

Structural Injustice: What It Is and How It's Hidden

I. *The Invisible Foot* (Okin 1989, Cudd 2006)

Question: Why do women continue to be economically disadvantaged relative to men?

- *Biologistic explanation:* women are innately disadvantaged in what it takes (intelligence, competitiveness, etc.) to be successful.
- *Individualistic explanation:* women prefer to spend time with children over being in a high-paying job (for whatever reason), so they choose to forego economic success.

- *Structural explanation:*

Imagine a couple, Larry and Lisa, who, let's suppose, are equally intelligent, talented, educated, and experienced in the workplace; they have equal power in their relationship, have no prejudices about gender roles, and are equally capable of all domestic tasks and childrearing tasks. Larry and Lisa decide to have children. They live in a community where decent childcare is beyond their means. Moreover, in this community, as elsewhere, there is a wage gap: women, on average, make only 75% of what men make.

Under these conditions, unless Larry and Lisa have special reasons to think that they are unusual in their earning capacities, it is reasonable for Larry to work full-time and for Lisa to make adjustments in her work, e.g., to work part-time, to take time off, to take a less demanding job. But in our society, "wealth determines power, domestic work is unpaid, and divorce laws do not evenly divide wealth." (149) So Larry accrues greater human capital and ends up with more power in the relationship. Moreover, insofar as Larry and Lisa are typical, women on average will be poorer risks for employers who will "tend not to trust that women will stay with their careers or that if they do, they will devote the kind of time and energy to them that men will." (149) As a result, "women's jobs" that require less commitment, mobility, and experience will pay less, and women will have to prove themselves exceptional to be considered for high paying "men's jobs." As a result, the pattern is reinforced. (Cudd 2006, 148-151)

Arguably, the invisible foot is an explanation that points to a form of structural injustice. It is a kind of injustice that does not become apparent when considering only biologistic or individualistic explanations. How does the explanation work?

II. What is a structural explanation?

Structural explanations consider the phenomenon to be explained as part of a larger phenomenon that sets constraints on the behavior of the interdependent parts. Reference to the structured whole highlights those local constraints. Contrast an aggregate and a structured whole:

- In an aggregate of individuals (a heap of pebbles, a handful of dog treats), the behavior of an individual part is not systematically dependent on the behavior of the other parts, so the possibility-space for the behavior of an aggregate is nothing more than the product of the possibility-spaces for its individual parts.
- In a structured whole, the possibility-spaces for the parts are constrained by their relations to each other, as defined within the structure.

Consider:

1) Why did Lisa quit her job? (What caused the quitting?)

Plausibly, Lisa's decision to not place Lulu (her child) in childcare is the *triggering cause* of her quitting her job. But why did Lisa quit her job *rather than* take a leave of absence, or have Larry quit his job, or both go part-time and rely on grandparents, arrange to tele-commute, etc? To answer these questions we seek the *structuring cause*.

2_L) Why did Lisa's decision to avoid childcare for Lulu cause **her** to quit her job *as opposed to* Larry.

2_Q) Why did Lisa's decision to avoid childcare for Lulu cause her to **quit** her job *as opposed to* go part-time, tele-commute, move to Sweden, etc?

The structuring causes concern Lisa's position within the structure of a workplace, the background institutions and opportunities for both parents, traditional social norms, e.g., that her employer doesn't offer paid leaves of absence or part-time work, that Lisa will be socially rewarded and Larry socially penalized for quitting.

Once we identify the choice architecture within which Lisa made her decision, we can push the question deeper: Why are these the relevant set of options?

- Why does Lisa have to choose between affordable crummy childcare, expensive quality childcare, or staying home with Lulu? Why isn't there a high-quality subsidized childcare center at her workplace?
- Why is the social structure, the norms, the resources as they are?

The focus on structure provides not only explains Lisa's decision, but offers resources for capturing regularities or patterns of action: those whose choices are similarly constrained will tend to act in similar ways, even if their personal histories, psychologies, and attitudes differ. For example, Lisa and Mona may make similar choices re childcare even if they grew up in very different circumstances and are different in many other ways.

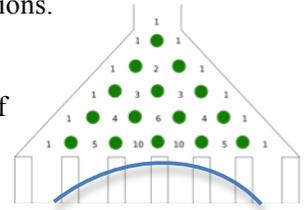
III. Structuring Causes and

"...there is an intuitive difference between an object and a place in a structure, between an officeholder and an office." (Shapiro 2000, 82)

Office holder: Obama, small plastic tower

Office/Position: President of the United States, rook

- If it is *given* for the purposes of explanation that an individual occupies a position in a structure, then the question is how anyone occupying the position is constrained by the structure's internal relations. (Mary and the grading curve.)
- Sometimes questions about individuals (*office holders*) are not the most fruitful. Consider a Galton Board: if we ask why a particular ball ended up where it did, *its* position is a matter of chance. However, if the question is instead: Why do so few balls fall at each end? We can explain this by the structure of the board.
- There are many causal factors in explaining an outcome. What causal information is relevant depends on what question we ask.
- Reference to structures is needed to explain patterns, and the behavior of individuals occupying offices/nodes within the structures.



IV. What Are Structures?

So in order to play the right sort of role in structural explanation, social structures must impose constraints on our action. How do they do so? Social structures provide us positions/offices within a set of relations defined by the structure.

A. Practices and constraints on action

There are many constraints on action (physical, biological, psychological), only some of which are social. How does the *social* constrain us? Is it just a matter of social expectations and attitudes such as blame and praise?

- Consider cooking. Cooking rice, for example, is an instance of a more general practice of cooking, and regular engagement in the practice is constitutive of a social role: cook. Being a cook relates one in specific ways to other persons (not only the customer or family, but also the farmer, grocer, garbage collector, sources of recipes, including traditions, cookbooks, etc), and also relates one in specific ways to things (foodstuffs, sources of heat, water, utensils). Cooking is only possible within a social structure that provides the ingredients, skills, tools; the norms for taste, texture and ingredients; the distribution of labor of cooks and consumers, etc.

There are at least three kinds of factors conditioning my dinner making:

- my personal attitudes, habits, dispositions; the personal attitudes of those who will be eating.
- *resources*: the materials/tools available (Note that materials/tools may also include skills, time?)
- *schemas*: the collective concepts, narratives, expectations, of those in my cultural milieu.

These three factors are tightly interdependent: collective expectations depend on individual attitudes and also influence individual attitudes; both individual attitudes and collective expectations affect what materials and tools are available, and the available materials affect attitudes.

B. Social constraints?

Are *schemas* what socially constraint us? Perhaps. Hypothesis: resources impose physical constraints, personal attitudes impose psychological constraints, and shared attitudes of a group (*schemas*) impose social constraints.

But how do *schemas* constrain? The mechanisms seem to be psychological. (Example of gender clothing *schemas*.) But even if the psychological facts are *triggering* causes of our choices, they aren't, or don't exhaust, what *socially* constrains our behavior.

- I can't cook idli without an idli steamer. This is not just a physical constraint, but a social constraint: the artifact is not available to me in my social milieu. I also can't cook idli for dinner, even if I have an idli steamer, if I am responsible for my family's meal and idli isn't what we eat (I take this to be more than just a matter of attitudes). What *food* I prepare is constrained both by the social materials available and the social meanings, over and above the physical objects and psychological attitudes. In such cases, action is socially constrained, i.e., it is constrained by social structures.
- At the very least the social constraints must include the material manifestation of those assumptions in what is available for purchase, and the (threat of?) material consequences if we do not conform. In short, structures that extend beyond my attitudes create my choice architecture.

Alternative hypothesis:

Sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute [social] *structures* only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time. (Sewell 1994, 13, my underline)

How are social structures "hidden"? Resources activate the *schemas* and prompt action that, in turn, reinforces both the positioning of the resources and the *schemas*. In effect, the world comes to be shaped in such a way that our action appears called for, inevitable. So change seems unmotivated, sometimes even impossible.

V. Summary of take-home points:

In providing structural explanations we are not looking, primarily, for triggering causes, but for structuring causes. We want to know not only what causes E, but what causes [C causes E].

- Structural explanation situates individuals within "offices" in the structure and points to ways that the structure constrains action. The existence and shape of the structure also calls for explanation.
- Social structures consist in a network of social relations, some of which are to other people, some to non-human animals, some to things; some are conscious and intentional (marriage), some are not (consumer vulnerability, racial privilege); some concern individuals, some relate groups, corporate entities, etc.
- Social relations are formed by practices, which themselves consist of interdependent *schemas* and resources.
- Offices/nodes in a structure of relations may be related causally (unemployment/crime), constitutively (what it is to be a rook is to be governed by the rook rules which specify allowable relations to other pieces), or regulatively (how a subject should behave in the presence of the queen).
- Resources, including material objects, mediate our relations to each other within a structure. In an important sense, we organize ourselves around resources; the resources, not only *schemas*, structure our behavior and play an important role in social explanation.
- Social structures are real and causally efficacious, and are a significant source of injustice. Yet because they are "hidden" in the interdependence of the social and material world, they are hard to notice and to change.
- A critique of social structures requires a normative theory that I have not provided here.

References

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