipline, I will draw on a recent sociological case study of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High, a U.S. high

school.<sup>97</sup> Among their many findings, Diamond and Lewis document and explain the racialized nature of the disciplinary practices at Riverview High. They found that "racial dynamics play a key role in both (a) who gets selected for discipline, and (b) how punishment is processed, with black and Latina/o students being disciplined more often and differently than white students."<sup>98</sup> One of the reasons for the racialized differences in who gets selected for discipline is that the teachers at Riverview High operate with the tacit racialized schema that black and Latinx students are more likely to misbehave and break the rules.<sup>99</sup> As a result, when they do misbehave—even with small infractions—their behavior is interpreted as transgressive and in need of intervention. By contrast, teachers have a different racialized schema for white students. Rather than being seen as inherently suspect, they are seen as inherently innocent. Thus, when white students misbehave, their behavior is often seen as silly and at worst a minor annoyance. In this case, the source of the racial inequality is that the rules are not enforced equally. Teachers whose role is to monitor students' adherence to the rules operate with racialized schemas that lead them to ignore the transgressions of white students, while remaining hyper vigilant of the transgressions of black and Latinx students. In this case, the racially oppressive harm lies in the racially biased application of the rules of the practice. White students at Riverview High have a positive privilege (i.e. a prerogative) to engage in bad behavior with a low risk of being disciplined—a privilege that is not extended to black and Latinx students. Black and Latinx students were not only more likely to be sanctioned for bad behavior, but also received harsher punishment. In 2009, black students in particular represented roughly 65% of school suspensions even though they only made up 35% of

---

<sup>97</sup> John Diamond and Amanda Lewis, *Despite the Best Intentions: Why Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

the school population.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, white parents were more likely to advocate for their kids and to exhibit a sense of entitlement when navigating the disciplinary process.

Racial schemas a key role in the disciplinary practices at Riverview High. This is evident not only from the racially unequal outcomes of the practice, but also from the relations between agents who occupy positions within the structure. To take one example, the racialized schemas [black student → inherently suspect] and [white student → inherently innocent] have a significant impact on agents who occupy the position of student in the practice of discipline at Riverview High. In fact, from a methodological point of view, it is best to think of 'black student' and 'white student' as the actually existing social positions within the Riverview High structure. In other words, the fact that racialized schemas guide the practice of disciplining means that the social position 'student' is too general to accurately describe the network of social relations at Riverview High. While the social position 'student' may have been helpful in my ideal-theoretical description of a school structure, once we turn to the non-ideal project of theorizing the effects of racial schemas on the practice of disciplining at Riverview High, it is more insightful to account for multiple racialized positions (i.e. 'white student', 'black student', 'Latinx student'). The relation [teacher - white student] is different from the relation [teacher – black student]. In the first relation, the teacher does not correct most of the white students' misconduct and in fact may not even identify them as such. By contrast, in the second relation the teacher is hyper vigilant of any possible rule-breaking by black students and is likely to punish them more severely. The disparity in these racialized student-teacher relations is not the result of a particular teacher failing to fulfill their role in the practice. Rather, this racial disparity is systematic at Riverview High and follows from the pervasiveness of the racialized schemas mentioned above, as well as racially biased rules

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 47.

for the identification and punishment of student misconduct. Of course, these racialized schemas and racially biased rules do not need to be explicit in order to guide the behavior of teachers and other participants in the practice. In fact, the implicit (perhaps even unacknowledged) nature of these racially oppressive rules and schemas may even contribute to the endurance of the racialized practice of discipline at Riverview High.

The disciplinary practices at Riverview High shed light on how racialized positions work. When the relations among socially positioned agents are significantly affected by race, it is best to theorize the structure's social positions in terms of racialized positions. In light of the racialized disciplinary practices at Riverview High, racialized positions such as 'white student', 'black student', 'white parent', and so on, are key theoretical devices for explaining how racial oppression works in the particular context of school discipline. In this context, the specificity of racialized positions is an advantage over racialized groups for theoretical purposes. The racialized schemas and racially biased rules that explain the disciplinary racial disparity at Riverview High does not harm all members of the racialized group black. Rather, it harms members of the racialized group black who occupy the racialized position of 'black student' at Riverview High. Of course, slightly modified versions of the racialized schema [black student → inherently suspect] are pervasive in other social structures in the U.S. One may even argue that the racialized schema [black → inherently suspect] harms all black people. However, we would still need to turn to racialized positions in order to get a detailed analysis of how this schema harms black people in specific social structures. In chapter 6, I will offer a more thorough analysis of racial oppression drawing on racialized positions. For now, I will turn to the third distinctly racial feature of racially oppressive social structures.

### 4.3. Structural Racism Reproduces Oppressive Relations between Racialized Groups

The third distinctly racial feature of racially oppressive social structures is that they reinforce oppressive relations among racialized groups. As I discuss in chapter 3, social relations among social groups are oppressive when one or more social groups suffer from a structurally caused harm, which at the same time benefits a privileged group within the structure. Applied to the domain of race, oppressive relations among racialized groups entail the existence of structural harms for members of non-white racialized groups, which also benefit agents socially positioned as white. Another way to put the same point is that racially oppressive relations are social relations of privilege and disadvantage between whites and non-whites. In fact, a common claim among anti-racist activist is to describe structural racism as a system that privileges whites to the detriment of non-whites. According to Charles Mills, white supremacy—which corresponds to structural racism in my account—is a social system whose end is the illicit differential advantage of whites as a group with respect to non-whites.<sup>101</sup> According to Mills, white supremacy (i.e. structural racism) contributes to the reproduction of social relations among racialized groups whereby whites are privileged vis-a-vis non-whites. These racially conferred privileges range from material benefits, differential moral/legal/social treatment, and differential rational expectations of economic success, to cultural and aesthetic recognition, first-class citizenship and full personhood.<sup>102</sup> These social relations of white privilege are, by the same token, relations of non-white disadvantage. Just like whites as a group systematically benefit from their social position in

---

<sup>101</sup> Charles Mills, “White Supremacy,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race*, ed. Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 475-487.

<sup>102</sup> Charles Mills, “The Racial Polity,” in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 135.



a racially oppressive social structure, non-whites are systematically disadvantaged by the same structure.

Michael Brown and David Wellman explain the link between white privilege and non-white disadvantage through their theory of racial accumulation and disaccumulation, according to which the cumulative effects of past racial discrimination and exclusion have resulted in the accumulation of race-based advantages by Whites at the expense of Blacks.<sup>103</sup> As they show, even very small economic and social advantages compound and can, like an investment, have large cumulative effects over many generations. Conversely, the concepts of “disinvestment” and “disaccumulation” point to the ways in which exclusion from economic and social opportunities can compound over time and result in inter-generational disaccumulation. In pre-civil rights America, labor market discrimination, as well as an array of discriminatory federal social policies (e.g. veterans’ programs, federal housing policy, and welfare policy) resulted in White accumulation of economic advantage while contributing to Black disaccumulation through lack of access to secure and well-paying jobs, segregation and the disaccumulation of wealth.<sup>104</sup> Since the dismantling of Jim Crow did not include policies that redressed the inter-generational effects of the twin processes of White accumulation and Black disaccumulation, Blacks continue to be systematically disadvantaged vis-a-vis Whites in their competition for resources and opportunities—including in employment and education. As Dalton Conley shows, the higher levels of White wealth that result from inter-generational accumulation translate into educational

---

<sup>103</sup> Michael Brown and David Wellman, “Embedding the Color Line: The Accumulation of Racial Advantage and the Disaccumulation of Racial Opportunity in Post Civil Rights America,” *Du Bois Review* 2, no. 2 (2005): 187-207.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-202.

and labor market advantages, which in turn (partly) explains the endurance of racial economic inequality more generally.<sup>105</sup>

So far, I have described racially oppressive relations in terms of social relations of white privilege and non-white disadvantage. However, when the harms inflicted on the oppressed racialized group are especially severe, racially oppressive relations may take the form of relations of domination. Thus, in my view, relations of domination correspond to extreme cases of oppressive relations. Following Lovett, we can claim that a racialized group (or a member thereof) is dominated when it is dependent on a social relationship in which another racialized group (or a member thereof) wields arbitrary power over it (or over its members).<sup>106</sup> For instance, New World slavery was a social system in which Black slaves were dominated by White slave-owners insofar the latter wielded arbitrary power over the former—there was little that a slave-owner was not permitted to do to a slave in his possession. Moreover, Black slaves were dependent on this dominating relation insofar as their material survival depended on the will of the White slave-owner.

Anti-racist activists also press the claim that the social relations among racialized groups in the contemporary United States (in particular, the relations between whites and blacks) can be described not only as relations of privilege and disadvantage, but also as relations of domination.<sup>107</sup> There are at least two ways of interpreting this claim. A weak version of the claim merely seeks to make explicit the causal and conceptual link between contemporary racialized social systems and historical projects of racial domination such as transatlantic slavery, colonialism and imperialism.

---

<sup>105</sup> Conley Dalton, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>106</sup> Frank Lovett, *A General Theory of Domination and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119.

<sup>107</sup> This is why they sometimes refer to racism as a system of racial domination.

However, I think that anti-racist movements often intend to make the stronger claim that the contemporary American social system continues to instantiate relations of racial domination today.

Insofar as Lovett's definition of domination requires that the dominant group wield *arbitrary power* over the dominated, it may prove difficult to argue that non-whites are currently dominated by whites. After all, slavery has been abolished, race-based discrimination has been outlawed, and there exist constitutional protections for victims of race-based violence. Given that the rule of law currently protects (at least in principle) members of non-white populations from the arbitrary actions of whites, it seems that whites cannot exert power over non-whites arbitrarily—that is to say, without being “externally constrained by effective rules, procedures, or goals that are common knowledge to all persons or groups involved”.<sup>108</sup> However, Lovett seems to acknowledge that once we consider non-ideal conditions, it may be possible to describe the American criminal justice system as instantiating relations of domination insofar as racial profiling grants police officers arbitrary powers to subject non-whites to random stops and searches.<sup>109</sup> In the same vein, the sordid regularity with which unarmed Black people are murdered at the hands of police officers with little to no consequences, suggests that they possess arbitrary power over Black people's lives. Examples of this kind suggest that describing the institution of policing as instantiating relations of race based domination, and therefore as an instance of structural racism, is entirely appropriate.<sup>110</sup>

There is an alternative way to defend the stronger claim that the U.S. social system continues to instantiate relations of racial domination. In *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, Paul

---

<sup>108</sup> Lovett, *Theory of Domination*, 96.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 98, fn. 21.

<sup>110</sup> Here I am assuming that the institution of policing also fulfills conditions (1) and (2) as described in my definition of racialized social systems.

Taylor elaborates on Howard Winant's concluding remarks in *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (2002) regarding the recent shift in the world racial system from domination to hegemony. According to Taylor, in the present post-racial situation, racialized social systems have minimized the cost of maintaining themselves by accommodating and co-opting the resistance that results from their negative disparate impact on communities of color. For Taylor, this strategy of accommodating and co-opting anti-racist resistance marks "the shift from domination, or rule by force, to hegemony, or crudely, rule by consent."<sup>111</sup> The shift from force to consent is marked by assimilating voices of dissent into the status quo. For instance, civil rights activists became legislators and politicians seeking to reform the system to advance their anti-racist causes. However, in doing so they acquired a positional interest in maintaining the system that they originally intended to abolish. Moreover, their participation and investment in the system grants it a veneer of legitimacy, which obscures the ways in which the system continues to be implicated in the problem of the color line. According to Taylor, the shift from domination to hegemony allowed the U.S. racialized social system to garner the consent of the oppressed as a way to stabilize itself along with its reproduction of hierarchical racial relations.

To recap, the third distinctly racial feature of racially oppressive social structures is that they enforce oppressive relations between racialized groups. These oppressive relations can take the form of relations of domination and relations of advantage/disadvantage. While some cases of structural racism may not reach the level of racial domination, relations of race-based privilege and disadvantage are constitutive of all instances of structural racism. As a result, structural racism has differential consequences on the life chances of individuals depending on their position in the structure—that is, depending on whether they belong to a subordinate (i.e. non-white) or

---

<sup>111</sup> Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, 76.

superordinate (i.e. white) racialized group. In chapter 6, I will explain one way in which racially oppressive social structures reinforce relations of race-based privilege and disadvantage. In particular, I will show how structural racism explains the durability of the racial achievement gap in education.

## **Chapter 5: Structural Racism and Other "Racisms"**

### **5.1. What is Racism? A Second Approximation to the Debate**

As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, thinking of racism at the level of social structures is crucial for making sense of the mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality. However, thinking of racism in structural terms is not common in philosophy. Save for a few exceptions, philosophical debates on the concept of racism tend to focus on whether particular individuals (or their beliefs, acts, intentions, etc.) may be considered racist. In other words, there is an individualist bias in philosophical discussions of racism that obscures the ways in which racism operates at the level of social structures. This individualist bias in the philosophical literature on racism is correlated with a focus on the moral implications of racism. A widely shared assumption in the literature is that an adequate theory of racism ought to capture the strong moral condemnation associated with the concept. As a consequence, the discussion tends to revolve around whether various forms of race-related wrongs that fall short of explicit racial bigotry deserve the label of racism, along with its negative moral implications. This tendency, which is not exclusive to philosophy, fits what sociologist Loïc Wacquant has called the “logic of the trial” in discussions of race—that is, a tendency to focus on convicting or exonerating this or that person, institution or society from the sin of racism, rather than on identifying the mechanisms behind the reproduction of racial domination (1997). As a result of these individualist and moralist biases in philosophical discussions of racism, attempts to theorize racism as a structural phenomenon are often dismissed. To be clear, I am not making the implausible claim that an account of racism can stay clear from making normative judgments. Racism is inevitably a normative concept. The issue with the “logic of the trial” is not the emphasis on morality per se, but rather the narrow focus on individual

culpability and blameworthiness, at the expense of other normatively salient features, such as the persistence of social relations of race-based oppression.

In chapter 4, I articulated an account of structural racism in terms of racially oppressive structures. In so doing, I focused on how structural racism contributes to a better explanation of the reproduction of racial inequality. While I think that structural racism plays a fundamental causal role in the maintenance of racial inequality, my explanatory account would be incomplete if I ignored the causal role of other racist phenomena. Moreover, talk of racist individuals, racist beliefs, racist intentions and racist actions is part of our common-sense talk about race, and therefore cannot be easily abandoned. These other concepts of racism do pick out important features of how race works in the contemporary world. Just because individualist conceptions of racism do not fully capture the sources of racial injustice, it does not mean that we ought to discard them and replace them with a structural conception.<sup>112</sup> As I argued earlier, I favor a pluralistic stance on the second-order question of how to assess different accounts of racism. In some contexts and for certain projects, a focus on individual racism may be preferable (e.g. if the point is to assess individual responsibility for racist actions). However, even for my project, which focuses on explanation and social structures, it is crucial to make explicit the interaction between social structures and individuals.

In spite of the inevitable disagreement over its extension, ‘racism’ has become, for better or worse, the preferred term to express people’s intuitions about what the “race problem” amounts to. On the one hand, conservatives conceptualize racism as explicit racial prejudice and bigotry,

---

<sup>112</sup>In this sense, I do not endorse “structural prioritism”, according to which individual-level phenomena need not be part of the diagnosis of racism as a social problem. On structural prioritism, see Madva, “A Plea for Anti-Anti Individualism”.

and point to the decline of these attitudes as evidence that racism is a thing of the past.<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, anti-racist movements conceptualize racism as an ongoing structural problem. On the structural racism view, racially oppressive social structures explain the persistent disadvantage that people of color face in their interaction with the various institutions of society (e.g. criminal justice system, health care system, education system, financial institutions, housing market, etc.). Thus, part of the disagreement over how to conceptualize racism stems from different ways of analyzing racism as a social problem—or in other words, what Du Bois called the “problem of the color line”. In my view, when anti-racist movements insist on using the term racism to describe the structures of racial privilege that systematically disadvantage people of color, they are implicitly insisting on expanding our understanding of the problem of the color line beyond the level of individual prejudice. Thinking of racism in structural terms rejects the post-racial discourse that racism is over by highlighting that this social problem will not disappear until we address the social structures that reproduce race-based disadvantage.

## **5.2. Racism: Ideological, Individual, Institutional, and Structural**

Earlier, I argued that the concept of structural racism—as it is used by anti-racist movements and critical race theorists—should be understood as a particular conceptualization of the long-standing problem of the color line. In order to appreciate this thought, it would be helpful to describe at some length three major alternative ways for conceptualizing racism as a social problem—namely, ideological racism, individual racism and institutional racism. As we will see, all of these alternatives propose a particular diagnosis of racism as a social problem and identify the locus of racism accordingly. That is to say, racism has also been conceptualized as a problem having to do, first and foremost, with ideologies, individual-level phenomena and institutions. It’s

---

<sup>113</sup>See Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: Free Press, 1996).



often thought that these ways of conceptualizing racism are at odds with one another. This point is most often made with respect to individual and institutional accounts of racism. For instance, Glasgow argues that individual (or what he calls, agent-based) accounts of racism cannot handle some cases covered by institutional accounts of racism, and vice versa.<sup>114</sup> However, this is a false dilemma. Ideological, individual and institutional racism are not in conflict—in fact, they all pick out important aspects of the problem of the color line. Not only that, but all three conceptions of racism are also crucial for understanding the workings of structural racism. In order to understand how structures of racial disadvantage operate, it is crucial to understand how individual prejudice and behavior figures in them. Similarly, the stability of structural racism depends on the legitimizing function of racist ideologies and the institutional mechanisms for reproducing racial disadvantage. Rather than delving into the endless debate over how to best conceptualize racism, my aim is to show that the most important alternatives that have been advanced (i.e. racism as ideological, individual and institutional phenomena) are not only compatible with, but actually key for understanding the nature of structural racism. This is because the phenomena picked out by individual, ideological and institutional racism are jointly constitutive of the structures of racial disadvantage that I refer to as structural racism.

In order to show this, I will primarily draw on Tommie Shelby's work on racism, which makes explicit the connection between ideological, individual and institutional racism. Shelby's project is congenial with the one I develop here given that, although he favors an ideological conceptualization of racism, he is open to the possibility of ascribing racism to phenomena other than ideologies. However, my project also differs from Shelby's in that I am not primarily interested in showing the *conceptual* connection between various forms of racism. Whereas Shelby

---

<sup>114</sup>Joshua Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect," *Ethics* 120, no. 1 (2009): 71-77.

goes to great lengths to show that an ideology-first account of racism can accommodate individual and institutional conceptions of racism, I am more interested in the connections among the *phenomena* to which those conceptions refer. In particular, my aim is to show that the phenomena picked out by ideological, individual and institutional conceptions of racism are all implicated in the sustained reproduction of structural racism. In other words, my project is an exercise in social ontology, rather than one in conceptual analysis.

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I rely on Shelby's conceptual analysis of ideological racism in order to delimit the phenomena to which that term refers (5.2.1). In doing so, I propose some changes to his view in order to improve on his conceptualization of the phenomena. Second, I give a description of the phenomena that individualist conceptions of racism are supposed to capture (5.2.2). To perform this task, I draw on individualistic accounts of racism in philosophy (viz. cognitivism, behaviorism and non-cognitivism) and the social sciences (viz. racism as individual prejudice). Third, I do the same descriptive work with the concept of institutional racism (5.2.3). Here, I rely once more on the work of Tommie Shelby—in particular, on his distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic institutional racism. Finally, I bring together the phenomena picked out by ideological, individual and institutional racism and show how they jointly constitute and maintain structural racism (5.2.4).

### 5.2.1. Ideological Racism

According to Shelby, racism is fundamentally a type of ideology. Shelby defines ideology as “a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations.”<sup>115</sup> Although Shelby identifies ideologies primarily with sets of beliefs, he

---

<sup>115</sup>Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66.

also claims that ideologies often become deeply entrenched in discourse and cultural products (slogans, jokes, film, music, art, television programming, advertisements, etc.), as well as in society's "common sense." By this I take him to mean that ideologies alter the schemas through which individuals make sense of social reality and their social identities. In other words, ideologies include not just sets of beliefs, but also the conceptual repertoires that color people's experience of the world. Ideologies that become part of a society's background assumptions not only distort the way social actors perceive the social world; they also affect how they organize their lives and coordinate their actions in the context of their social practices.<sup>116</sup>

Shelby identifies three properties that all ideologies share.<sup>117</sup> First, ideologies are *epistemically flawed*. Most ideologies are not simply false; in fact, because ideologies distort the way we perceive reality, the observed "facts" often appear to confirm the content of the ideology. Secondly, ideologies serve a *hegemonic function* insofar as they contribute to the (re)production of unjust social arrangements, which are often rooted in oppressive social relations that benefit a hegemonic group. The most common way in which ideologies perform this function is through legitimization—that is, by creating the appearance that the unjust social arrangements are justified. Finally, ideologies have a *genetic* component insofar as they are adopted with a false consciousness. In non-Marxist language, ideologies become widely accepted because of the influence of non-cognitive motives, such as the desire to maintain a positive self-conception or a dominant social position. Importantly, the agent that adopts the ideology need not be aware that she is doing so out of non-cognitive motives because these motives often operate behind our backs.

---

<sup>116</sup>Recall Haslanger's claim that ideologies are schemas that partially constitute social practices that reproduce relations of domination and subordination.

<sup>117</sup>The following is drawn from Tommie Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *The Philosophical Forum* 32, no. 2 (2003): 157-160.

Building on his account of ideology, Shelby defines ideological racism as “a set of misleading beliefs and implicit attitudes about “races” or race relations whose wide currency serves a hegemonic social function.”<sup>118</sup> As a kind of ideology, racism has epistemic, functional and genetic properties that call for criticism. To take up a previous example, classical racialism consists of a set of beliefs, central to which is the (biological) concept of race. The race concept underlies the hierarchical sorting of human populations according to phenotypical traits, hereditary lines, and continental origin. Classical racialism is *epistemically flawed* because of the pseudo-scientific basis upon which this sorting is justified. Classical racialism can also be criticized on *functionalist* grounds insofar as it was used to justify projects of racial domination, such as the transatlantic slave trade, European colonialism and New World slavery. The illusory belief in the natural inferiority of Blacks and Native Americans *functioned to legitimize* the oppression and near extermination of these populations. Finally, classical racialism is also subject to *genetic* criticism. As Shelby points out, the slave-holding aristocracy of the American South accepted the ideology of classical racialism not out of truth-conducive reasons, but because it benefited their social position in the local slave economy.<sup>119</sup><sup>120</sup>

So far I have described the properties of ideological racism by referring to classical racialism. However, ideological racism is not static. Its content changes in response to shifting cultural, political and economic contexts, as well as in response to social criticism.<sup>121</sup> For instance, classical racialism, with its now debunked doctrine of whites’ biological superiority, has been

---

<sup>118</sup>Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66.

<sup>119</sup>Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” 182.

<sup>120</sup> For a discussion of how antebellum slave-owning families clung to racist ideologies in order to preserve the conceptual repertoires that were essential to their social identities and to their relation to the social world, see Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 192-196.

<sup>121</sup>Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66. Also see Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith, “Laissez-Faire Racism” and Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*.

replaced by cultural racism. Unlike its predecessor, cultural racism relies on non-biological concepts, such as black cultural pathology, the disintegration of the black family and blacks' lack of individual motivation, to explain away the persistence of racial inequality. Despite the change in content, cultural racism serves the same hegemonic function as classical racialism; namely, to rationalize a social structure of racial disadvantage (i.e. structural racism).

### 5.2.2. Individual Racism

When philosophers theorize racism as an individual-level phenomenon, they do so in cognitive, behavioral or non-cognitive terms.<sup>122</sup> According to the cognitivist model, racism refers to cognitive attitudes (e.g. beliefs) towards a particular set of morally problematic propositions in the domain of race. In an influential account, Appiah cashes out the content of racist beliefs in terms of (1) "racialism" (i.e. there are racial essences that allow us to divide individuals into races) and either (2a) "extrinsic racism" (i.e. it is justified to treat people differently on the basis of race because racial essences are correlated with differences in morally relevant qualities, such as honor, courage and intelligence) or (2b) "intrinsic racism" (i.e. it is justified to differentiate morally on the basis of race because each race has an intrinsically different moral status).<sup>123</sup> In Appiah's cognitivist picture, racism refers to a combination of false propositions (e.g. racialism, and extrinsic racism or intrinsic racism) and a cognitive disposition to resist a rational revision of those beliefs in the face of countervailing evidence.

---

<sup>122</sup> Luc Faucher and Edouard Machery, "Racism: Against Jorge Garcia's Moral and Psychological Monism," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 39, no. 1 (2009): 41-62 ; J.L.A. Garcia, "Racism, Psychology, and Morality: Dialogue with Faucher and Machery," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2011): 250-268; Garcia, "Current Conceptions"; Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect"; Levy, "Am I Racist?"

<sup>123</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Racisms," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3-17.

The second individualist model for understanding racism is behaviorism. According to this model, racism involves individuals behaving or being disposed to behave in a way that is harmful to the members of a racial group.<sup>124</sup> In this model, racism picks out the likes of discriminatory and disrespectful behavior, as well as behavior that contributes to systematic racial disadvantage, exclusion, or domination. For instance, Michael Philips defends a behavioral account according to which racism refers primarily to what he calls “basic racist acts”, which he defines as follows: “P performs a Basic Racist Act by doing A when: (a) P does A in order to harm Q because Q is a member of a certain ethnic group; or (b) (regardless of P’s intentions or purposes) P’s doing A can reasonably be expected to mistreat Q as a consequence of Q’s being a member of a certain ethnic group.”<sup>125</sup>

The last major individualist framework for theorizing racism is non-cognitivism. According to this framework, racism refers primarily to non-cognitive states such as volitions and emotions. Jorge Garcia’s influential account of racism advances a volitional model. For Garcia, racism refers primarily to a morally vicious ill-will or disregard towards members of another race. His account is volitional insofar as it treats racism as primarily a matter of what what a person wills for others in light of their race. In other words, on Garcia’s view, racism picks out “the content of a person’s will”.<sup>126</sup> When the content of the person’s will is hatred, ill-will or disregard, then that person is properly described as racist. Although Garcia prefers to describe his account as volitional, the phenomena that his conception of racism picks out seems to also involve emotions.

---

<sup>124</sup> Faucher and Machery, "Racism," 45.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Philips, “Racist Acts and Racist Humor,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (1984): 75-96.

<sup>126</sup> J.L.A. Garcia, “Philosophical Analysis and The Moral Concept of Racism,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25, no. 5 (1999), 13.

This is most evident with respect to hatred and ill-will, but disregard may also have emotional elements insofar as it can involve a lack of empathy vis-a-vis members of another racialized group.

Affective accounts of racism also fall within the non-cognitive framework and they identify racism with certain negative emotions (or a disposition to have such emotions) towards members of other races. In their defense of the relevance of psychology to debates on racism, Faucher and Machery defend an affective model, according to which racism refers primarily to an array of emotions ranging from hatred, hostility, anger and disgust, to fear, jealousy, envy, pity, and indifference. Drawing on a sociofunctional approach to emotions, they argue that the plurality of emotions evoked by particular racial groups corresponds to the problems that the group is seen as posing (e.g. if African-Americans elicit mostly fear among whites, it is because they are seen as a problem for property and security). Thus, Faucher and Machery argue that in order to understand the nature of racism, we ought to pay attention to the plurality of racist emotions, the cultural representations of the problems that racial groups are seen as posing, and the stereotypes associated with particular racialized groups.<sup>127</sup>

Part of what drives philosophers towards these individualist models for theorizing racism (i.e. cognitivism, behaviorism and non-cognitivism) is that they reflect our common-sense understanding of racism. In many cases, philosophers are explicit in their commitment to a conceptualization of racism that captures the ways in which the term is employed in ordinary everyday discourse.<sup>128</sup> In light of this, it is not a surprise that philosophers' individualist accounts of racism are compatible with the traditional model for understanding racism in the social sciences—namely, as individual racial prejudice.

---

<sup>127</sup>Faucher and Machery, "Racism," 53.

<sup>128</sup>Garcia, "Current Conceptions"; Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect," 92.

In his influential *On the Nature of Prejudice*, the psychologist Gordon Allport defined prejudice as “antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization”.<sup>129</sup> Allport’s definition highlights the affective and cognitive components of racism as racial prejudice. Today, psychologists theorize racial prejudice as an individual-level attitude with cognitive, behavioral and affective components.<sup>130</sup> The concept of stereotype captures the cognitive component of prejudice. Stereotypes are associations and beliefs about the characteristics of a group and its members, which shape how people think about and respond to the group. The concept of discrimination (i.e. behavior that maintains or reinforces advantage for some group and its members over another group and its members) captures the behavioral component. Finally, and somewhat confusingly, ‘prejudice<sub>2</sub>’ also refers to the affective component of ‘prejudice’ qua individual-level attitude.<sup>131</sup> Prejudice<sub>2</sub> picks out the same phenomena as affective accounts of racism in philosophy—namely, emotions such as fear and hatred towards members of another group. These emotions are thought to shape the affective side of people’s reactions to other groups and their members.

Hence, racial prejudice qua individual-level attitude captures all the phenomena present in cognitivist, behavioral and non-cognitivist models of racism. Moreover, the psychological account of racism as racial prejudice explains the connection between these phenomena; prejudices<sub>2</sub> and stereotypes (the cognitive and affective components) are thought to cause discriminatory behavior. Importantly, racial prejudice was traditionally understood as as an explicit attitude consisting of conscious and deliberate processes. More recently, it has been proposed that racial prejudice can

---

<sup>129</sup>Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954/1979), 9.

<sup>130</sup>John F. Dovidio et al., “Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination,” in *SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, ed. John F. Dovidio et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010), 3-28.

<sup>131</sup>See Edouard Machery, Luc Faucher, and Daniel Kelly, “On the Alleged Inadequacies of Psychological Explanations of Racism,” *The Monist* 93, no. 2 (2010), 229.



also consist of implicit attitudes (also known as implicit biases) in which the aforementioned cognitive, affective and behavioral processes can be unintentionally activated or operate outside of conscious awareness.

Despite its traditional hold on social scientific analysis of racism, the individual prejudice model has recently come under attack. Anti-racist social movements and radical race scholars are dissatisfied with its individualistic framework, which conceptualizes the problem of racism as simply a matter of overt and irrational racial attitudes among white Americans. According to its critics, the individual prejudice model provides an impoverished assessment of the problem of racism. For one thing, the model's focus on overt and crude racism left out those individuals who do not externalize their racist beliefs and emotions, whether it be because these remain implicit or because they have found ways to express their racial views in race-neutral language. Another criticism raised against the individual prejudice model is that, by theorizing racism as an irrational phenomenon (or as the effect of universal intrapsychic processes, as it's theorized in implicit bias research), it obscures the ways in which the problem of racism is linked to Whites' group-based interest in maintaining the privileges that stem from racial oppression.<sup>132</sup> Finally, the emphasis on individual-level attitudes prevents understanding the problem of racism as also a matter of social institutions that reproduce systematic racial disadvantage, even in the absence of racial prejudice among their members.<sup>133</sup> This latter line of criticism gave rise to the concept of institutional racism, to which I turn now.

---

<sup>132</sup>See Bob Blauner, *Still The Big News: Racial Oppression in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*.

<sup>133</sup>Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1967/1992).

### 5.2.3. Institutional Racism

Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton in *Black Power* first introduced the concept of institutional racism in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. At a time when individual prejudice was the dominant framework for understanding American racism, Ture and Hamilton argued that ‘institutional racism’ was a necessary tool for understanding the effects of racism on the lives of Black people in the United States. From its inception, institutional racism had an explanatory aim—namely, to improve our understanding of how racial subordination is reproduced. At a time when explanations of racial disadvantage were strongly influenced by Allportian models of individual prejudice, Ture and Hamilton argued that a complete account of the mechanisms that kept Black people in an inferior position should include the institutions that reproduce systematic racial disadvantage. As they put it, the problem of racism is not just a matter of “individual whites acting against individual blacks.”<sup>134</sup> Without denying the gravity of acts of individual racism, Ture and Hamilton highlighted the much more subtle workings of institutional racism, which can be observed in “the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities... [as well as] the conditions of poverty and segregation in black communities”.<sup>135</sup> Unlike individual racism, which is deplored by the majority of whites, government institutions whose policies lock black people in an inferior position garner the support of whites, who oftentimes benefit from them. In introducing the concept of institutional racism, Ture and Hamilton sought to make clear that such institutions were no less destructive of human life than acts of racial bigotry, and should therefore be opposed as much as individual racism. In my opinion, their use of the language of institutional racism to describe this institutionalized reproduction of racial disadvantage was meant to highlight

---

<sup>134</sup> Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 4.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

that this phenomenon is central to an explanatory account of the social problem that in everyday talk goes by the name of racism.

Tommie Shelby picks up Ture and Hamilton's concept of institutional racism and renders it amenable to philosophical analysis. Shelby distinguishes between two types of institutional racism: intrinsic and extrinsic. Although Shelby's distinction is extremely helpful, his discussion of institutional racism is brief and opens the door to potential objections.<sup>136</sup> Therefore, I will fine-tune the distinction and illustrate it with some examples of my own. According to Shelby, institutions are *intrinsically* racist when their constitutive features are infected by a racist ideology.<sup>137</sup> Shelby identifies three levels at which racism can infect an institution. First, the *goals* of an institution may be racist if it aims to harm the members of a racialized group and such aims are justified or rationalized by a racist ideology. Such racist goals need not be explicit or public; in fact, institutions that appear to have race-neutral goals may be covertly designed to subordinate a racial group. An institution so designed will be intrinsically racist even if it fails to attain its ends. Thus, whether an institution is intrinsically racist is not necessarily a matter of its effects.

An institution can also be intrinsically racist if the *content* of its rules and/or criteria for assigning roles to its members contains racial bias or is racially discriminatory. Shelby conceives of institutions as social practices—that is, as “formal system[s] of roles and rules that enable and regulate sustained cooperative action for some specified purpose.”<sup>138</sup> To function appropriately, an institution requires its members to enact the role assigned to them and follow the rules associated with the role. Institutional rules and role criteria need not be explicitly racist. All that is

---

<sup>136</sup> Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 24-28.

<sup>137</sup>Note how Shelby's account of intrinsic institutional racism resembles Garcia's individualistic 'infection model' of racism in "Current Conceptions of Racism."

<sup>138</sup>Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 25.

needed is for racially biased or discriminatory rules and role criteria to be operative in the institution, even if only at an implicit and informal level. The Ferguson Police Department is an example of an institution with racist rules. The US Justice Department Ferguson Report found that that one of the implicit common-sense rules followed by police officers was to treat Black citizens as “criminals” and as “lacking personal responsibility”. These racially biased rules that undergird the practice of policing in the FPD make the institution intrinsically racist.<sup>139</sup>

Finally, racist ideology can make an institution intrinsically racist if it infects the *application* of its procedures. Even if the goals of an institution are non-racist and its rules and role criteria are free of racial bias, an institution may be intrinsically racist if its members systematically fail to apply those rules and role criteria equally and consistently because of personal prejudice. The pervasive racially discriminatory application of institutional procedures may be conscious or unconscious, but is always the result of individual actions informed by a racist ideology. For instance, even if the FPD purged its implicit and explicit rules from racial bias and discrimination it would still remain intrinsically racist so long as it does not address the police officers’ implicit biases, which lead them to use excessive force against Blacks.<sup>140</sup> Insofar as police officers would systematically fail to apply the correct (non-racist) rules for the use of force when dealing with Black citizens—and insofar as this systematic misapplication of the rules of policing would stem

---

<sup>139</sup>For a reading the US Justice Department Ferguson Report that further develops the point that racist ideology is operative behind the discriminatory practices of the FPD, see Robert Gooding-Williams, "Ideology, Social Practices, Anti-Black Concepts" (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>140</sup>A recent study found no evidence for bias in police shootings of Blacks, but it did find evidence of bias in officers’ excessive use of force against Blacks. As the article makes clear, its findings do not rule that the most egregious examples of police shootings were free of racial bias, nor do they show that the public’s perception of racism in policing is misguided. See Quoc Trung Bui and Amanda Cox, “Surprising New Evidence Shows Bias in Police Use of Force but Not in Shootings,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/12/upshot/surprising-new-evidence-shows-bias-in-police-use-of-force-but-not-in-shootings.html>

from the workings of racist ideology via the psychological mechanism of implicit bias—the FPD would continue to be intrinsically racist.

Insofar as ‘intrinsic institutional racism’ picks out institutions whose constitutive features are infected by racist ideology, this type of institutional racism is (in most instances) reducible to an individualistic model of racism. This is most clear in the case of intrinsically racist institutions in which members fail to apply institutional rules equally and consistently due to individual prejudice. Although less evident, the same applies for most cases of institutions whose goals and rules are infected by racist ideology. In most cases in which an institution’s *goal* is to harm people of color, it is possible to trace back that goal to an individual or group of individuals with racist intentions. Similarly, when institutions have racially biased or discriminatory *rules*, it is possible to trace those rules back to racially prejudiced individuals who first set those rules—whether or not they did so consciously. Whereas ‘intrinsic institutional racism’ is (for the most part) reducible to an individualistic model of racism, ‘extrinsic institutional racism’ elides this kind of reducibility and is therefore closer to Ture and Hamilton’s formulation of institutional racism as picking out institutions that perpetuate black disadvantage. According to Shelby, *extrinsically* racist institutions are racist not because of their constitutive features, but “solely in virtue of their policies’ effects.”<sup>141</sup> An institution that is not intrinsically racist may be extrinsically racist to the extent that it “perpetuate[s] the negative effects of ongoing or past racist actions and thereby encourage[s] racist attitudes and stereotypes.”<sup>142</sup> This formulation captures the kind of impact-based instances of institutional racism that Ture and Hamilton and other radical race theorists are intent on theorizing.

---

<sup>141</sup>Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 24.

<sup>142</sup>*Ibid.*

Unfortunately, Shelby's claim that an institution counts as extrinsically racist *solely* because of its policies' effects has the potential to create unnecessary confusion. In particular, it feeds into individualists' criticisms that 'institutional racism' lacks conceptual clarity. For instance, Jorge Garcia's rejection of impact-based accounts of institutional racism rests precisely on this point.<sup>143</sup> Garcia argues that talk of institutions having "racist impact" and "racist outcomes" conflates racism with the effects of past racism, which to him are separate phenomena—just like warfare is separate from the lingering effects of warfare. For this reason, Garcia argues that we should reserve the term 'institutional racism' for cases in which the vice of racism infects institutions' constitutive features—in other words, to what I described above as intrinsic institutional racism.

I agree with Garcia that having a negative impact on people of color is not a sufficient condition for an institution to be racist—extrinsically or otherwise. Social dynamics are highly complex and many institutions—even those with anti-racist constitutive features—may at one time or another have the unintended consequence of contributing to the reproduction of racial inequality. However, unlike Garcia, I do not endorse an account of institutional racism that is ultimately reducible to individual-level phenomena.<sup>144</sup> Note that this is compatible with Garcia's claim that 'vice-based individual racism' and 'extrinsic institutional racism' pick out different phenomena. My aim is precisely to vindicate the use of the label 'racism' to also refer to institutions that fall under some version of an impact-based account of racism. To do this, however, I need to identify a further requirement for categorizing as (extrinsically) racist those institutions

---

<sup>143</sup>Garcia, "Philosophical Analysis," 16-18. For a similar argument, see Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, *Racism, Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>144</sup>For Garcia, all instances of institutional racism are ultimately reducible to the individual vices or racially motivated ill-will or indifference.

that have a negative impact on people of color. In my view, that further requirement is that such institutions stand in a certain relation to racist ideology. I will spell out the precise nature of this relation in the following section, in which I show how the phenomena picked out by ideological, individual and institutional racism work together to constitute and maintain structural racism. For now, I would like to clarify that, in my view, an institution is extrinsically racist if and only if a) it systematically harms people of color and b) it stands in a (yet to be defined) relation R to ideological racism.

Before turning to the next section and clarifying the nature of R, let us turn to an example that illustrates the concept of *extrinsic* institutional racism. Word-of-mouth hiring is a widely used practice whereby employers channel job offerings through the social networks of current employees. This practice gives employers a better chance of hiring a good candidate because current employees tend to refer people who they are willing to vouch for and who they think would be a good fit for the organization. In most cases, this recruiting technique has a race-neutral purpose; namely, to increase the odds of hiring a good candidate. However, even if this social practice is not intrinsically racist, it has the effect of erecting an institutional barrier to employment for Blacks. Due to formal and informal segregation, Blacks are often excluded from White personal networks, which due to past and present racist practices, tend to have more social capital. Blacks' exclusion from White personal networks that channel job offerings through word of mouth bars them from one of the most important mechanisms for success in the labor market<sup>145</sup> and is arguably an important cause for the White-Black unemployment gap.<sup>146</sup> In this way, companies that hire

---

<sup>145</sup>Gertrude Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 14-18.

<sup>146</sup>The unemployment rate of Blacks has been consistently twice that of Whites for at least 6 decades. See Drew Desilver, "Black Unemployment Rate is Consistently Twice That of Whites," *Pew Research Center*, August 21, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/>

through personal connections fulfill one of the necessary conditions for being extrinsically racist insofar as they have a negative impact on Blacks that stems from past (formal residential and social segregation) and present racist (informal residential segregation and exclusion of Blacks from White social circles due to racist prejudices) practices.<sup>147</sup>

#### 5.2.4. How Are Ideological, Individual and Institutional Racism Involved in the Reproduction of Structural Racism

Earlier I claimed that the phenomena picked out by accounts of ideological, individual and institutional racism contribute to the stability of structural racism. I have also claimed that, while each of these accounts identifies different phenomena as the locus of the social problem of racism, they are fully compatible with one another and with my account of structural racism. Now that I have described in some detail each of these alternative accounts of racism, I can finally substantiate these claims by showing how the phenomena picked out by ideological, individual and institutional racism are recursively implicated in the reproduction of racially oppressive social structures.

As the reader may recall, social structures consist of networks of social relations, which are recursively recreated by individual agents in the context of their social practices. In turn, social practices are collective solutions to coordination or access problems with respect to a resource. Moreover, social practices consist of sets of interdependent schemas and resources when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time. Finally, schemas count as ideologies when they structure our social practices such that we reproduce unjust social relations, or value the wrong things (or in the wrong way). For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus on the first kind of ideological schemas—namely, those that organize us in unjust social relations. Haslanger argues that schemas are ideological in this sense when they organize us in relations of domination and

---

<sup>147</sup>On the role of segregation in perpetuating racial inequality, see Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*.



subordination. In light of my discussion of structural racism, I would add relations of privilege and disadvantage to the list of unjust social relations that are backed up by ideological schemas. With this framework in mind, we can think of structural racism as a network of social relations of racial domination and/or racial privilege, which is reproduced by the recursive social practices of human agents guided by ideological schemas.

This description of structural racism highlights the fact that its maintenance is causally dependent on an array of social practices—specifically, those social practices whose effect, whether intended or not, is the reproduction of relations of racial domination and racial privilege. Anti-racist movements and critical race theorists often refer to practices that have this negative impact on people of color as *racist* practices. However, in this dissertation, I employ a narrower definition of racist practices. Mirroring my discussion of extrinsically racist institutions in section 4.2.3, I contend that having this kind of impact is not sufficient to ascribe racism to a practice; in addition, that practice must also stand in a certain relation to racist ideology. This should not be a surprise given that racist institutions are a subset of racist practices—namely, racist practices whose impact is greater because they are particularly enduring and widespread across a range of social interactions.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, institutions are social practices that manage highly important resources (e.g. access to education, access to health care, safety) and therefore play a key role in the differential allocation of advantages and disadvantages along racial boundaries. Given their impact in the allocation of resources at a societal level, racist institutions are among the most important mechanisms for the reproduction of structural racism. This is why accounts of

---

<sup>148</sup>Here I am drawing on Giddens' account of institutions as deeply-layered social practices. See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1979), 65.

institutional racism are compatible with my account of structural racism—in fact, analysis of racist institutions is essential for explaining the stability of racially oppressive social structures.

Having shown the key role that racist institutions play in the reproduction of structural racism, I will tie up the loose ends regarding the kind of relation to racist ideology in virtue of which some institutions (or more generally, social practices) may be considered extrinsically racist. Earlier (5.2.3), I argued that an institution is extrinsically racist if and only if a) it systematically harms people of color and b) it stands in a (yet to be defined) relation R to ideological racism. I can now specify the nature of R, and in so doing, I will also explain the role that ideological racism plays in the reproduction of structural racism. In a nutshell, the relation R between extrinsically racist institutions (or practices) and racist ideology can take three forms: racist ideology may *inform*, *legitimize* or *accommodate* such institutions (or practices). Moreover, it is in virtue of this relation to extrinsically racist institutions that racist ideology performs its hegemonic function of sustaining an unjust social order rooted in social relations that benefit a hegemonic group. In other words, racist ideology fulfills its hegemonic function by informing, legitimizing and accommodating institutions (or practices) that reproduce structural racism. Before explaining this in more depth, I will make some additional points about racist ideology.

Earlier, I discussed Shelby's account of ideology in terms of sets of beliefs and conceptual repertoires that frame people's experience of the world and affect the way they organize their lives and coordinate their actions in the context of their social practices. Shelby uses ideology in a pejorative sense; thus, for him ideologies are subject to criticism insofar as they are epistemically flawed, serve a hegemonic function and become widely accepted out of non-cognitive motives, such as a desire to maintain a positive self-conception or a dominant position. We can now see that Shelby's account of ideology can be easily cashed out in terms of ideological schemas. That is,

racist ideologies refer to the schemas that function to inform, legitimize or accommodate practices that reproduce relations of racial domination and/or racial privilege. Or what is the same, racist ideologies are the schemas that guide human agents when they participate in practices that reproduce structural racism.

Importantly, racist ideologies are racist not only in virtue of serving this hegemonic function. For instance, ideological schemas that frame the unemployed as lazy, incompetent and choosing to live off government handouts legitimize draconian economic policies that lock the unemployed into poverty. In so doing, these ideological schemas reproduce relations of racial disadvantage—and thus, structural racism—insofar as a disproportionate number of the unemployed are black. However, this effect, by itself, is not sufficient to count these ideological schemas as racist. What makes ideological schemas about the unemployed racist is the additional fact that the aforementioned stereotypes are racialized. That is to say, in the American imagination, the stereotype of the lazy and incompetent jobless “moocher” is often associated with brown and black people. This can be easily confirmed if we reflect on the “controlling images” of the African American welfare queen or the lazy Mexican taking a siesta.<sup>149</sup> While these ideological schemas do not make reference to the racist doctrine of whites’ biological superiority over non-whites, they tap on similar publicly shared meanings that can be traced to the evolution of racist thinking as grounded in cultural rather than biological differences. Therefore, ideological schemas are racist if and only if a) they function to inform, legitimize, or accommodate practices that contribute to the reproduction of structural racism, and b) their semantic content affirms ideas of white superiority and non-white inferiority, whether grounded in biology or in culture.

---

<sup>149</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Racialized stereotypes of the unemployed constitute an example of how racist ideologies function to *legitimize* social practices that stabilize relations of racial domination and racial privilege. In addition, racist ideologies can also *inform* individuals' participation in practices that reproduce structural racism. To return to the discussion of the practice of policing in the Ferguson Police Department (4.2.3), individuals who participate in that practice under the role of police officer will tend to follow the common-sense rules associated with their role. These rules (or schemas), which include automatically treating Black citizens as “criminals” and as “lacking personal responsibility”, *inform* the actions of police officers in the context of the practice of policing. Thus, these racially stigmatizing schemas may help explain officers' disproportionate use of violence against—and sometimes outright killing of—Black citizens while on duty.<sup>150</sup> As I suggested earlier, insofar as the practice of policing in the United States grants (mostly white) police officers arbitrary power over the lives of Black people, it instantiates relations of racial domination, and thus contributes to structural racism. Therefore, the racist ideology of black criminality plays a role in the reproduction of structural racism by *informing* the participation of police officers in the practice of policing.

Finally, racist ideologies can contribute to the maintenance of racially oppressive social structures by *accommodating* social practices that reproduce relations of racial domination or racial privilege. A good example of a racist ideology that performs this accommodating role is colorblind ideology. In public discussions about race, color-blindness often appears as an ideal or as a policy proposal.<sup>151</sup> As an *ideal*, color-blindness aspires for a society in which people do not draw racial distinctions. The ideal of color-blindness opposes the use of racial distinctions for the

---

<sup>150</sup>The frequency of cases of off-duty police officers shooting unarmed black people suggests these racist schemas inform the behavior of police officers even outside the context of the practice of policing.

<sup>151</sup>See Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, ch. 8.

purposes of justifying inequality, stigmatization and discrimination. Defenders of color-blindness as a *policy* argue that it is the best means to fight against racial injustice. They contend that race-conscious policies should be avoided because they are inherently morally objectionable and have bad consequences.<sup>152</sup> Color-blind *ideology* shares many of the features of color-blindness as an ideal and as a policy, but it distorts them and puts them to the service of stabilizing relations of racial disadvantage. Instead of asserting the need for a society in which racial distinctions no longer ground unjust inequality, discrimination and stigmatization, colorblind ideology depicts our society as one in which this ideal has already been realized. Colorblind ideology infers from the reduction of overt racist attitudes and the dismantling of state-backed discrimination that racism is a thing of the past, even if past racial harms remain without rectification. In so doing, it obscures the impact that past racial discrimination has in the persistence of racial inequality today, as well as the need for institutional measures to rectify past racial harms.<sup>153</sup>

Like other schemas, colorblind ideology frames people's interpretation of the world. In particular, colorblind ideology frames people's understanding of racial inequality as a matter of individual dispositions and choices, rather than structural constraints to black improvement. Instead of showing the operation of color-blind, seemingly non-racist practices—such as word-of-mouth hiring—in the context of a society with unaddressed racial harms as a key mechanism for the reproduction of racial inequality, colorblind ideology explains racial inequality in terms of Blacks' lack of individual motivation and personal responsibility. In so framing our perception of the mechanisms behind systemic racial inequality, colorblind ideology masks the injustice of a

---

<sup>152</sup>See the aforementioned chapter for Anderson's refutation of the criticisms of race-conscious policies, including a point-by-point treatment of their alleged bad consequences; namely, that they are divisive, stigmatizing, inefficient, depress motivation and harm their intended beneficiaries.

<sup>153</sup>Ronald Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 43.

system whose institutions employed racial categories to disadvantage Blacks for hundreds of years, only to declare itself blind to race at a moment when race categories are necessary to explain the enduring effects of racial subordination and to ground race-conscious policies aimed at rectifying past racial harms.

Thus, colorblind ideology performs its *accommodating* function by framing our perception of practices that are race-neutral and yet, given a background of unaddressed racial harms, work to sustain relations of racial disadvantage (e.g. word-of-mouth hiring). For those who see through the lens of colorblindness, practices like word-of-mouth hiring fulfill the requirements of justice insofar as their constitutive features are race-neutral. As a result, these practices' involvement in the reproduction of systematic racial disadvantage is not seen as a violation of equality of opportunity, but as the unfortunate outcome of Blacks' individual choices in a just (because colorblind) free market. By preventing those under its spell from understanding the disparate impact of such practices as rooted in a history of unaddressed racial harms, colorblind ideology obscures the need to overhaul such practices as a matter of justice. In so doing, colorblind ideology ensures that such practices continue to perpetuate the negative effects of past racial discrimination with little to no opposition from those under its spell. This is how colorblind ideology *accommodates* racist practices that, although race-neutral, contribute to the reproduction of relations of racial disadvantage, and *a fortiori* to the reproduction of structural racism.

I have thus clarified the nature of the relation between racist ideology and racist institutions and practices. An institution (or practice) is extrinsically racist if and only if a) it contributes to the reproduction of relations of racial domination or racial privilege, and b) it is informed, legitimized or accommodated by racist ideology. Additionally, institutions (and practices) may also be intrinsically racist if their constitutive features (i.e. goals, rules, and application of rules) are

informed by racist ideology (e.g. the Ferguson Police Department). By the same token, racist ideologies perform their hegemonic function by informing, legitimizing or accommodating racist practices and institutions that reproduce relations of racial domination or racial privilege. Together, racist ideology and racist institutions (and practices) work to maintain structural racism.

Of course, there is one crucial piece that is missing from this picture of the reproduction of structural racism—namely, agency. It is individual agents who collectively and recursively constitute the social practices and institutions that reproduce relations of racial domination and racial privilege. If racist ideologies inform, legitimize and accommodate racist practices and institutions, they do so only insofar as they have an impact on the actions of individuals who take part in such practices and institutions. Thus, the last element of my account of the reproduction of structural racism has to do with the phenomena picked out by individualist accounts of racism. As I laid out in 5.2.2, individual accounts of racism make reference to an array of individual-level phenomena, such as beliefs, associations, actions, volitions, emotions, and prejudice. From the perspective of explaining the reproduction of racially oppressive social structures, the actions of individuals are of primary importance. It is through their actions that individuals collectively give rise to and maintain the practices and institutions that reproduce structural racism. To recall my discussion of the ontology of social structures, social structures are constituted through recursive social practices and institutions, which are the effect of collective human action drawing on interdependent sets of schemas and resources.

With all the important elements in place, I can finally provide a summary of how the reproduction of structural racism works, and of how the phenomena picked out by individual, ideological and institutional racism contribute to it. Racially oppressive social structures (within the U.S. context) organize individual agents in oppressive social relations that harm non-whites,

while simultaneously benefitting whites. These oppressive social relations are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in racist social practices and racist institutions. As we know, when individuals partake in a social practice, they draw on the schemas and resources specific to that practice. In the case of racist practices and racist institutions, the schemas on which participants draw may also be described as racist ideologies. Moreover, racist ideologies function to stabilize structural racism insofar as they inform, legitimize and accommodate racist practices and racist institutions. With the backing of racist ideologies, racist practices and racist institutions contribute to the reproduction of relations of domination and racial privilege—or in other words, of structural racism.



## Chapter 6: How Structural Racism Explains Durable Racial

### Inequality

#### 6.1. The Individualism-Holism Debate

The goal of this chapter is to substantiate the following explanatory claim: structural racism explains the durability of racial inequality in the United States. Importantly, this explanatory claim is a structural explanation. In order to clarify what I mean by that, I must first address some important issues in the individualism-holism debate. First, we must distinguish between two separate individualism-holism debates—a methodological one and an ontological one. The dispute between methodological individualists and methodological holists is at heart a dispute over whether individuals (and their desires, beliefs, intentions, etc.) or social structures should be the foundation of social explanation. By contrast, the ontological individualism-holism debate revolves around the ontological status of social structures and their relation to individuals. The methodological debate is of particular interest here because it deals with questions of social explanation. However, the ontological debate is also relevant to the extent that it sheds light on the pre-theoretical intuitions of methodological individualists and methodological holists.

##### 6.1.1. The Ontological Individualism-Holism Debate

Let us start with the ontological debate. The fundamental question in the debate is whether social structures exist over and above individuals.<sup>154</sup> Ontological holists affirm that they do, whereas ontological individualists deny it. There are many ways to spell out the claim that social structures exist over and above individuals. An ontological holist may argue that social structures

---

<sup>154</sup> Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, "Introduction," in *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate: Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science*, eds. Julie Zahle and Finn Collin (New York: Springer, 2014), 2-3.

have causal powers in their own right. Dave Elder-Vass defends this position with his account of emergence. He argues that social structures have emergent causal powers, which means that they have causal effects on the world that the agents that compose the structure would not have if they did not participate in the structure.<sup>155</sup> He illustrates this claim with the causal power of a company to dismiss an employee.<sup>156</sup> To be sure, the company attributes this causal power to the individual agent who occupies the position of manager. However, the manager would not be able to dismiss the employee unless both occupied the relevant positions within the company structure. The company has a causal effect on the world (i.e. the dismissal of an employee) that the agents that compose it would not be able to produce outside the context of the company. For Elder-Vass, this emergent causal power indicates that the company exists over and above individuals. Other attempts at vindicating the ontological status of social structures focus on showing that they are more than the sum of their parts (i.e. more than a collection of individual agents), that statements about social structures cannot be translated into statements about individuals, and that certain groups can qualify as agents in their own right.<sup>157</sup>

So far, I have described the ontological individualist's position in purely negative terms. To be an ontological individualist is to reject the existence of social structures over and above individual agents. To complement this view, I will draw on Philip Pettit's positive account of ontological individualism. According to Pettit, the ontological individualist is also committed to a particular picture of human beings as autonomous agents.<sup>158</sup> For Pettit, this picture of human beings stems from our experience of ourselves as more or less rational agents guided by intentional

---

<sup>155</sup> Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 66.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>157</sup> Zahle and Collin, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>158</sup> Philip Pettit, "Three Issues in Social Ontology" in *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*, 78.

attitudes like beliefs and desires. Moreover, this folk psychological view of human beings as more or less rational autonomous agents is a condition for the possibility of interpersonal interactions and other social practices that are essential to life in community.<sup>159</sup>

This key commitment of ontological individualism is a reaction to the prospect of structural determinism—or the claim that social structures can determine human agency in a way that conflicts with the assumptions of human autonomy and rationality. The reality of structural determinism would entail that we are not the autonomous rational beings we take ourselves to be, but rather pawns of unrecognized social forces. Pettit endorses ontological individualism. He is mainly concerned with theoretical projects in the social sciences that posit social laws that contradict the folk psychological view of ourselves as autonomous rational beings.<sup>160</sup> Pettit's commitment to his version of ontological individualism seems to be hermeneutically based. He believes that the folk psychological view of human beings as rational autonomous beings is necessary to render our actions and others' actions intelligible. In other words, this folk psychological view is central to how we make sense of ourselves. Pettit defends a positive ontological claim about human beings—we are rational autonomous agents. At the same time, this ontological claim has explanatory implications. It is because we are rational autonomous agents that our actions must be explained in terms of our rationally consistent beliefs and desires, rather than in terms of social laws that bypass our agential control. In other words, Pettit's ontological individualism is linked to a particular way of explaining human action. In order to fully develop the implications of this position, I will now turn to the debate between methodological individualists and holists.

---

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 82

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

### 6.1.2. The Methodological Individualism-Holism Debate

The ontological debate between individualists and holists is about the ontological features of social structures (do they exist over and above individual agents?) and human beings (are we rational autonomous agents?). By contrast, the methodological debate revolves around social explanation. Should social explanations focus on individuals (and their beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.) or should they focus on social structures? For the methodological individualist, individuals are the foundation of social explanation. Individuals are autonomous agents who shape the world around them. The social world, including social structures, is the product of the beliefs, desires, intentions and actions of individuals. On the other hand, methodological holists focus on social structures in order to account for the features of individuals. For the holist, the explanation of action does not end at the level of individuals. There is a further question—namely, how do individuals get the beliefs, desires and intentions that they have? For the holist, the answer to this explanatory question must make reference to social structures.

Notice how the methodological individualist's position relies on a key claim of ontological individualism—that human beings are rational autonomous agents. We can explain the social world in terms of individuals and their beliefs and desires because we can draw on psychological theories that explain all human action as following rationally in light of individuals' beliefs and desires. In addition, social explanation can focus exclusively on individuals because their autonomy means that no factors outside their psychological states can constrain their agency. In other words, individuals are not the product of society; they are free agents that shape the social world. Social structures cannot interfere with their sphere of rational autonomy, and therefore cannot be explanatory. The folk psychological view of human beings as autonomous rational agents adds explanatory plausibility to methodological individualism. However, its biggest

contribution is its common sense appeal. As Pettit makes clear, thinking of ourselves as rational autonomous agents (and here the claim of autonomy is perhaps the most important) is key to our self-understanding. I bring up this point because the assumption of human autonomy and the common sense appeal it grants to methodological individualism is rarely acknowledged in the debate. Moreover, the individualist's commitment to individual autonomy also helps explain her distaste for holist explanations.

Methodological individualism is the position that the social world can be fully explained in terms of individuals, and their beliefs, desires, and intentions. For the individualists, all explanations that make reference to social structures must be dispensed with. This is because holist explanations, also known as structural explanations, are redundant. The claim that structural explanations are redundant is often framed in terms of intertheoretic reducibility.<sup>161</sup> Methodological individualists claim that all social scientific explanations that appeal to social structures are reducible to claims about individual psychology. As mentioned earlier, individualists believe that all social structures are the creation of human agents. In addition, they reject that social structures can interfere with the autonomy of individual agents. Whatever effect social structures have on the social world, they are completely due to the autonomous agency of the individuals that bring them to life. Thus, any structural explanation is reducible to an individualist explanation by translating all references to social structures in terms of individuals, and their beliefs, desires and intentions. As such, structural explanations are redundant and must be dispensed with. Only individualist explanations are needed to make sense of the social world.

Methodological holists argue that social structures play a non-redundant explanatory role in social explanation. They reject the individualist's claim that social explanation must stop at the

---

<sup>161</sup> Zahle and Collin, "Introduction," 7.

level of individuals. Rather, they seek to explain the ways in which social structures shape the beliefs, desires, and intentions that form the basis of individual agency. There are two positions available to the methodological holist.<sup>162</sup> First, she could adopt a strong methodological holism (SMH) that mirrors the methodological individualism position. According to this view, there is no need for individualist explanations because individuals' beliefs, desires, intentions, and actions are fully determined by social structures.<sup>163</sup> In this view, the rational autonomous agent that forms the basis of methodological individualism is a mere illusion. Human beings are not free agents who shape the social world in accordance with their beliefs and desires. Rather, their beliefs and desires are a result of their position in social structures. Individuals and their intentional properties are the consequence, rather than the cause, of the social structures in which they participate. According to SMH, individualist explanations are not only redundant, but also misleading. They posit autonomous agents as having explanatory power, when in fact they are mere pawns of social structures, which is where the real explanatory lies. Every aspect of the social world can be explained in terms of its position in the totality of social structures. Individualist explanations must be dispensed with.

The second option is weak methodological holism (WMH). In this view, individuals and their beliefs, desires, and intentions are *influenced*, rather than *determined*, by social structures. Like SMH, WMH rejects that individuals are the end of explanation. We must examine the ways in which social structures shape the beliefs, desires, and actions of individuals. However, WMH does not deny that these features of individuals can play a self-standing role in social explanation. This is because individual beliefs, desires and actions are not fully determined by social structures.

---

<sup>162</sup> I get the distinction between and strong and weak methodological holism from Ibid., 5.

<sup>163</sup> The following description of strong methodological holism draws extensively from Susan James, *The Content of Social Explanation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 79-117.

For any given individual, it is possible that their position in a social structure will not be predictive of their beliefs, desires and actions. Since the influence of social structures is not all-encompassing, individuals retain a constrained autonomy. Their actions may be constrained or motivated by their position in social structures, but they are still subject to their intentional agency. Because they retain a constrained autonomy, individuals have the potential to change the social structures that shape their agency. Social structures themselves are not the end of explanation. We must also ask ourselves how these structures are constantly shaped by the constrained agency of individuals. For all these reasons, individualist explanations can be illuminating in their own right and must not be dispensed with.

Although WMH recognizes the validity of individualist explanations, it still puts emphasis on structural explanations. This preference for structural explanations is a matter of explanatory interest.<sup>164</sup> In other words, it is a question of what matters most to us as we try to understand the social world. Individualist explanations are mainly interested in understanding individuals as autonomous agents whose choices and actions shape the world. (Weak) structural explanations are mainly interested in understanding how social structures shape (but not determine) the agency of individuals.<sup>165</sup> Methodological individualists and strong methodological holists reject the validity of structural explanations and individualist explanations, respectively. By contrast, weak methodological holists recognizes the importance of both explanatory projects, while choosing to focus on structural explanation in light of their particular explanatory interests.

I endorse weak methodological holism. As stated earlier, my particular explanatory interest is to develop the following structural explanation: structural racism explains the durability of racial

---

<sup>164</sup> James, *The Content of Social Explanation*, 177.

<sup>165</sup> From now on, all references to structural explanation will be of the weak kind. I am not interested in structural explanations that posit individuals as fully determined by social structures.

inequality in the U.S. We now have a good idea of what structural explanations are—they seek to explain how social structures shape the agency of individuals. In light of my explanatory interests, it would be helpful to look at structural explanations of a similar kind—namely, those that seek to explain how social structures influence agents to participate in the reproduction of durable group-based inequalities. Thankfully, we have already discussed such an explanation at several points in this dissertation—I am referring to the case of Lisa, the working mother (see 2.5, 3.2.2, and 3.3). One way to interpret this case is as a structural explanation of how sexist social structures influence women in Lisa's position to make choices that reinforce gender inequality. I start the following section by taking a deeper look at this structural explanation in order to extract lessons about how social structures influence individual agency.

## **6.2. What is a Structural Explanation?**

I first introduced the case of Lisa, the working mother, in the context of a discussion of how social structures influence the behavior of individual agents (see 2.5.). There, I argued that social structures shapes individual agency in three ways. First, social structures *constrain* the agency of individuals by making certain options unavailable or less desirable. Second, social structures influence the agency of individuals by *enabling* them to perform roles, and have duties and prerogatives that would be unavailable to them outside the structure. Third, social structures *motivate* individuals towards particular courses of action in virtue of their position in the structure. Now that we know that structural explanations focus on how social structures shape the agency of individuals, we can conclude that there are at least three ways in which structural explanation may work: via structural constraint, via structural enablement, and via structural motivation. In the following section, I will revisit the case of Lisa, the working mother, in order to gain insight into how structural explanations work.



### 6.2.1. Lisa's Case Revisited

As developed by Cudd (see 3.2.2, 3.3), Lisa's situation is a case of structural constraint. Lisa's decision to quit her job after having a baby was influenced by her membership in the oppressed social group 'women'. As a woman, Lisa faced sexist social structures that constrained her other options. The gender pay gap made the option of having her husband quit his job less desirable from a household finance perspective. The lack of affordable daycare in her community made the option of leaving the baby in daycare practically unavailable. Thus, Lisa's choice to quit her job was not fully free—it was constrained by the sexist social structures around her.

Haslanger's take on the Lisa case sheds further light on how social structures constrain individual agency.<sup>166</sup> According to Haslanger, structural explanations explain the actions of individual agents by *situating* them within positions in a social structure. Social structures constrain the agency of individuals in virtue of the place they occupy within a structure. In light of the structural constraints of Lisa's situation (i.e. a gender wage gap, lack of affordable childcare, etc.), Haslanger argues that a structural explanation of Lisa's behavior would be more illuminating than an individualist explanation. The individualist explanation would explain Lisa's quitting her job by referring to Lisa's beliefs and desires that gave rise to her decision to quit her job. Such an explanation would go as follows. Lisa quit her job because she *decided* to do so, and she decided to do so because she *believed* it would be best for her family and she *wanted* what was best for her family. Even if we could fill out more details of the psychological states that led Lisa to quit her job, Haslanger argues that this kind of explanation would always remain incomplete. What is missing from the individualist explanation of Lisa's behavior is the social structures that she is a

---

<sup>166</sup> Haslanger, "Structural Explanation"

part of and that constrain her agency. In order to fully explain Lisa's behavior, we should shift the focus of explanation to those structures.

According to Haslanger, a structural explanation of Lisa's behavior will start by situating Lisa as an occupier of the mother/wife position in a complex social structure of family/work relations. This social structure includes facts about human (infant) dependency, a stable framework of gender relations, and a particular wage-labor system. Qua occupier of the mother/wife position in this highly constraining social structure, Lisa's options for solving the childcare problem were severely limited—only some options were genuine possibilities. For instance, Larry was not going to quit his job (because it was not in the best interest of the family's income), her employer was not going to provide childcare, and she couldn't leave Lulu at home alone. These structural constraints limit Lisa's possibility space—her choice architecture—to the point where "quitting is [her] only real option".<sup>167</sup>

For Haslanger, this is compatible with her action being rational and autonomous. That is to say, this structural explanation is compatible with weak methodological holism. As an individual, Lisa was free to choose otherwise (e.g. she could have left Larry and Lulu), but as a mother/spouse in a sexist structure of family/work relations, that was not a real option for her. In fact, given the structural constraints of her situation, it was rational for her to choose to quit her job. This illustrates another benefit of structural explanations; they unveil the unjust effects of social structures that make it rational for individuals to make choices that keep them subordinate. In making this constrained choice, Lisa not only incurs the harms associated with becoming economically dependent on her husband, she also unwittingly contributes to the reproduction of the gender pay gap. By quitting her job, Lisa reinforces the stereotype that women are unreliable

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 12.

workers who value family over career. As I discussed in 3.3. Cudd shows that the stereotype of women as unreliable workers constitutes a significant obstacle to closing the gender pay gap. Moreover, given that most working mothers in our society share Lisa's agential constraints, they also tend to make the same constrained choice, which further entrenches the economic oppression of women as a whole. Cudd focuses her attention on this vicious cycle whereby women face structural constraints that coerce them into making individually rational choices (i.e. quitting their job after having a baby) that have suboptimal results for them as a group (i.e. reinforcing the gender pay gap). This vicious cycle, which stems from the structural constraints that women in Lisa's position face, explains the durability of women's economic oppression.

Without a structural explanation that highlights the constraints that the social structure of family/work relations imposes on women in Lisa's position, we would regard their situation as the result of their “free choices” flowing from their beliefs, desires, and personal preferences (e.g. women's desire to be caregivers, women's preference for family over career). On such an impoverished picture, we would regard the endurance of the gender pay gap as an unfortunate effect of women's autonomous agency and see no reason for moral or political concern. By contrast, a structural explanation highlights the fact that the gender pay gap is sustained by social structures that constrain women's agency. As I discussed in 3.4., insofar as women's subjection to these structural constraints qualifies as coercion, the situation described in Lisa's case is oppressive and a cause for moral and political concern.

According to Haslanger, another benefit of structural explanations is their stability. She claims that once we zero-in on structural constraints, it becomes easier to capture significant regularities in the behavior of individuals who occupy the same position in a social structure, even if their personal histories, psychologies and attitudes differ. That is to say, other women who, like

Lisa, occupy the position of wife/mother in the social structure of work-family relations will tend to quit their job after having a child because their choice architecture will be similarly constrained. Haslanger's structural explanation captures a stable pattern in the choices of similarly situated women, even if their individual psychological states differ widely. By contrast, an individualist explanation would be unable to explain the stability of this pattern in women's choices because the relevant psychological states (e.g. beliefs, desires, and preferences) will vary widely from woman to woman. Therefore, when it comes to explaining stable patterns of individual behavior in the social world, the stability of structural explanations make them preferable to individualist explanations.

#### 6.2.2. How do Structural Explanations Work?

There are many lessons to be learned from Cudd's and Haslanger's structural explanations of Lisa's situation. Both emphasize the role of structural constraint on influencing Lisa's behavior. To be precise, they both explain how social structures constrain the agency of women in Lisa's situation. This is an important feature of structural explanations. Strictly speaking, they do not aim to explain the behavior of individual agents, but rather tendencies in behavior among similarly situated agents. Haslanger makes this clear when she argues that the explanatory power of structural explanations comes from situating agents within positions in a social structure. Structural explanations do not aim to explain the behavior of any particular individual. The explanation may be right about Lisa's case, but there certainly are women who face the same structural constraints as her and choose not to quit their job. Even if similarly situated agents face the same structural constraints, their actions may differ because their agency is shaped rather than determined by the social structures that constrain them. As we discussed earlier, it is a fundamental commitment of

weak methodological holism that agents retain their autonomy in spite of the pressures exerted by social structures.

Even if structural explanations cannot account for the behavior of any given individual, they can still give us insight into how social structures shape the agency of individuals. This is because they can explain tendencies in behavior among similarly situated agents. As Haslanger argues, the explanatory power of structural explanations lies in unveiling stable patterns of action among agents whose personal histories, psychologies and attitudes may differ widely. In other words, structural explanations explain the *stability of behavioral tendencies* among similarly situated agents. Not all women in Lisa's situation will quit their job, but by and large, women facing similar structural constraints will tend to act as Lisa did. In addition, the stability of women's constrained choice to quit their job after having a baby contributes to the stability of the gender pay gap, and of women's oppression more generally. Thus, structural explanations also help explain the *stability of social patterns or arrangements* as a result of behavioral regularities among similarly situated agents. This insight is key for the structural explanation I aim to defend in this dissertation. My structural explanations will explain the stability of racial inequality by showing how racially oppressive social structures lead to stable patterns of action among racially privileged agents.

Earlier I introduced three possible causal mechanisms of structural explanation: structural constraint, structural enablement and structural motivation. Cudd's and Haslanger's structural explanations rely on the first of these mechanisms—namely, structural constraint. They explain the stability of the gender pay gap in terms of the structural constraints imposed on working mothers. This structural explanation is helpful for my purposes because it also explains the stability of group-based inequality. While I am interested in the stability of the inequality between racialized groups, Cudd and Haslanger are interested in the stability of the inequality between

gender groups—that is, between men and women. I find their structural explanations of the stability of gender inequality illuminating. However, the Lisa explanation focuses exclusively on the mechanism of structural constraint. This explanation does not address the other two mechanisms of structural explanation: structural enablement and structural motivation.

The explanation's emphasis on structural constraint is linked to its focus on the role of women in reproducing gender oppression. The explanation unveils how the social constraints that working mothers face lead them to act in ways that reproduce their own oppression. Since the explanation focuses on the victims of the system, it does not address the role that the beneficiaries of the gender pay gap play in its reproduction. For instance, the Lisa explanation has nothing to say about Lisa's male partner who got to keep his job and earn economic power over her. Thus, Cudd's and Haslanger's structural explanations offer an incomplete picture of how social structures shape individual agency. They focus on structural constraint, but do not address the mechanisms of structural enablement and structural motivation. In addition, the explanation emphasizes the causal contribution of the victims of the system, rather than that of its beneficiaries. This is not a criticism of Cudd's and Haslanger's explanations, which never claimed to offer a complete explanation of the durability of gender inequality. However, in my own structural explanation of the durability of racial inequality, I will explore a different (complementary) approach. Instead of focusing on the mechanism of structural constraint that Cudd and Haslanger so aptly lay out, I will focus on structural motivation. Instead of focusing on the actions of members of oppressed groups, I will emphasize the role that privileged agents play in the reproduction of group-based inequality.

### 6.2.3. A Preliminary Overview of my Structural Explanation

Applied to the domain of race, my structural explanation aims to show how racially oppressive social structures motivate agents positioned as white to act in ways that ensure the

durability of racial inequality. I am especially interested in the role that "well-meaning" whites (that is, whites who identify themselves as non-racist) play in the reproduction of racial inequality. Thus, my structural explanation aims to show how structural racism motivates "well-meaning" whites to participate in the maintenance of racial inequality. As we will see, privilege plays a key role in how racially oppressive social structures motivate "well meaning" whites to partake in the reproduction of racial inequality. As we know from our discussion of oppression (see 3, and especially 3.2.2), oppressive social structures grant unearned advantages to members of privileged groups. The material and psychological benefits that whites derive from structural racism form the backdrop of racial inequality. Once racially oppressive social structures create racial inequality in this way, whites (whether or not they regard themselves as racist) acquire an interest in maintaining the racial inequality from which they benefit. Whites' interest in the maintenance of racial inequality stems from their privileged position in racially oppressive social structures. This positional interest motivates agents positioned as white in racially oppressive social structures to act (or fail to act) so as to ensure the stability of racial inequality. This is my structural explanation in a nutshell. Before explaining each of its parts in more detail, I will introduce an example that will allow me to illustrate and narrow down my explanation.

### **6.3. The Riverview High Case**

The example I will use to illustrate my structural explanation is drawn from John Diamond and Amanda Lewis' recent sociological case study of the racial achievement gap in a Midwestern high school—Riverview High.<sup>168</sup> Focusing on this example will allow me to narrow down my explanation to a particular kind of durable racial inequality in the United States—the racial achievement gap. This gap refers to disparities in educational attainments (e.g. test scores, grade

---

<sup>168</sup> Lewis and Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions*.

point averages, high school and college completion rates) between white students and black and Latinx students. To add even more specificity, my structural explanation will focus on explaining the resilience of the racial achievement at a particular educational institution—Riverview High. This level of specificity will allow me to offer a more detailed description of the causal mechanisms whereby structural racism motivates "well-meaning" whites to reproduce the racial achievement gap. In other words, in order to show how structural racism explains the durability of racial inequality, I will focus on a more specific explanatory claim—how does structural racism explain the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High?

At the same time, the explanatory framework that I develop here will also be helpful in accounting for the reproduction of other kinds of racial inequality. The role of racial privilege in motivating "well-meaning" whites to reproduce racial inequality is not limited to the educational context. Moreover, the racial achievement gap has a significant impact on other social structures, such as the labor market and the criminal justice system. Racial disparity in educational attainment puts black and Latinx people at a disadvantage in a highly competitive U.S. labor market and contributes to high unemployment and underemployment rates among these groups. As a result, cash-strapped Latinx and black people in the U.S. are at an increased risk of getting involved with the criminal justice system—a problem compounded by various racist dynamics within this social structure, such as racial disparities in policing, arrests and sentencing. In other words, not only is the racial achievement gap an instance of racial inequality, it also contributes to the durability of racial inequality in other domains.



Having explained my reasoning for focusing on the racial achievement gap, I will now return to my description of the Riverview High case study.<sup>169</sup> Riverview High is a public high school located in Riverview, a suburban racially integrated Midwestern town. Riverview is a self-described diverse and progressive community, whose population is largely middle-class and prioritizes public schooling. As a result, Riverview High is a well-resourced school, with great facilities and experienced teachers. While the majority of the teachers are white, the share of black teachers has grown over the past few decades. The town's schools have been desegregated for decades, and many families choose to live in Riverview precisely because the schools are diverse. 90% of the students are black or white, in equal measure. The remaining 10% are mostly Latinx along with some Asian students. Not only is the school racially diverse, but students report significant cross-race interaction. Over 80% of students report that some or most of their friends are of a different race. While black and Latinx families lag behind white families financially, they still tend to be much better off than black and Latinx families living in the surrounding urban area. Unlike their peers in the surrounding under-resourced urban school district, black and Latinx students have access to state-of-the-art facilities, well-trained teachers, and a community of instructors and administrators who care deeply about closing the racial achievement gap.

All of these facts about Riverview High make it an ideal candidate for closing the racial achievement gap. However, there has been a consistent racial achievement gap for decades at Riverview High. The GPAs of white and Asian students are a full point higher than that of black and Latinx students. Standardized test scores follow the same racially disparate pattern. White students are more likely to attend college (90%) than black and Latinx students (60%).

---

<sup>169</sup> All the details of this description are drawn from the empirical findings in Diamond and Lewis, *Despite the Best Intentions*.

Furthermore, only 5% of white students end up in 2-year colleges, while 30% of black students and 40% of Latinx students attend 2-year colleges. What could explain the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High?

The explanation that I develop in this chapter is an application of the structural motivation explanation that I sketched in 6.2.3. In particular, I will explain the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High as the result of a racially oppressive social structure that motivates white parents at Riverview High to support school practices that maintain the racial achievement gap. The structural motivation of white parents to support these practices stems from their position of racial privilege within the structure. Of course, I still need to fill in many of the details of this explanation. At this point, I just want to highlight two points. First, the explanation I develop here is an example of how structural racism (i.e. racially oppressive social structures) can motivate agents who are socially positioned as white to participate in the reproduction of racial inequality. Second, my explanation of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High is based on the empirical findings of Diamond and Lewis' case study. As such, my explanation offers empirical justification to a foundational claim of this dissertation—namely, that the concept of structural racism is key to racial theorizing because it helps explain the durability of racial inequality.

### 6.3.1. Assessing Other Explanations of the Racial Achievement Gap at Riverview High

Before moving to my structural explanation, I will briefly discuss other prominent explanations of the racial achievement gap, which Diamond and Lewis show not to be helpful in explaining the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. The first is an explanation that focuses on the opportunity inequalities between the average white and black student. As a result of race-based economic equality and residential segregation, majority-white school districts have access

to more resources than majority-black districts. Public schools located in majority-white areas tend to offer their students access to better educational facilities, better-trained instructors, and a more rigorous curriculum. By contrast, public schools in majority-black areas tend to be under-resourced and are thus unable to offer their majority-black student body the same educational opportunities. In this account, the racial disparity in educational attainments is a result of the disparities in educational opportunities for the average white and black student. In turn, this opportunity gap stems from the combined effects of residential segregation and racial inequality on school district funding. This explanation of the racial achievement gap counts as a structural explanation in my framework. In particular, it is a structural constraint explanation. The racially oppressive social structures that cause residential segregation and economic racial inequality also lead to fewer educational opportunities for black students. This structurally caused opportunity inequality constrains the agency of black students by making it more difficult for them to perform well in school.

Diamond and Lewis highlight the importance of this "opportunity gap" explanation in accounting for the resilience of the racial achievement gap in the United States.<sup>170</sup> In fact, lay and academic discourse often points to this explanation as an example of how structural racism operates in the domain of education. While the racial opportunity gap helps explain the racial achievement gap in the United States as a whole, it is not useful in the Riverview High case. This is because Riverview High is a well-resourced school in a racially integrated community. In principle, black and white students have equal access to the outstanding educational opportunities that Riverview High has to offer. The fact that there still is a racial achievement gap at Riverview High indicates that residential segregation and resource disparities among school districts cannot

---

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 8.

fully account for the persistence of the racial achievement gap in the United States. A full-fledged explanation must also look at the social practices within institutions like Riverview High. In my case, I will emphasize the causal role of the tracking system in perpetuating the racial achievement gap. It is important to note that the structural explanation I develop in the following sections is complementary to the aforementioned "opportunity gap" explanation, which has been shown to partially explain the racial achievement gap.

Diamond and Lewis consider a second prominent explanation of the racial achievement gap that may seem better suited to the Riverview High case. This explanation flows from a popular narrative that explains the racial disparities in educational attainments as a result of black students facing peer pressure not to take school seriously. This so called "acting white" hypothesis contends that black students who do well in school face accusations of "acting white" by their black peers. In order to avoid this label, black students prefer to disengage from school, which explains the racial disparity in educational attainments. The acting white hypothesis has become highly popular in lay discourse and is often considered as *the* explanation for the racial achievement gap among teachers and the general public.<sup>171</sup> Drawing on the same logic as the acting white hypothesis, the "oppositional culture" explanation of the racial achievement gap is prominent in academic discourse. As advanced by John Ogbu, the oppositional culture explanation is a structural constraint explanation.<sup>172</sup> Ogbu argues that black people's experiences of structural exclusion and discrimination undermine the black community's commitment to mainstream social structures like the education system.<sup>173</sup> In response to their systematic experience of oppression, black people develop a culture of opposition to school, which they come to see as a "white domain". Due to this

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 19.

oppositional culture, doing well in school is seen as "acting white" among black students. This oppositional culture constrains the agency of high-achieving black students, who experience peer pressure to disengage from school, lest they be accused of acting white. Faced with these structural constraints, black students tend to adopt an anti-school attitude, which ultimately undermines their academic success. This pattern of behavior among black students leads to reduced black educational achievement and explains the racial achievement gap. Briefly put, the oppositional culture explanation understands the racial achievement gap as resulting from the structurally constrained choices of black students to disengage from school in order to avoid the social penalties associated with being perceived as "acting white" by their black peers.

Both the acting white hypothesis and the oppositional culture explanation rely on a monolithic conception of black culture and the black community as fundamentally opposed to schooling. In fact, recent studies show the opposite to be true.<sup>174</sup> Black students express interest in attending college just as much as white students. Black students also spend the same amount of time (or more time) on homework, generally possess more pro-school attitudes than white students, and have similar rates of absenteeism compared to white students of the same social class. Moreover, black students who do well in school are not socially penalized for "acting white"; rather, they tend to be amongst the most popular with their peers. In addition to its flawed assumptions about black attitudes on education, there is little empirical support for the explanatory power of the acting white hypothesis.<sup>175</sup>

Recently, some proponents of the acting white hypothesis have conceded that their explanation fails to explain racial achievement asymmetries in general. Instead, they now claim

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 20.

that the popularity penalty associated with "acting white" only activates in integrated schools like Riverview. Diamond and Lewis spend an entire chapter showing that the acting white hypothesis plays no explanatory role in the racial achievement gap at Riverview High.<sup>176</sup> In fact, they find that black students at Riverview High are more committed to their educational achievement than white students. While black students and parents recognize the prevalence of racial discrimination at Riverview, their reaction is to value education as a tool for challenging discrimination. Thus, the opposite of the oppositional culture explanation is true at Riverview. The experience of systematic racial discrimination leads black students and parents at Riverview to double down on their commitment to education attainments. Despite its lack of empirical validation, the oppositional culture explanation of the racial achievement gap is *prima facie* compatible with the tracking system explanation I develop in later sections.

I have now discussed two prominent explanations of the racial achievement gap that fail to account for the racial disparity in educational attainments at Riverview High. What do these explanations have in common? And how do they differ from the explanation I sketched in 6.2.3? First, they are both structural explanations that work via structural constraints. On the opportunity gap explanation, the racial disparity in access to educational resources constrains black students' capacity to perform as well as white students. On the oppositional culture explanation, the alleged anti-school culture in the black community constrains black students' ability to do well in school, lest their peers perceive them as "acting white". Both explanations also focus on the causal role of black students in reproducing the racial achievement gap. This is not surprising given that most academic explanations of the racial achievement gap start from some version of the question "what

---

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-44.

is going on with the black kids?"<sup>177</sup> In this respect, just like Cudd's and Haslanger's explanations of the gender pay gap, these explanations center on the victims of the system rather than its beneficiaries.

By contrast, my structural explanation highlights the role of white parents in maintaining the racial achievement gap. In doing so, I shift my explanatory focus to the agents who benefit from the racial achievement gap at Riverview—white parents and their kids. This shift in perspective also leads me to home in on the mechanism of structural motivation. I am particularly interested in explaining how social structures motivate Riverview white parents to become involved in the reproduction of the racial achievement gap. That said, my explanation of the racial achievement gap is perfectly compatible with alternative explanations that emphasize the causal role of black and Latinx students and parents. Diamond and Lewis identify two racialized school practices that play a key role in the reproduction of the racial achievement gap at Riverview—the practice of discipline and the tracking system.<sup>178</sup> I have already discussed how the racialized practice of discipline works to reinforce the racial achievement gap at Riverview High (see 4.2). In the explanation I develop in this chapter, I will focus on the tracking system. What is the tracking system and how does it contribute to the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High?

### 6.3.2. The Tracking System and its Role in Reproducing the Racial Achievement Gap at Riverview

The tracking system refers to the social practice of assigning students to different instructional levels. At Riverview High, the tracking system has three instructional levels—basic, honors, and advanced placement (AP). Students are placed in each track on the basis of teacher

---

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., chs. 3 and 4, respectively.

recommendations, grades and test scores. The rationale for this system is that it allows students to get placed in the appropriate track based on their academic performance. As a result, each student will receive appropriate instruction and support according to their particular academic needs. By tailoring the educational experience of students in this way, the tracking system aims to enhance the educational attainments of all students.

Unfortunately, the tracking system at Riverview does not work in this way. The assignment of students into different tracks is not made purely on the basis of their academic performance. Teachers have lower expectations of black students. As a result, they perceive black students as less smart and naturally suited to the lowest track, regardless of their actual academic performance.<sup>179</sup> In addition, white parents were more likely to successfully contest their children's placement in lower tracks. While black parents were less likely to challenge their kids' placement, those who did faced resistance from school staff, which was not the case for white parents.<sup>180</sup> As a result of this racialized process of track placement, Riverview—a seemingly racially integrated school—reintroduces racial segregation in its classrooms. Although whites constitute less than 50% of the student body at Riverview, 90% of AP-class students and 80% of honors-class students are white.<sup>181</sup> By contrast, two-thirds of the students in basic level classes were black or Latinx. This racialized distribution of track placements leads to a racialized distribution of educational resources and opportunities at Riverview High. Lower level classes provide a less rigorous educational experience. Students in basic classes (the majority of whom are black or Latinx) have less experienced teachers and a less challenging curriculum.<sup>182</sup> Moreover, since basic classes are

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 107-108.



majority-black and Latinx spaces, teachers have low expectations of students in this track. Research shows that the educational achievement differences between tracks grow over time: students in higher tracks benefit from access to enhanced curricula, better teachers and other perks (e.g. grade inflation).

Thus, the tracking system at Riverview has the opposite of its intended effect. Rather than enhancing the educational achievements of black and Latinx students, it widens the racial achievement gap. Black and Latinx students perform consistently worse than their white peers not because of differences in skill or dedication, but because they have access to fewer educational resources due to their track placement. As we have seen, initial track placements are not entirely based on student performance. Teachers' racialized perceptions of student's academic skills and of "who belongs in which track", along with the unequal influence that white and black parents have in challenging their kids' placement, lead to a racialized hierarchy in the tracking system with white students at the top and black and Latinx students at the bottom. Once black and Latinx students are placed in the basic track, they become excluded from having access to the better educational resources and opportunities available to mostly white students in the honors and AP tracks. As a result, black and Latinx students find it extremely difficult to attain the academic performance required to move up to higher tracks. Thus, the tracking system at Riverview largely explains the racial achievement gap by locking in the majority of black and Latinx students in lower-level classes, thus preventing them from having access to the same educational resources and opportunities as their white peers.

By the same token, the tracking system grants systematic educational advantages to white students at Riverview. White students benefit from the racialized process of track placement by being disproportionately placed in honors and AP classes. Once they are placed in these higher

tracks, they have access to the best educational resources and opportunities Riverview has to offer, which allows them to maximize their educational achievements. To apply a concept I developed in 3.2.2, white students occupy a racially privileged position at Riverview High. Unsurprisingly, white parents at Riverview are highly committed to the tracking system. As Diamond and Lewis show, white parents have consistently blocked any attempts at reforming the tracking system because they want to maintain the educational advantages that their kids gain from the system.<sup>183</sup> The desire to maintain their children's privileged position within the structure motivates white parents to support (and resist attempts at reforming) the tracking system, even if they are fully aware that the current system harms black and Latinx students.<sup>184</sup> In other words, white parents have a positional interest in supporting the tracking system

### 6.3.3. Positional Interests and their Application to the Riverview High Case

As I briefly discussed in 2.5, positional interests are interests that stem from an agent's position in a social structure. Like other interests, positional interests motivate human action. To be precise, positional interests attach primarily to social positions in a social structure and only attach to individuals insofar (and as long) as they occupy a position in a social structure. Thus, positional interests can motivate the behavior of individual agents who occupy a social position within a social structure. To continue with our current example, the Riverview High structure includes social positions such as white student, white parent, black student, black parent, teacher, principal, and so on. Each of these social positions have a set of positional interests attached to them, which become motivational for agents who occupy each respective social position. Some of these positional interests may be in conflict and thus motivate socially positioned agents to pursue

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 137-140.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 133.

conflicting courses of action. For example, white parents have a positional interest in the continuation of the tracking system, whereas black parents have a positional interest in abolishing or at least reforming the system.

This example also shows one way in which positional interests motivate individual behavior—namely, via material rewards. White parents have a positional interest in preserving the tracking system (and are motivated to act on that interest) because the system grants them material rewards. Specifically, it ensures that their children have access to the best educational resources and opportunities Riverview has to offer. More generally, securing access to material and psychological resources (see 3.2.2) is a key source of the motivational power of positional interests. Agents who occupy a privileged position in a social structure (and thus benefit from an unequal distribution of the structure's resources) have a positional interest in maintaining their privileged access to those resources. This positional interest motivates privileged agents to defend the social practices that those material rewards. This is precisely what we see in the Riverview High case. White parents occupy a social position that grants them and their children privileged access to the best educational resources at Riverview. Furthermore, the tracking system plays a key causal role in ensuring white parents' privileged access to these resources. Due to their occupying this privileged social position, white parents acquire a positional interest in the maintenance of the current tracking system, which motivates them to block all attempts at reforming it.

The concept of positional interest is key to the explanation I develop here because it explains the stable tendency among white parents at Riverview to defend the tracking system, which in turn explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. What explains white parents' enduring support for the tracking system is their positional interest in maintaining

the educational benefits their children derive from the system. Having clarified the explanatory role of the tracking system and positional interests in accounting for the durability of the racial achievement gap, I now move to explain the link between structural racism and the explanation I develop here. After all, my explanation of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview is meant to illustrate the explanatory power of structural racism. So, how does structural racism fit into the explanation I have been sketching so far?

#### 6.3.4. Riverview High, Structural Racism and Emergent Properties

The explanatory claim I develop in this chapter could be stated in the following way: structural racism explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. As I argue in chapter 4, structural racism refers to racially oppressive social structures. Thus, a more precise version of the explanation I develop here is that Riverview High—insofar as it is a racially oppressive social structure—explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. To add even more precision, I will argue that a particular emergent property of the Riverview High structure—namely, the positional interests of white parents—explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. In clarifying my explanation, I have introduced two new important claims. First, Riverview High is a racially oppressive social structure. Second, the positional interest of white parents is an emergent property of the Riverview High structure. I will tackle each of these in turn.

Why should we think of Riverview High as racially oppressive social structure, and thus as an instance of structural racism? To answer this question I will look back at Cudd's four conditions of oppression and see whether Riverview High fulfills them (see 4). Cudd's first condition of oppression is the presence of harm caused by a social structure. Riverview High is a social structure insofar as it is a network of social relations between social positions (e.g. teachers,

administrators, students, parents), as well as relations between these social positions and the material world (e.g. students reading textbooks, a chemistry teacher using lab materials to explain a concept). As we saw in 4.2 and 6.3.2, Riverview High is a social structure that harms black and Latinx students through its social practices of school discipline and the tracking system. Both of these practices have systematically detrimental effects on the racial achievements of black and Latinx students. This description shows that Riverview High not only fulfills the structural harm condition, but also the social group condition (i.e. the harm is inflicted on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm). Riverview High inflicts a structural *harm* on members of the *racialized groups* black and Latinx. Riverview High also fulfills the privilege condition (i.e. there is another social group that benefits from the structural harm). At Riverview, white students and white parents (i.e. members of the racialized group white) benefit from the very same practice that harms black and Latinx students, i.e. the tracking system. Lastly, Riverview High fulfills the coercion condition (i.e. there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about harm). According to Cudd, a social structure is coercive if it "unfairly limits the choices of some group of persons relative to other groups in society".<sup>185</sup> As we saw in 6.3.2, the tracking system at Riverview High unfairly limits the options of black students to get into honors and AP classes and to benefit from the better educational resources and opportunities available to students in these classes. Moreover, the limited options of black students to get into upper-level classes is correlated with the increased options among white students to get into these classes. In addition, in light of the educational disadvantages that students in lower tracks face, the tracking system also unfairly limits the options of black students to improve their educational attainments relative to white students. In other words, Riverview High via its tracking system unfairly limits the options of

---

<sup>185</sup> Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 131.

black students to bridge the racial achievement gap. Therefore, Riverview High fulfills all four conditions of oppression and ought to be considered a racially oppressive social structure.

The second claim under consideration is that the positional interest of white parents in maintaining the tracking system is an emergent property of the Riverview High structure. In order to back up this claim, I must first say more about the concept of emergent properties. According to Dave Elder-Vass, emergent properties are properties of entities or wholes that are not possessed by its parts apart from their participation in the whole.<sup>186</sup> For example, water has properties that neither hydrogen nor oxygen possess when they are not combined together to form the whole water. We can put out a fire with water, which is not the case for hydrogen or oxygen. Water freezes at zero degrees Celcius, whereas hydrogen and oxygen would be gases at that temperature. One reason to care about emergent properties is that they allow us to explain how an entity can have causal powers that are not just the sum of the causal powers of its parts.<sup>187</sup> An entity has emergent causal powers (i.e. causal powers in its own right) when its causal powers cannot be attributed to its parts independently of their participation in the entity. For instance, putting out a fire is an emergent causal power of water insofar as the parts that make up the whole water (i.e. hydrogen and oxygen) do not have this power unless they are combined to form water.

Elder-Vass applies the logic of emergence to social structures. He argues that social structures have emergent properties (i.e. properties in their own right) in virtue of the relations among the socially positioned agents that make up the structure. These properties of social structures are emergent because they are not possessed by the individual agents apart from their participation in the social structure. Moreover, the emergent properties of social structures can

---

<sup>186</sup> Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 4.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

have a causal impact in the social world. In particular, the emergent properties of social structures can cause behavioral regularities among agents that participate in the structure. In what follows, I will argue that positional interests are an example of the emergent properties of social structures. As such, the positional interests shed light on the explanatory power of social structures.

As I discussed in 6.3.3, positional interests are interests that attach to social positions in a social structure. In the Riverview High case, the positional interest in preserving the tracking system attaches to the social position 'white parent'. White parents at Riverview have a positional interest in maintaining the tracking system because their children derive material rewards from that system. In other words, this positional interest is the result of how participants in the structure (i.e. teachers, students, parents, administrators) coordinate their management of the school's educational resources through social practices like the tracking system. Since the tracking system ensures a distribution of Riverview's educational resources that systematically privileges white students to the detriment of black students, white parents develop a positional interest in blocking any attempts at changing the system. Thus, this positional interest emerges out of the racially unequal distribution of educational resources at Riverview—in other words, this positional interest is a property of the racially oppressive social structure that is Riverview High. Furthermore, this positional interest has causal powers—it ensures a stable behavioral pattern among Riverview white parents to defend the tracking system, which in turn contributes to the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. Finally, this positional interest is not just a property of the Riverview High structure, but an emergent property. That is to say, it is a property that is not possessed by the individual agents that make up the structure apart from their participation in the structure. This is evident from my definition of positional interests as interests that attach to social positions in a social structure. White parents at Riverview have a positional interest in maintaining

the tracking system only to the extent that they occupy a social position that benefits from the system. If these agents leave Riverview, this positional interest will no longer apply to them. Thus, this positional is an emergent property of the Riverview structure and is only a property of individual agents insofar as they partake in the structure.

I have now clarified the two claims I introduced at the beginning of this section. First, I argued that Riverview High is a racially oppressive social structure. Second, I argued that the positional interest of white parents in maintaining the tracking system is an emergent property of the Riverview High structure. With these two pieces, the explanatory puzzle is finally complete. I will now be able to connect structural racism to my explanation of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. A more refined sketch of my explanation would go as follows. Racially oppressive social structures (e.g. Riverview High) explain the durability of racial inequality (e.g. the racial achievement gap) insofar as their emergent properties (e.g. white parents' positional interest in maintaining the tracking system) motivate racially privileged agents (e.g. white parents at Riverview High) to support social practices that reproduce racial inequality (e.g. the tracking system). I develop this explanation in full in the following section.

#### **6.4. How Structural Racism Explains Durable Racial Inequality: The Riverview High Case**

I will unpack my structural explanation of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High in two parts. First, I will briefly clarify the explanandum of the explanation—that is, the social fact in need of explanation. Secondly, I will unpack the explanans—that is, the set of causal factors that account for the explanandum. For this second task, I will bring together all the explanatory factors introduced in 6.3 into a complete explanation of how structural racism contributes to the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. In this way, I will finally be able to



vindicate my explanatory claim that structural racism can help explain the durability of racial inequality.

#### 6.4.1. What is the Explanandum?

In 6.2.2, I argued that structural explanations address at least two kinds of explananda: the stability of behavioral tendencies among similarly situated agents, and the stability of social patterns or arrangements. The explanandum I tackle here is of the second kind. My ultimate aim is to explain the stability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. In the context of explaining the stability of this social pattern, I will also explain the stable tendency among Riverview white parents to support the racialized tracking system. As it turns out, structural racism explains white parents' reliable support for the tracking system, which in turn explains the stability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. To the extent that my explanation accounts for the inequality-supporting behavior of white parents at Riverview, I must emphasize once again that structural explanations do not explain the behavior of any given individual (see 6.2.2). Not all white parents whose children benefit from the tracking system support and defend that practice. Thus, for some white parents at Riverview, it will not be true that their racial privilege motivates them to participate in the reproduction of the racial achievement gap. This is the expected result given that social structures do not determine individual behavior (see 6.1.2). Instead, structural explanations account for *behavioral tendencies* among agents who share a similar position within a social structure. In the Riverview case, my structural explanation accounts for the reliable tendency among white parents to support the racialized tracking system. For the sake of the explanation, it does not matter whether this or that parent supports the tracking system. What matters is that the structure of racial privilege at Riverview motivates a critical majority of white

parents to support the tracking system, which in turn explains the stability of the racial achievement gap.

Notice that the explanandum is the *stability* of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. Thus, I do not seek to explain the *origin* of the gap—in other words, how it got started. Nor do I aim to account for the *presence* of the gap at Riverview. Rather, my focus is on explaining why the gap has endured for so long. In that sense, my explanatory project is similar to Cudd's endurance question. My aim is to explain why the racial achievement gap at Riverview is so long-lasting. The endurance of the racial achievement gap at Riverview is especially puzzling because Riverview has the ideal conditions for closing the gap. Riverview is a racially integrated school where black students have access to state-of-the-art facilities and well-trained teachers. Despite the lack of racial diversity among teachers and administrators, they care deeply about closing the racial achievement gap and have taken several steps towards that goal. Moreover, white parents at Riverview identify themselves as progressive and committed to racial diversity. They are what we would call well-meaning white liberals. Against this backdrop, it is certainly puzzling that the racial achievement gap at Riverview has remained stable for decades. My explanation tackles this puzzling situation by showing how structural racism motivates agents socially positioned as white—including well-meaning white parents—to participate in the reproduction of racial inequality. While my explanation here is tailored to explaining the racial inequality in educational attainments at Riverview, the same explanatory framework can be used to explain the durability of racial inequality more generally.

#### 6.4.2. What is the Explanans?

At the most general level, structural racism is the explanans of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. My task in this section is to spell out the underlying causal

mechanisms that allow structural racism to have this explanatory power. As I argue in 6.3.2, my explanation will focus on the causal role of the tracking system in reinforcing the racial achievement gap at Riverview. The tracking system contributes to the racial disparity in educational achievements by instituting a racialized hierarchy in the placement of students into different tracks. Although Riverview High is a racially integrated school from the perspective of its student body (90% of students are black or white, in equal measure), the tracking system reintroduces segregation in the classroom. White students are disproportionately represented in honors and AP classes, while black students are disproportionately represented in the basic classes. This racialized hierarchy in tracking placements leads to a racialized distribution of Riverview's educational resources and opportunities. Students in honors and AP tracks have access to better teachers, better facilities, and a more rigorous curriculum than students in the basic track. In addition to their privileged access to Riverview's educational resources, (mostly white) students in the higher tracks benefit from grade weights, which grants them a half point GPA boost in each class they take.<sup>188</sup> Relatedly, (mostly white) students in higher tracks also benefit from grade inflation because of pressure from (mostly white) parents.<sup>189</sup> Given all these educational privileges for (mostly white) honors and AP students, it is not surprising that their educational attainments are consistently better than those of (mostly black) students in the basic track. Moreover, the unequal access to educational resources and opportunity makes it extremely difficult for students in the basic track to move to higher tracks. In fact, the tracking system widens the achievement gap between black and white students throughout their high school years.

---

<sup>188</sup> Diamond and Lewis, *Despite the Best Intentions*, 135.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

The track placement of students is not based solely on prior academic achievement. Teacher recommendations play a key role in tracking assignments. However, teachers' decisions of who to recommend for higher tracks are racially biased because of their racialized perception of black students as less capable and not committed to school. Thus, even high-achieving black students face many obstacles to join honors and AP classes. By contrast, even those white students who are initially placed in the lower track are likely to be re-assigned to a higher track because of parental pressure on school officials. Black parents are less likely to contest track placements, but even when they do, they are far less likely to succeed than white parents. The few black students who manage to join the higher tracks face many obstacles that prevent them from taking full advantage of the educational resources and opportunities therein. Because of the segregated nature of the tracking system, black students in honors and AP classes are often the only non-white student and tend to experience racial isolation.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, it is common for black students in upper-level classes to experience microaggressions from teachers and their white peers.<sup>191</sup> These negative experiences negatively affect the emotional well-being and academic performance of high-achieving black students, which further cements the racial achievement gap at Riverview.

We can now see that racialized nature of the tracking system, as well as its causal contribution to the racial achievement gap, is a result of the social practices of socially positioned agents (e.g. teachers, white parents, white students, black parents, black students) who make up the Riverview structure. Thus, an explanation of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview could focus on the social practices of teachers (e.g. their racially biased track placements), black students (e.g. their constrained access to upper-level classes and the educational

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 100-102.

resources therein), and so on. As I have discussed earlier, my explanation centers the role of privileged agents in reproducing racial inequality. In particular, I am interested in how white parents contribute to the maintenance of the racialized tracking system, and in so doing, ensure the reproduction of the racial achievement gap.

I have already shown that the racialized tracking system explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. The next step in the explanation is to show what motivates white parents to participate in the maintenance of the racialized tracking system. As I show in 6.3.3, white parents at Riverview have a positional interest in maintaining the racialized tracking system because their children benefit from the system. This interest is positional because it stems from white parents' (and their children's) position of racial privilege within a racially oppressive social structure—Riverview High (see 6.3.4). White parents at Riverview have this positional interest only to the extent that their position within the structure allows them to benefit from the structure's racially unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities. These agents would not have this positional interest if they were socially positioned as black parents instead, or if Riverview High stopped distributing its educational resources along racial lines. Thus, white parents' positional interest in maintaining the tracking system is not a property of the individual agents who happen to occupy the social position 'white parent'. Rather, this positional interest is an emergent property of a racially oppressive social structure—Riverview High (see 6.3.4). This point is important because it entails that whatever causal power this positional interest has, is a causal power of the Riverview High structure.

So what causal power do positional interests have? As I have argued throughout this chapter, positional interests are one way in which social structures *influence* individual behavior. For agents who occupy the position 'white parent' at Riverview, the interest attached to that

position *motivates* them to block any attempts at reforming the system. Given my commitment to weak methodological holism (see 6.1.2), I deny that the motivational power of positional interests can cause any given individual to act in a certain way. Positional interests motivate the agency of socially positioned individuals, but it does not determine their choices. Thus, if we are to ascribe a causal power to positional interests, it is better to think of them as causing behavioral tendencies among similarly positioned agents. The motivational power of positional interests is unable to ensure that all individuals act in accordance with their positional interest. However, at the aggregate level, their motivational power ensures that most agents will follow the path of least resistance and act in accordance with their positional interests.<sup>192</sup> In the Riverview High case, the positional interest in maintaining the tracking system, which is attached to the social position 'white parent', explains the tendency among white parents to actively block any attempts at reforming the system. Although this positional interest exerts motivational influence on all white parents, some white parents at Riverview choose to go against it and oppose the tracking system. Still, at the aggregate level, this positional interest exerts enough motivational influence to ensure that the vast majority of white parents follow the path of least resistance and join in defending the tracking system.

The question still remains as to what gives positional interests the motivational power that they have. In particular, what motivates white parents to act on their positional interest to maintain the tracking system? To answer this question, we must first look at this positional interest in more detail. White parents' positional interest in maintaining the tracking systems stems from the material rewards their children derive from the system. Under the current racialized tracking

---

<sup>192</sup> Allan Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference, Third Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2018), 68-72.

system, the children of white parents have privileged access to the honors and AP classes, as well as to the additional educational resources and opportunities that come with them. Thus, what motivates white parents to support the tracking system is their desire to protect the educational advantages that their kids derive from the system. Given that the educational resources at Riverview are limited (e.g. there is only so many well-trained, experienced teachers), white parents' motivation to protect their kids' access to the benefits of honors and AP classes entails a motivation to exclude black kids from having access to those same resources.<sup>193</sup>

This behavioral pattern among white parents at Riverview is consistent with the phenomenon of opportunity hoarding. As defined by Charles Tilly, opportunity hoarding is a social process whereby a group who gets access to a valuable resource confines use of that resource to members of the ingroup, such that outgroups are systematically excluded from having access to the resource.<sup>194</sup> According to Tilly, opportunity hoarding is a key mechanism for explaining the durability of categorical inequalities. He defines categorical inequalities as "inequalities in advantages among human beings that correspond to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities or performances."<sup>195</sup> In this definition, racial inequality is a case of categorical inequality. Thus, following Tilly, opportunity hoarding is a key mechanism for explaining the durability of racial inequality. The concept of opportunity hoarding fits perfectly with my explanation of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. In particular, I argue that we should interpret white parents' support for the tracking system as an instance of opportunity hoarding. White parents' defense of the tracking system is a form of opportunity hoarding because

---

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>194</sup> Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 7.

it seeks to restrict access to Riverview's best educational resources to (mostly white) honors and AP students. This process of opportunity hoarding also entails excluding (mostly black) basic-level students from having access to Riverview's best educational resources. Since any significant change to the tracking system would undermine white parents' ability to hoard educational opportunities for their children, white parents become invested in the continuation of the tracking system. And given the role of the tracking system in the reproduction of the racial achievement gap, white parents also become invested in the continuation of the racial achievement gap.

In order to unpack the relation between structural racism and the behavioral tendency among white parents to support the tracking system, it would be helpful to clarify the causal role that race plays in the tracking example. First, the schemas of racialism influence teachers' racially biased placement of students into AP, honors and basic classes. Guided by racialist schemas that associate black and Latinx students with low academic performance and potential, teachers recommend them disproportionately for the lowest track. As a result, the distribution of educational resources at Riverview High via the tracking system follows a racially hierarchical order, with white students in the advanced tracks, and black and Latinx students in the basic track. This racially unequal distribution of educational resources also plays a causal role insofar as it provides an incentive for agents whose children benefit from the tracking system (i.e. white parents) to support the system and oppose any attempts at changing it.

Importantly, in my explanation, white parents' support for the tracking system does not stem from a sense of white group identity. Rather, the source of their support for the tracking system is their positional interest in maintaining their kids' race-based educational advantages. These advantages are race-based insofar as they stem from a racialized practice of track placement that systematically disadvantages black and Latinx students. Moreover, the aforementioned



positional interests attach to the racialized position "white parent"—in other words, a social position that is heavily influenced by practices of racial categorization and differential treatment. Still, in my explanation, Riverview white parents' are not primarily motivated by a sense of white identity, but rather by their material interests, which in this case happen to coincide with the reproduction of the racial achievement gap.

Of course, my explanation does not deny that some Riverview white parents may support the tracking system out of a sense of white identity or racial prejudice. However, since my emphasis is on explaining why well-meaning whites contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality, my explanation focuses on a causal mechanism (i.e. motivated action via positional interests) that does not rely on the presence of overtly racist motivations. Once again, my aim here is not to offer a full-fledged explanation of durability the racial achievement gap. As I mentioned earlier, my explanation complements structural explanations that focus on inter-school opportunity gaps, rather than the intra-school opportunity gaps I am describing here. Similarly, my explanation of white parents' support for the tracking system can (and should) work in tandem with alternative explanations that focus on other racialized sources of motivation, such as irrational cognitive biases, ideology, habits, and affect.

Having clarified all the remaining details of the explanans, I will now proceed to lay out the definitive version of my structural explanation of the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview. Following 6.2.2, structural explanations explains the stability of a social pattern or arrangements (i.e. an enduring racial achievement gap at Riverview) as resulting from behavioral tendencies among similarly situated agents (i.e. the behavioral tendency among white parents to defend the tracking system). The tracking system is a social practice at Riverview that plays a key role in reproducing the racial achievement gap. It does so by introducing a racialized hierarchy in

tracking placements, which leads to a racially unequal distribution of Riverview's educational resources that privileges white students and disadvantages black students. That the tracking system has these racialized effects is a well-known fact at Riverview. In fact, teachers and administrators have tried to reform the system numerous times. However, the tracking system remains unchanged largely because of white parents' opposition to all reforming efforts. In this context, the question "what explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview" is tantamount to the question "what explains the tendency among white parents to defend the current tracking system?" The answer to this latter question lies in the positional interests that attach to the racialized position 'white parent' at Riverview. In particular, white parents at Riverview have a positional interest in securing the educational benefits that their kids derive from the racialized tracking system. This positional interest motivates white parents to engage in practices of opportunity hoarding, which include blocking all attempts at reforming the current tracking system. The motivational power of this positional interest ensures a stable pattern of support for the tracking system among white parents. Thus, this positional interest explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. Moreover, insofar as this positional interest is an emergent property of a racially oppressive social structure (i.e. Riverview High), it is also true that structural racism explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview—which is the explanatory claim I promised to substantiate in this chapter.

## Conclusion

My goal in this dissertation was to defend the usefulness of the concept of structural racism as a tool for anti-racist theory. The main challenge to this project is the lack of consensus over the meaning of structural racism. To address this challenge, I developed an internally coherent account of structural racism that incorporates the main insights from academic and political definitions of the term. In my account, structural racism refers to racially oppressive social structures. Regarding the usefulness of the concept for anti-racist theory, I argued that the distinct contribution of the concept of structural racism is its explanatory power. In particular, I argued that structural racism helps explain the durability of racial inequality in racialized societies like the United States. Thus, my dissertation was organized around two interconnected goals. The first—conceptual—goal was to flesh out my definition of structural racism as racially oppressive social structures. The second—explanatory—goal was to vindicate the claim that structural racism helps explain the durability of racial inequality.

I devoted the first five chapters to my conceptual project. In chapter 1, I situated my project within the broader discourse on racism. I distinguished the public discourse on racism from the philosophical debate on racism. Drawing on Shelby's framing of the philosophical debate, I defined my project as being primarily concerned with the first-order conceptual question "what is structural racism?" I also stated my position on the second-order debates on racism. I defended a pluralist approach to the study of racism, according to which the success of any given theory of racism hinges on whether it answers the theorist's particular interests. On the question of whether personal morality or political morality take precedence when assessing the moral implications of racism, I took the perspective of political morality. Finally, on the debate over the explanatory value of individual racism vs. structural racism, I favored a structural racism framework, with the caveat

that a full-fledged structural racism explanation of durable racial inequality must incorporate individual-level explanations.

In chapters 2 and 3, I developed two social theoretical concepts that are key for my definition of structural racism—social structure and oppression. I defined social structures as networks of social relations that are recursively reproduced by individual agents through their participation in social practices. I also discussed the general role of social structures in social explanation. In this context, I identified three ways in which social structures shape individuals—by constraining, enabling and motivating their agency. Building on my account of social structures, I defined oppressive social structures as those structures that reliably organize social groups in relations whereby one group (or groups) suffers from an unjustly inflicted harm, while another group (or groups) benefits from the same harm. I also discussed three key features of oppression: its structural nature, its relational nature, and its durability.

In chapter 4, I drew on the conceptual tools I developed in chapters 2 and 3 to flesh out my account of structural racism as racially oppressive social structures. I addressed three features that distinguish structural racism from other kinds of oppressive social structures. First, in racially oppressive social structures, hierarchical racial schemas are central in framing how agents interpret and respond to the world. In that context, I discussed the doctrine of racialism and its role in the racialized practices of categorization and differential treatment that produce racial hierarchy. Second, I introduced a distinction between racialized group and racialized position, which was useful for my explanatory project. Finally, I clarified the nature of racially oppressive relations as relations of race-based privilege and disadvantage. I also identified relations of racial domination as an extreme case of racial oppression. In chapter 5, I explored the connection between my account of structural racism and other conceptualizations of racism in the literature. I showed that

my account of structural racism can accommodate the main insights from existing theories of individual, ideological and institutional racism. At the same time, I argued that in order for structural racism to explain durable racial inequality, we must account for the causal interaction between social structures and individual agents.

In chapter 6, I shifted my attention to the explanatory project of the dissertation. I briefly addressed the methodological individualism-holism debate and I situated my explanation within the framework of weak methodological holism—the view that individuals are shaped, but not determined by social structures. I also clarified the object of structural explanations. Structural explanations may explain the stability of behavioral tendencies among similarly situated agents, or they may explain the stability of social patterns or arrangements. Lastly, I substantiated the explanatory claim that structural racism explains the durability of racial inequality. In order to illustrate my explanatory framework, I focused on a single representative case of racial inequality—the racial achievement gap. To add even more specificity as well as empirical support, I extracted the empirical facts of my explanation from a recent sociological case study of the racial achievement gap at Riverview High. I showed that the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview is largely explained by the presence of racialized tracking system. I then explained white parents' overwhelming support for the tracking system as motivated by their positional interest in preserving the educational advantages their children derive from the system. Insofar as this positional interest was an emergent property of a racially oppressive social structure (i.e. Riverview High), I concluded that structural racism explains the durability of the racial achievement gap at Riverview.

The Riverview High explanation showcases the explanatory power of racially oppressive social structures like Riverview High. In so doing, it also vindicates the usefulness of the concept

of structural racism as a tool for anti-racist theory. In addition, the Riverview High explanation complements Cudd's and Haslangers' influential accounts of structural explanation, which focus on the role of structural constraint. My explanation homes in on a different mechanism whereby social structures shape individual agency—structural motivation. Relatedly, the Riverview High explanation moves beyond Cudd's and Haslanger's focus on how the victims of oppression become coerced into reinforcing their own oppression. Without denying the usefulness of this explanatory strategy, my Riverview High explanation pushes us to consider the role that privileged agents play in the reproduction of racial inequality and other forms of social injustice. In particular, my explanation shows how "well-meaning" members of privileged groups can become involved in the reproduction of oppressive social relations.

In the Riverview High explanation, I highlight the role of positional interests and material rewards as the motivation for white parents' participation in the reproduction of racial inequality. In so doing, I advance a strategic explanation of privileged agents' contribution to durable racial inequality. This explanation treats agents as rationally driven by an interest in maintaining their race-based advantages. Of course, this is only a partial explanation of what motivates agents to support racial inequality. My focus on strategic behavior aims to counter a contemporary narrative that casts privileged agents as unwillingly contributing to racial inequality due to irrational cognitive biases (e.g. implicit bias). In future work, I will aim to develop a more robust account of human action that can a more complete explanation of why privileged agents participate in the reproduction of racial inequality. This account of human action will have to explain the interaction between rational strategic behavior and other factors that motivate human agency, such as irrational cognitive biases, culture, ideology, habits, and emotions.

## Bibliography

- Allport, Gordon W. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954/1979.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Racisms." In *Anatomy of Racism*, edited by David Goldberg, 3-17. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Amy Gutmann. *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Bailey, Alison. "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (1998): 104-119.
- Blauner, Bob. "Talking Past Each Other: Black and White Languages of Race." *American Prospect* (Summer 1992): 55-64.
- . *Still The Big News: Racial Oppression in America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Blum, Lawrence. "Racialized Groups: The Sociohistorical Consensus." *The Monist* 93, no. 2 (2010): 298-320.
- Bobo, Lawrence. "Reclaiming a Du Boisian Perspective on Racial Attitudes." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 186-202.
- Bobo, Lawrence, James Kluegel and Ryan Smith, "Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler, Anti-Black Ideology." In *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, edited by Steven Tuch and Jack Martin, 15-42. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation." *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997): 465-480.
- . *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001.
- Brown, Michael and David Wellman. "Embedding the Color Line: The Accumulation of Racial Advantage and the Disaccumulation of Racial Opportunity in Post Civil Rights America." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 2, no. 2 (2005): 187-207.
- Bui, Quoc Trung and Amanda Cox. "Surprising New Evidence Shows Bias in Police Use of Force but Not in Shootings." *New York Times*, July 11, 2016.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/12/upshot/surprising-new-evidence-shows-bias-in-police-use-of-force-but-not-in-shootings.html>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

- Coren, Michael J. "The Roots of The Gender Pay Gap Are Deeper Than Discrimination." *Quartz*, March 12, 2019. <https://qz.com/1567008/the-systemic-reasons-why-the-gender-pay-gap-increases-over-time/>
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.
- Cudd, Ann E. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- D'Souza, Dinesh. *The End of Racism*. New York: Free Press, 1996.
- Dalton, Conley. *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.
- Desilver, Drew. "Black Unemployment Rate is Consistently Twice That of Whites." *Pew Research Center*, August 21, 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/>
- Diamond, John and Amanda Lewis. *Despite the Best Intentions: Why Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Dovidio John F. et al. "Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination." In *SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, edited by John F. Dovidio et al., 3-28. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010.
- Elder-Vass, Dave. *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Ezorsky, Gertrude. *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. New York: Crossing Press, 1983.
- Garcia, J.L.A. "Current Conceptions of Racism: A Critical Examination of Some Recent Social Philosophy." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (1997): 5-42.
- . "Philosophical Analysis and The Moral Concept of Racism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25, no. 5 (1999): 1-32.
- . "Racism, Psychology, and Morality: Dialogue with Faucher and Machery." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2011): 250-268.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1979.



- . *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Glasgow, Joshua. "Racism as Disrespect." *Ethics* 120, no. 1 (2009): 71-77.
- Gooding-Williams, Robert. "Ideology, Social Practices, Anti-Black Concepts." Unpublished manuscript.
- . "Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy." *Constellations* 5, no. 1 (1998): 18-41.
- Greenwald, Anthony and Linda Krieger. "Implicit Bias: Scientific Foundations." *California Law Review* 94 (July 2006): 945-967.
- Faucher, Luc and Edouard Machery. "Racism: Against Jorge Garcia's Moral and Psychological Monism." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 39, no. 1 (2009): 41-62
- Hardimon, Michael O. "Four Ways of Thinking about Race." *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 26 (2019): 103-113.
- Haslanger, Sally. *Critical Theory and Social Practice*. Amsterdam: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2017.
- . *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . "What is a (Social) Structural Explanation?" *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1 (2016): 113-130.
- . "What is a Social Practice?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 82 (2018): 231-247.
- James, Susan. *The Content of Social Explanation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Johnson, Allan. *Privilege, Power, and Difference, Third Edition*. New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2018.
- Jung, Moon-Kie. *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing U.S. Racisms Past and Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Larmore, Charles. "What is Political Philosophy?" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2013): 276-306.
- Levy, Neil. "Am I Racist? Implicit Bias and the Ascription of Racism." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 268 (2017): 524-551.
- Lovett, Frank. *A General Theory of Domination and Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

- Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Machery, Edouard, Luc Faucher, and Daniel Kelly. "On the Alleged Inadequacies of Psychological Explanations of Racism." *The Monist* 93, no. 2 (2010): 228-254.
- Madva, Alex. "A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy." *Ergo, An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 27 (2016): 701-728.
- Marx, Karl. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." In Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader, second edition*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 594-617. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- McIntosh, Peggy. *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*. Working Paper no. 189. Wellesley, MA: Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1998.
- Miles, Robert and Malcolm Brown. *Racism, Second Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Mills, Charles. "Heart Attack: A Critique of Jorge Garcia's Volitional Conception of Racism." *The Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 29-62.
- . "The Racial Polity." In *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, 119-138. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- . "White Supremacy." In *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race*, edited by Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson, 475-487. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs. "Fact Sheet of Anti-Trans Hate Violence." [https://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncavp\\_transhvfactsheet.pdf](https://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncavp_transhvfactsheet.pdf), accessed May 20, 2019.
- Pettit, Philip. "Three Issues in Social Ontology." In *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate: Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science*, edited by Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, 77-96. New York: Springer, 2014.
- Philips, Michael. "Racist Acts and Racist Humor." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (1984): 75-96.
- Sewell, William H. Jr. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1-29.
- Shelby, Tommie. *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent and Reform*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016.
- . "Racism, Moralism and Social Criticism." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 158 (2014): 57-74.

- . "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory." *The Philosophical Forum* 32, no. 2 (2003): 153-188.
- Stahl, Titus. "Collective Responsibility for Oppression." *Social Theory and Practice* 43, no. 3 (2017): 473-501.
- Stanley, Jason. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Sundstrom, Ronald. *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.
- Taylor, Paul C. *Race: A Philosophical Introduction, Second Edition*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- Thomasson, Amie. "Structural Explanation and Norms: Comments on Haslanger." *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1 (2016): 131-139.
- Tilly, Charles. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Traister, Rebecca. "Why Women Can't Break Free from the Parent Trap." *New Republic*, February 2, 2015. <https://newrepublic.com/article/120939/maternity-leave-policies-america-hurt-working-moms>.
- Ture, Kwame and Charles Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. New York: Vintage, 1967/1992.
- Wellman, David. *Portraits of White Racism, 2nd edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Winant, Howard. *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Five Faces of Oppression." In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 39-65. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Zahle, Julie and Finn Collin. "Introduction." In *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate: Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science*, edited by Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, 1-14. New York: Springer, 2014.