

Analyzing Structures

I. Recap

We've seen several different approaches to justice and equality. I suggested last class that there is a conception of equality that all parties to the debate can agree upon. The basic idea is that caste hierarchies—hierarchies that lock one in a station in life based on accidents of birth—are unjust. I'll call this the "equality baseline." It is manifested in a commitment at least to "formal equality". But beyond this equality baseline, people differ in what they consider the requirements of justice:

a) Libertarian: emphasis on historical entitlements; only endorses formal equality of opportunity.

b) Liberal conception: emphasis on what is earned; endorses substantive equality of opportunity that compensates for bad socio-economic luck in one's starting point, but allows inequalities that stem from the lottery of natural endowments.

c) Democratic egalitarian (Rawls): emphasis on the basic structure of society being fair and equal; endorses "fair equality of opportunity".

(As I have been using the terms, both (b) and (c) count as liberal egalitarian views, i.e., they are concerned to balance liberty and substantive (not just formal) equality.)

On all three conceptions of justice, in deciding how we should address, e.g., economic inequalities, it matters what the source of inequality is: is one entitled to one's current holdings, or were they acquired unjustly? Did one acquire them by luck? What sort of luck? Has one been deprived of one's rightful share due to an unfair social or economic structure?

II. Individual Explanations and Structural Explanations

We are all familiar with and good at giving explanations of behavior that focus on the individual, e.g., on her psychology, her skills, etc. Why did Jones skip lecture today? Because she is lazy and didn't want to get up; because she finds philosophy boring and wanted to finish her novel; because she is worried about finishing her physics problem set... It is sometimes tempting to generalize individualistic explanations in order to account for broad patterns. For example, suppose we want to explain why there is a disproportionate number of women, or minorities in poverty. Some argue that it is because:

X's are innately inferior. (biological explanation)

X's are lazy. (characterological explanation)

X's are not qualified for good jobs. (meritocratic explanation)

Although presumably an individual's behavior is always caused by something within the agent, sometimes the best explanation of behavior, especially group behavior, draws on background social facts. Think of social structures as relatively inflexible features of social life (laws, customs, norms) that apply to individuals by virtue of their membership in a group, e.g.,

Homeowners must pay property taxes.

Drivers must stay to the right on two-way streets.

Males must not wear skirts, except possibly kilts, or when in costume.

Females must be primary caretakers of infants.

Custodians must not interrupt meetings to empty wastebaskets.

Suppose one wanted an explanation of why custodians tend to work late at night. A hypothesis might be that in general, those who have custodial jobs like their mornings at home. It may be that they do, but this is a silly explanation. A more plausible explanation is structural: It is customary for business meetings to happen during the day, and because custodians are excluded from spaces where those of higher status are working, then they'll have to work at night, whether they like their mornings at home or not. As a result, people will gravitate to custodial jobs who need work at night (perhaps because they hold two jobs). In

individual cases there may be custodians who prefer a nighttime schedule, but the explanation of the pattern is structural.

Suppose we want to explain why a disproportionate number of poor households are headed by women. One might consider a variety of individualistic explanations (women are more lazy than men and so don't work as hard; women are not as smart/qualified as men so can't get good jobs). A structural explanation would point to relatively rigid features of the social context that constrain poor women in ways that prevent them from improving their economic status. Factors include:

Women are expected to be the primary caregivers of children.

There is insufficient affordable childcare.

Part-time jobs are badly paid and often have few, if any, benefits.

Part-time jobs provide little opportunity for promotion or development.

[What are some of the other factors?]

According to democratic egalitarianism we need to be very attentive to the structural sources of unfairness and inequality. Society is responsible for the structures that position some as advantaged and others as disadvantaged. Social and economic success is never a "natural" phenomenon, even though it may depend, in part, on the distribution of natural endowments. Those who succeed do so because social structures enable them to; those who fail, e.g., end up struggling in poverty, also do so because social structures enable them to. A society that treats all of its members fairly and as equals should create structures that do not privilege any group and allow inequalities only when they benefit all.

III. Faces of Oppression

Oppression is structural injustice. It comes in many forms. Young describes some characteristic dimensions. (How are these related to Scanlon's list of problematic inequalities? Are they pointing to the same structural injustices?)

1. Exploitation: Exploitation occurs "...through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another." (337)

Examples: *gender exploitation*: "transfer of the fruits of material labor to men and transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men." (337)

Racially specific exploitation: "Wherever there is racism, there is the assumption, more or less enforced, that members of the oppressed racial groups are or ought to be servants of those, or some of those, in the privileged group..." (338)

2. Marginalization: Marginalization occurs when "a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination." (339) "Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use." (339)

Examples: The elderly, the poor, the disabled. The harm of marginalization is not just the material deprivation experienced, but also the fact that marginals are prevented from "[exercising] capacities in socially defined and recognized ways." (339)

3. Powerlessness – "The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them." (341)

Examples: Non-professionals are powerless relative to professionals.

4. Cultural Imperialism – "To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other." (343)

Examples: marginalization in the US of native Spanish-speakers and Latino culture. Note also *ethnocentrism* (see definition at <http://www.webref.org/sociology/E/ethnocentrism.htm>).

Both individuals and institutions can be ethnocentric.

5. Systematic Violence – “What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systematic character, its existence as a social practice.” (345)
This threat deprives people of freedom and dignity.

Intersectionality

Individuals are members of more than one social group, e.g., we are gendered and raced; we are members of an economic class; we have a sexual identity; we are disabled or able-bodied, are young, middle-aged, or elderly, attractive or not. Different forms of oppression are not simply additive: how one experiences a “face” of oppression will depend on the complexity of one’s membership in different social groups. E.g., wealthy women and poor women will experience gender oppression differently. Latinos and Latinas will experience racism differently.

[Does the Wilkerson and Gresham essay provide an example of intersectionality? How?]

IV. Welfare as We Know It

According to the US Census Bureau¹, in 2004, 37.0 million people were in poverty, up 1.1 million from 2003. The official poverty rate in 2004 was 12.7 percent, up from 12.5 percent 2003. The poverty thresholds depend on a number of factors, including numbers of individuals in a household and their ages. Here is a simplified table²:

Number in household	No children	1 child	2 children	3 children
1	9,827			
2	12,649	13,020		
3	14,776	15,205	15,219	
4	19,484	19,803	19,157	19,223

Poverty is bad for people. People in poverty not only suffer from lack of economic resources, but also tend to live in more crowded, violent and polluted neighborhoods, with inferior schools, poor health care, and fewer opportunities for meaningful work or stimulating recreation. What should we do about this? What have we done about this?

Development of US Social Security Programs³

- 1935 Social Security Old-Age Insurance; Unemployment Insurance; and Public Assistance programs for needy aged, and blind (replaced by the SSI program in 1972); and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (replaced with block grants for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families in 1996)
- 1934 Railroad Retirement System
- 1937 Public Housing
- 1939 Social Security Old-Age and Survivors Insurance
- 1946 National School Lunch Program
- 1950 Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled (replaced by the SSI program in 1972)
- 1956 Social Security Disability Insurance
- 1960 Medical Assistance for the Aged (replaced by Medicaid in 1965)
- 1964 Food Stamp Program
- 1965 Medicare and Medicaid Programs
- 1966 School Breakfast Program
- 1969 Black Lung Benefits Program
- 1972 Supplemental Security Income Program
- 1974 Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- 1975 Earned Income Tax Credit
- 1981 Low-Income Home Energy Assistance
- 1996 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

These involve a combination of “social insurance” and “public assistance”.

¹ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty04/pov04hi.html>

² <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh04.html>

³ <http://www.ssa.gov/history/pdf/histdev.pdf>