

The Structures of Social Structural Explanation: Comments on Haslanger's *What are Social Structural Explanations?*¹

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Sally Haslanger (2016) provides an account of social structural explanation and the social structures that figure in them. In some cases, the social structures involved in a given social structural explanation appeal to “broad and deep social phenomena”, like “the wage-labor system of industrial capitalism and the heteronormative and bionormative nuclear family” (p. 113). In other cases, the social structures involved in a given social structural explanation appeal merely to “local and flexible phenomena”, like “the social structure of a particular institution such as a school, church, or business” (p. 113).

Haslanger argues that in explaining the behaviour of individuals (in particular, the *structuring causes*, as opposed to the *triggering causes*, of individual actions²), structural explanations do a better job than individualistic explanations. I won't focus on that part of her argument. Instead, I will argue that Haslanger hasn't yet provided a direct argument that broad and deep structural explanations do a better job than local and flexible explanations in the types of cases at issue.

In what follows, I argue that local and flexible structural explanations are often preferable for explaining the (structuring) causes of individual behaviour. This throws doubt on the general value of appeal to broad and deep explanations over local and flexible explanations. The underlying line of thought is that there is room for a view that is not individualistic, but at the same time shuns broad and deep structural explanations, and instead appeals to local and flexible structural explanations. Ultimately, there is a place for broad and deep explanation, but the circumstances in which broad and deep features are explanatory, informative and relevant is more limited than I think Haslanger would contend.

I begin by outlining Haslanger's preferred account of structural explanation and the criteria by which Haslanger argues that structural explanations are superior to individualistic explanations. In section 2, I outline Haslanger's theory of social structures. Both section 1 and 2 outline key examples that will be discussed throughout. In section 3, I make some metaphysical distinctions regarding social structures. These distinctions will be useful in considering the level of grain or specificity of the structures involved in structural explanations. In section 4, I briefly argue that social structures are not a uniform or easily characterisable class and that this is reason to endorse a “micro” or “bottom-up” perspective on the investigation of (kinds of) structures. In section 5, I outline various factors relevant to what it takes for a social structure to be *local*, *broad*, *flexible* and *deep*. In section 6, I provide a local and flexible explanation of Haslanger's core case. In section 7, I argue that this local and flexible explanation is preferable to the broad and deep explanation that Haslanger provides. In section 8, I argue that the account of social structural explanation

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² Cf. Dretske, 1988, pp. 42-43 and Haslanger, 2016, pp. 120-121.

Haslanger favours supports a local and flexible explanation of the core case. In section 9, I conclude with two additional benefits of local and flexible explanation.

1. Structural Explanations and Their Virtues

Structural explanations explain the properties of, behaviours of, or constraints on an object in terms of those of some larger whole of which that object is a part. Oftentimes, structural explanations are superior to other forms of explanation. To illustrate this, Haslanger offers the following example:

Suppose I am playing ball with my dog. I stuff a treat into a hole in the ball and throw it for him. The ball goes over the lip of a hill and rolls down into a gully. Why did the treat end up in the gully? If we imagine the trajectory of the treat alone, from a space near my hand, through an arc the air, then landing about an inch above the ground and moving at about that height down the hill until it stops, it would be a huge task to explain the particular events that determined each of its movements. A much easier explanation would be to point out that the treat was inserted into a ball that was thrown and rolled down the hill into the gully. (2016, p. 114)

The explanation in terms of the ball, as opposed to the treat, is superior in numerous regards:

- (i) It is simpler.
- (ii) It is more stable in that the explanation generalizes – it can explain why other treats or even other kinds of objects, when stuffed in the ball, would end up in the gully.
- (iii) It allows us to more easily identify how to intervene and stop the treat from ending up in the gully.
- (iv) It enables us to better continue our inquiry about the treat: *Should the treat be in a ball or some other kind of dog toy? Would I be better off throwing the ball further away from the gully?*

Haslanger's concern is not with structural explanations in general, but with *social* structural explanations. She draws on Garfinkel's erotetic model of explanation, where explanations are answers to questions. Garfinkel uses this model to show how the best answers to some questions, in the social domain, can be sensitive to structure. Consider, for example, the following case:

Suppose that, in a class I am teaching, I announce that the course will be "graded on a curve," that is, that I have decided beforehand what the overall distribution of grades is going to be. Let us say, for the sake of the example, that I decide that there will be one A, 24 Bs, and 25 Cs. The finals come in, and let us say Mary gets the A. She wrote an original and thoughtful final. (1981, p. 41)

Garfinkel argues that when we ask:

- (1) a. Why did Mary get an A (as opposed to a B or C, etc.)?
b. Why did Mary (as opposed to the other students in the class) get an A?

The answer: 'She wrote an original and thoughtful final' is inadequate – it is at best only a partial answer to the questions (1a) and (1b): Mary had to write the *best* final in order to get the only A. Mary earned the only A not simply because she wrote a 'thoughtful and original final', but because she wrote *the most* 'thoughtful and original final'. This answer presupposes certain

relations between Mary's performance and the performance of her classmates – structural relations imposed by the grading curve.

2. Haslanger on Social Structures

Social structures, according to Haslanger, are networks of social relations (between people, things, or groups) that are embedded in the material world. Social relations are constituted by our *practices*,³ which, in many instances, are collective solutions to coordination problems with respect to a *resource*, so that individuals' engagement with, and responses to, the resource are *organized*. Resources are things that are taken to have value. In order for solutions to coordination problems to be organized, practices (in part) consist in *schemas*. Schemas allow individuals to “interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought and affect” (p. 126). Haslanger understands schemas to be public, shared social meanings associated with things in the social world.⁴

Paradigmatic social practices exist because agents repeatedly enact them, but our agency is also organized, shaped and constrained by their existence. Barnes (2016) offers the following illustrative analogy:

By way of analogy, think of wheel ruts (the deep indentations in a dirt road made by wagon wheels.) Ruts are caused by repeated patterns of travel—different wagons going over the same bit of road over and over. But once a rut is there, it's something separate from the individual paths of any particular wagon, even though its continued existence relies on the continued travel of wagons along the same path. Moreover, once there are ruts in a road, those ruts explain why wagons continue to travel the way they do, because once there are ruts in a road it's really hard to drive a wagon anywhere but the ruts. (2016, p. 7)

According to Haslanger, our action is socially constrained (and not merely physically and psychologically constrained) by the availability of and access to resources, the public social meanings which “set limits on and organize our thought, communication”, and choices, and by providing “templates for interaction”:

... structures beyond my attitudes and the attitudes of others create my choice architecture: I can't cook idli without an idli steamer. This is not just a physical constraint, but also a social constraint: the artifact is not available to me in my social milieu. What food I prepare is constrained both by the social materials available and the social meanings/schemas, over and above the physical objects and individual attitudes. Such meanings are not up to the individual agent but depend on collective understandings and the resources that have been organized by those understandings. The options are constituted through our practices... (2016, p. 128)

Haslanger is especially interested in how social structures can be implicated in creating and perpetuating disadvantage and injustice. In other words, she is interested in how social structures figure in answering questions within social theory that are of importance to feminist and critical theory – questions like the following:

³ For a useful overview of the different forms of practice theory, see Reckwitz (2002).

⁴ See Haslanger (2014a).

- (2) a. Why do women continue to be economically disadvantaged relative to men?
- b. Why do so many more women than men quit their jobs to care for young children?

At least in our particular socio-cultural milieu, one might think that we live in a time and population where, for the most part, women seem at least in some sense free to make their own choices, and in particular, where women can (and indeed often do) freely value professional and economic success and independence over childcare. With this in mind, it might be tempting to conclude that women choose childcare over professional and economic success largely because they want to. But if this is how one answers (2a/b) (i.e., solely on individualistic grounds), then one might argue that there is no issue of disadvantage or injustice worth pursuing. By contrast, if one answers (2a/b) in a structure involving way, then this can reveal genuine issues of disadvantage and injustice – many women are structurally situated so that it is more rational for them to choose childcare over work (or worse, irrational for them not to choose childcare over work).

In order to show that structural issues are at stake in answering (2a/b), Haslanger maintains that in individual cases, like the following, a structural explanation offers a better explanation than the individualistic one. The core case she considers is that of Lisa, Larry and Lulu⁵:

Imagine a couple, Larry and Lisa, who, we 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; baby Lulu arrives. They live in a community where decent childcare is beyond their means. Moreover, let's suppose that 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. (2016, p. 122)

The task is to explain the structuring cause of Lisa's behavior – to answer the questions (3a/b) in a structure involving way, and to show that answering (3a) and (3b) in structural terms is to provide the best answer:

- (3) a. Why did Lisa quit her job (rather than Larry)?
- b. Why did Lisa quit her job (rather than find a different solution to the childcare problem, e.g., go part time, rely on grandparents, or excellent affordable daycare...)?

With these preliminaries in place, we are in a position to investigate considerations which make for not just good or bad explanations, but for good or bad structural explanations. I think a key consideration is the "level of grain" of the structure, or in other terms, the specificity of the structural explanation.⁶

3. Structures, Systems, Kinds of Structures, Stages of Structures

⁵ Cf. also Okin (1989) and Cudd (2006).

⁶ Garfinkel (1981) also considers some similar issues – see p. 55.

In order to gain a better grasp of the appropriate level of specificity or level of generality needed in structural explanations, it will be useful to distinguish between *structures*, *systems*, *kinds of structures*, *stages of structures*, *kinds of systems* and *stages of systems*. Haslanger distinguishes systems and structures (following Shapiro, 1997) as follows:

...my family is a system that includes particular individuals (Steve, Isaac, Zina, Sparky, me) who stand in relations such as ‘parent of’, ‘child of’, ‘spouse of’, ‘dog of’, etc. But we can abstract from this particular Yablanger system to see it as instantiating a more general structure shared by other families. (2016, p. 118)

Let us further distinguish between structures and kinds of structures: the family structure that the Yablanger system instantiates is an instance of a family structure, but there are many other networks of relations that are family structures – the structure that my own family instantiates has the ‘parent-of’ and ‘spouse-of’ relations, but only one instance of the ‘child of’ relation. This makes it clear that there is not a unique family structure, but rather there is a kind of structure, which corresponds to the kind families. However, the “geometry” of the network of relations that make up a (labelled) structure is not the only thing that might distinguish structures – amongst other things, disjoint schemas might distinguish structures with the same “geometry”. For example, think of a family structure like mine with three nodes connected by the ‘parent-of’, ‘spouse-of’ and ‘child-of’ relations but where the schemas that organize the practice of ‘having a child’ are so disjoint from those of the family structure instantiated by my family that we would classify the practices as distinct ‘having a child’ practices – one could imagine a practice where children in this other sort of ‘having a child’ practice are assigned by lottery with new children being assigned every three weeks. In such a case, the two family structures are distinguished by having disjoint schemas for interpreting and organizing the practices. This is just to say that many different structures can be classified as family structures, and it is useful to disambiguate talk of *structures* and *kinds of structures*.

Let us also distinguish between structures and stages of structures. Given that the relations that make up structures are constituted by practices, schemas and resources that are “variable and evolve across time and context” (p. 126), structures themselves are also variable and evolve across time and context. A *stage of a structure* is an “instantaneous snapshot” of the practices, schemas and resources that constitute a structure at a given world-time. In Barnes’s analogy, think of the rut in the road at a particular time t – it might have been rained over at $t-1$ and so at t , it is more difficult to escape its grips.

Finally, let us make parallel distinctions for systems. For example, imagine a particular wagon driving along a path within the rut at t . Such an instantiation of a stage of the structure is a *stage of a system*. One can also talk of *kinds of systems* – e.g., a kind of family system might be the set of all family systems with exactly one female standing in the ‘parent-of’ relation.

With these distinctions in place, one can see that there are several choice points in determining the appropriate structures involved in structural explanations, even once one has accepted that a structural explanation is the best explanation: Is the structure relevant to the explanation, a structure, a system, a kind of structure, a kind of system, a stage of a structure or a stage of a system or some combination thereof?

Such details can matter to the adequacy of the explanation. Recall the ball example. Notice that the object relevant to the explanation is articulated in a non-specific way, *a ball*, indicating that the explanation can apply at a level of generality greater than the individual ball. The explanation at this level of generality works because the key feature responsible for the treat ending up in the gully is a property of balls in general – i.e., that balls roll. Such a property is plausibly an essential property of the kind ball. Since the key feature relevant to the behaviour of the treat is an essential property of the kind, the object which features in the explanation can be the kind ball without any loss of key explanatorily relevant features. However, notice that if we alter the case slightly, so that it is partly the wind, and not just the rolling, that resulted in the ball/treat ending up in the gully, then the object which features in the explanation in terms of a ball no longer seems adequate (just like Mary’s performance in the Garfinkel example). In such a case, the object relevant to the explanation needs to be less general – the lightness of the ball is another key factor as to why the ball/treat ended up in the gully.

Such details can also matter to the presence of the explanatory virtues, (i)-(iv) listed above. These virtues are sensitive to the object that features in the explanation. Take again the ball example and the altered ball example with the wind. How best to intervene can be very different in the two cases. For example, suppose again that the ball was light and there was a wind. I might, then, intervene by throwing the ball against the wind. However, such an intervention might not work in the original ball example (when there’s no wind, the ball might just end up on the street). The generality of the object also affects the kinds of available follow-up questions: Contrast *should I use a square toy instead of a ball?* as opposed to *should I use a ball that’s heavier than the one I have?*

It is worth noting at this point that broad and deep explanations take objects with a higher degree of generality as the objects that feature in the explanations – for example, kinds of structures. On the other hand, local and flexible explanations will often take objects with a lower degree of generality to be the objects which feature in the explanations – for example, a system at world *w* and time *t*.

4. Aside: The “Bottom Up” or “Micro” Perspective and the Uniformity of Practices and Structures

Following part of the general strategy in Epstein (2015, *forthcoming*) on social groups, I propose a “bottom up” or “micro” perspective in the investigation of practices and structures. (This is not necessarily at odds with Haslanger’s vision, but is rather an interpretation of it.) Epstein’s main contention is that there is often little uniformity to how social groups are individuated, how they persist and how they are set up (or “anchored”⁷ or “scaffolded”⁸). Likewise, I think there is often little uniformity to how social practices are individuated, how they persist, and how they are set up. As such, in investigating structures or kinds of structures, like the structure instantiated by the Yablanger system or families, one should begin by looking at individual family systems, their practices, and generalizing from there to characterize structures and kinds of structures.

⁷ Cf. Epstein (2015).

⁸ Cf. Haslanger (*forthcoming*).

To get a sense of how much practices can vary in their individuation, persistence and anchoring/scaffolding conditions, here are but a few illustrations.

Sometimes practices don't exist, like the rut in the road, until many people, in many contexts, have engaged in a pattern of interaction – for example, have driven over that part of the road. Some practices live and die with a couple of people negotiating a shared solution to some short-term coordination problem (think of the types of scenarios psychologists put subjects into to test these things; or the professor's grading curve in the Garfinkel example). Some practices are set up purely by a shared understanding, but are never enacted because no one ever successfully enacts them (for example, think of a practice we collectively design to serve some function, but the function is never properly served – handling the mail in some remote region of Antarctica). Some practices are created by interacting structures (for example, those whose schemas compose – imagine a practice of pet marriage). Some practices are sustained by interacting structures – for example, take Haslanger's core example involving Lisa and the interaction of employment and family structures – interaction of this sort might be thought to create and sustain a practice of quitting a job for childcare purposes. Practices can come into existence, and their existence sustained, in a wide variety of ways.

What is more, at the system level, notice that existing practices can be practiced in a wide variety of ways: perhaps a wagon's path through the rut veers outside of the rut for the last 5 metres because the agent pulling the wagon pulled too hard. Or, to take a case from Dorr and Hawthorne (2014), imagine the first agent who interpreted salad making to include making salads with fruit, thereby practicing the art of salad making in a new way.

Since there is little uniformity in how practices and structures are individuated, how they persist, and how they are set up, as the foregoing variety of examples indicate, in attempting to investigate kinds of structures, like families, I propose that one should take a “bottom-up” or “micro” perspective.

5. Local, Flexible, Broad and Deep

So far, I've outlined Haslanger's account of social structural explanation and the social structures that figure in them, and proposed some further metaphysical distinctions with the aim of showing that even if a structural explanation provides the best explanation, there are still open issues as to what structure is appropriate for a given explanation. In the remainder of the paper, I will argue that in paradigmatic cases, a *local* and *flexible* structure, as opposed to a *broad* and *deep* structure, is the best object of explanation. But first, I need to say something about the properties *local*, *flexible*, *broad* and *deep*.⁹ So in this section, I will outline some factors involved in understanding the properties *local*, *flexible*, *broad* and *deep*. Such properties are important to the domains of feminist and critical theory, where a chief concern is to effectively identify social disadvantage and injustice, and appropriate interventions to change the problematic practices and structures involved. Local, flexible, broad and deep can act as indicators of the extent to which

⁹ To avoid having recourse to nominalizations like 'locality', 'flexibility', 'breadth', and 'depth', I'll abuse English and use the adjectives as if they were nouns standing for properties.

practices/structures constrain, how difficult it is to change practices/structures, and what shape interventions should take.

What properties of a structure or the practices that constitute structures do *local*, *flexible*, *broad* and *deep* pick out? There is a huge variety of factors that can play a role in understanding these properties, which indicates that determining how and the degree of structural constraint is no easy matter to resolve, nor is it easy to identify effective mechanisms of change. To name just some factors that may be involved: the distribution of the practice across populations, the frequency of enactment of the practice, heterogeneity in the way the practice is enacted, persistence of these features across time, the volatility and strength of our interests and assignments of value to the resources (which form part of the practice), the degree of context-sensitivity and semantic under-determination of the schemas (which form part of the practice), the degree to which anchoring (or scaffolding) conditions for practices of that kind are uniform or renegotiable, the modal profile of the practice and the systems that instantiate it, the material and social environment in which the practice (or enactments of the practice) are embedded, the essential, “extra-essential” or accidental properties of the practice (e.g., any abilities, powers, rights, responsibilities, obligations, etc. that might accompany enactment of a practice), properties of individuals enacting a practice (bodily, psychological, social – e.g., group memberships), and others.

Given the sheer complexity of the issues, it would be useful to have more terminology to distinguish each of these factors, but for present purposes I will stick to simple and hopefully intuitive characterisations of the properties local, broad, flexible, deep. I will also rely on examples to get across the kinds of contrasts I think are relevant as conditions for possession of the properties.

The intuitive notions I would like my reader to latch on to are as follows: A *local* structure/system/practice is one that is constituted by schemas, resources, individuals and bits of the material world that are more tied to a particular context, circumstance or milieu. A *flexible* structure/system/practice is one that is constituted by schemas, resources, individuals and bits of the material world that are modally less robust i.e., more contingent/accidental. *Broad* and *deep* correspond to the other end of the local-flexible scales just described.

To further illustrate the relevant distinctions, here are two contrasting examples.

Imagine a practice ‘smoozing’ organized around something called ‘smooze’. Smooze is a resource – a material substance to which populations assign value and upon which populations coordinate smoozing. Almost every person, from a wide range of populations, regularly smooze and uniformly do it in designated ways. It is a kind of social practice. This kind of practice is widespread. Smoozing has a long history, its schemas and ways of enacting them persist across time and they have a great propensity to do so. Agents assign value to smooze in a relatively uniform and unchanging way. Agents interpret the schemas constituting the practices of smoozing relatively uniformly and in a context-invariant way. In all the closest worlds (with respect to many antecedents), and most socially normal or ideal worlds, smoozing exists as it is practiced in the actual world. In all closest worlds (with respect to many antecedents), and most socially normal or ideal worlds, agents take the social meanings associated with smoozing to be

what they are in the actual world. When individuals decide what to do, how to perform various interactions with their friends, family and objects – their decisions are highly constrained by smoozing. Further, smoozing is an individual level property, as opposed to a stage-level property (Kratzer, 1995).

By contrast, when we explain why Mary got an A in the Garfinkel example, we appeal to a practice that is much more local and flexible. Though there is a kind of practice that is grading on a curve, this kind of practice manifests in a large variety of ways. In effect, each time a professor decides to grade on a curve – to engage in that kind of practice – they “make” (anchor, scaffold) a new curve (schema, practice, structure) to suit their purposes. For example, they will have particular grading criteria and university policies that factor into designing the particular grading curve (schemas, practice, structure). And they will have to take into account the particular composition of their class, as well as the particular assignments the class was given. Moreover, different professors will create different grading curves (instances of that kind of practice) in different ways. Moreover, the practice devised by the professor, once it has served its purpose, exists no longer. It is instantiated by Mary and her classmates, but won’t be instantiated by anyone else afterwards. Still further, the grading structure the professor used could have easily been different. He could have easily set up the practices (schemas and resources) constitutive of the grading structure in a different way. Though Mary and her classmates were perhaps harshly, though only temporarily, constrained by the grading structure imposed on them, the professor’s choice about how to grade was not so constrained: neither by “templates” (i.e., ruts), resources, nor by schemas for the interpretation of grading curves.

6. A Local and Flexible Explanation for Haslanger’s Core Case

Coming back to the core case involving Lisa, Larry and Lulu and question (3a/b). Granted that a structural explanation provides a better explanation than an individualistic one, we can further ask: what kind of structural explanation provides the best explanation? I contend that a local and flexible explanation provides a better explanation of Lisa’s decision to quit.

There are of course many different local and flexible explanations one could give, but let us focus on one involving a description of the particular family system (Lisa, Larry and Lulu, related in various ways) and the behaviour of and constraints on that particular system and its members. In other words, the explanation might take something like the following form:

Lisa occupies node n in her family.

Her family is constrained in way W (by lack of suitable childcare in her family’s community for Lulu, the 75% wage given to Lisa by her employer and a >75% minimum salary required to cover their family’s living expenses).

Node n has 75% wage in her family.

Lisa (in virtue of occupying node n with 75% salary) is constrained in way W and quit her job as a result.

The structure invoked in this explanation is local and flexible, and the explanation in terms of this structure provides an adequate answer to (3a/b): It is local in that Lisa, Larry and Lulu are a specific family system that is constrained by circumstances particular to their family (lack of childcare in their community, Lisa's crappy employer, how much food and rent costs in their community relative to what they earn, and so on). The structure is flexible in that the constraints faced by the structure could have easily been different (for example, had relatives lived close by or Lisa had the option of working part time). The behaviour of Lisa's family system and its members is flexible as well in that what her family and the members of her family do is in large part determined by the decisions and deliberations of the family system, and these decisions and deliberations could have been very different had Lisa and Larry had different attitudes or had the question been about a different family system (even one facing the same circumstances). Likewise, Lisa's family system and the practices, schemas and resources that constitute it are determined in large part by the decisions and deliberations of Lisa and Larry, the outcome of these decisions and deliberations can be very different for different families, and so, the practices, schemas and resources underlying Lisa's family system are (or at least could be) flexible.

Moreover, the local and flexible explanation above seems like an adequate answer to (3a/b): The needed structural conditions framing Lisa's decision are in place in a similar manner to the Garfinkel case involving Mary's A. Moreover, like Haslanger's broad and deep structural explanation (see immediately below), it does better than any individualistic explanation: The explanation involves a structure (albeit a local and flexible one), and there are enough background structural conditions in place to provide insight into the options available to Lisa as opposed to Larry and to understand why her decision to quit was rational.

Haslanger seems somewhat undecided on the issue of the appropriate structure for the case, and this at least demonstrates that it is a difficult matter to sort out. Indeed, she initially characterises her structural answer to (3a/b) in relatively local and flexible terms:

To answer (3a/b) it is not enough to say that Lisa quit (just) because she wanted what's best for her family. ... The fact is that Lisa quit her job because she chose to and Larry didn't also choose to quit his job. It is a background structural constraint that they both can't quit, and so Larry's behavior, their relationship, and the limited options available are crucial to explaining her action. As before, it seems better to shift the object of explanation to the structure: Why did Lisa end up in the gully (so to speak)? *Because Lisa is part of a system that includes Larry, her employer, etc., and given that Larry wasn't going to quit, the employer wasn't going to provide childcare, and she couldn't just leave Lulu home alone, this was her only real option. She might have made a rational choice to quit, but it is inadequate to just point to her choice as if it occurred independently of the workings of the system.* (2016, p. 123, my italics)

However, throughout the remainder of the paper, Haslanger provides answers in terms of more broad and deep structural relations:

The fact is, of course, that Lisa quit her job rather than Larry because *Lisa is a woman who occupies the wife/mother node in a problematic structure of family work relations.* The structure within which she and Larry live combines facts of human (infant) dependency, *a stable framework of gender relations,* and *a particular wage-labor system.* These structural constraints limit the possibility space—this choice architecture—for both Lisa and Larry; the differences in what is available to them, *given their gender,* is crucial for explaining what occurs. (2016, p. 124, my italics)

Thus, I take Haslanger to be leaning towards a broad and deep explanation. In particular, she is leaning towards the claim that the best explanation of Lisa's quitting her job involves appeal to

more than just local and flexible features of Lisa's node and Lisa's family, but includes appeal to features of a broader and deeper family structure, Lisa's position within that broad family structure (that she occupies the wife-mother node), gender relations (that she is a woman) and wage-labour relations.

7. Local and Flexible Structural Explanation as a Better Explanation

There are several reasons to think that local and flexible structural features, rather than broad and deep features, are involved in an adequate, or the best, explanation of why Lisa quit her job.

7.1 The Case for Local Structure

The key structural constraints in the example are local – lack of suitable childcare in their community, the 75% wage given to Lisa by her employer, the fact that the family requires >75% to live off of – are constraints faced by Lisa's family (the specific system or group) and these constraints are tied to the particular circumstances of their family at the time when Lulu is born. Families in general, and not even families of the same type as Lisa's will not, in general, face the same circumstances or have the same constraints. It is the constraints on and the circumstances of Lisa's family that cause Lisa to (decide to) quit, not broad constraints on or broad circumstances of families in general or families of the same type as Lisa's.

Further, one might argue that Lisa quit because she occupies the node in her family system with the property of having 75% salary, not because her node is the wife-mother node or because she is a woman. The factors relevant to the structuring cause of Lisa's choice needn't have much to do with her being a mother, a wife or a woman, in any substantial sense (her husband qua family member faces the same constraints, it is just that he occupies the node with 100% salary). It might be salient that Lisa occupies the wife-mother node and that she is a woman, but she doesn't or at least needn't face the relevant constraints because she is a wife, a mother or a woman.

One might reply here that it is important to explaining why Lisa quit that she is a wife and a mother, because to do otherwise would be to disregard the importance of the general social fact that women earn less than men, and that acknowledging this is important for the possibility of intervention and social change. This reply is legitimate; however, I think acknowledging this fact and its importance is fully compatible with providing a local and flexible explanation. The point here is merely that additional consideration is needed in order to establish the broad and deep features as explanatory in Lisa's case. One way to do so, would be to argue that paying women less is than men is a social practice in Haslanger's sense, and that this practice is relevant to explaining Lisa's decision to quit – that it is a structuring cause of Lisa's decision to quit.

Finally, returning to the discussion immediately above, it needn't be any broad features of the wage-labour system or any broad employment practices that constrain Lisa's family: Lisa's employer is crappy and many other employers are crappy too, but it needn't be any shared properties with these other employers that are structuring causes of the choice to quit.

These considerations give reason to think the circumstances surrounding and constraints on the structure that are explanatorily relevant are local, as a consequence the structure relevant to explaining why Lisa quit should not be broad, but local.

A related argument that broad node occupation or broad relations are not plausibly relevant has to do with the level of autonomy different systems/groups (of a particular kind) have in organising themselves and forming their own practices, schemas and resources that constitute the group's structural relations. Take families: different families organize themselves differently, they might interpret practices, schemas and resources in their own way (appropriate to them), or they might anchor or scaffold their own practices, schemas and resources which are independent from and perhaps even incommensurable with any broad social practices one might associate with families (or families past). It is worth noting that the undoing of broad and deep practices and schemas is after all what is oftentimes needed for social progress. Thus, one might have a picture of the strictures of marriage and motherhood past, but much progress has been made since times past. That is worth recognising. Perhaps even enough progress has been made that explanation of Lisa's action in terms of her family structure should be in local terms as either there are no cohesive broad features of families, or there are none that are explanatorily relevant to Lisa.

7.2 The Case for Flexible Structure

The key structural constraints in the example are likewise flexible – lack of suitable childcare in their community, the 75% wage given to Lisa by her employer, the fact that the family requires >75% to live off of – are constraints faced by Lisa's family that could have easily been different. For example, if one of Lisa's colleagues at work had suddenly quit a week before she was scheduled to leave her job, then she might have gotten a big promotion. In such circumstances, many of her and her family's constraints disappear and many more options are available to both Lisa and Larry: They can afford childcare and both Lisa and Larry can keep their jobs, Larry has the option to stay at home, etc. The circumstances and structural constraints crucial to what options are available to Lisa, and Lisa's decision, are accidental.

The behaviour of Lisa's family system and its members is flexible as well in that what her family and the members of her family do is in large part determined by the decisions and deliberations of the family system, and these decisions and deliberations could have been very different had Lisa and Larry had different attitudes or the question been about a different family system (even one facing the same circumstances).

8. Questions, Answers and Explanations

Haslanger argues that Garfinkel's erotetic account of structural explanation is well suited to provide an account of social structural explanation where the social structures involved are as her account of social structures stipulates. Recall that, according to Garfinkel, explanations are answers to questions and an explanation is structural when the question either explicitly states structural conditions or presupposes them. A crucial feature of this account is that which social structure is involved in a given structural explanation depends greatly on the question being asked. In particular, whether or not a given structural explanation involves a broad-deep structure or a local-flexible structure depends greatly on the question being asked.

Structural conditions limit the space of possible answers to those where the given structural condition is satisfied. An important demand of the erotetic account, then, is that the answer be *informative* and *relevant* given to the question asked and the purposes of the questioner (i.e., the theorist). We can assess whether or not a given structure is apt based on whether or not it figures in an informative and relevant answer to the given question. In answering a given question by including descriptions of structural features that might indeed be present, but that are not relevant to the question asked, the answerer is in breach of (a version¹⁰ of) Grice's maxim of relation: be relevant. Further, in explaining phenomena at a level of generality that goes beyond the level of generality demanded by the question is to over-answer – to be over-informative and provide more information than is needed – in breach of (a version of) Grice's maxim of quantity: 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), and 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.¹¹

In what follows, I query:

- (i) whether the core question at issue, (3a/b), presupposes (it doesn't explicitly state) any broad-deep structural conditions;
- (ii) whether any broad-deep structural conditions are relevant to answering the question, and finally;
- (iii) whether a broad and deep answer is over-informative given the question asked.

I will address each of these in turn. My contention, for the purposes of fruitful philosophical debate, is that broad and deep features are (i) not presupposed, (ii) not relevant, and (iii) over-informative. However, this is probably too strong a contention, so instead one might weaken this and claim that it is at least an open issue whether or not broad and deep structural features are presupposed, relevant and informative.

(i): There are a few definitions of presuppositions of questions. Here are three:

Presupposition 1) A presupposition of a question is something the truth/satisfaction of which is a necessary condition for a successful interrogative speech act. (Katz, 1972).

Presupposition 2) A presupposition of a question is a proposition entailed by all possible answers to the question. (Keenan and Hull, 1973)

Presupposition 3) A presupposition of a question is a proposition whose truth is a logically necessary condition for there being a true (i.e., correct) answer to the question. (Belnap and Steel, 1976)

Given question (3a/b) or even the more probing questions (4a/b), aimed at explicitly eliciting a structuring cause for Lisa's choice, broad and deep structuring conditions are not obviously presupposed:

- (4) a. Why did Lisa have more limited options than Larry?
- b. Why does Lisa have 75% the salary that Larry does?

¹⁰ I say "a version" here since the maxims applied in this setting will be Gricean considerations relevant to a theory of explanation, not a theory of communication.

¹¹ It is also possible to under-answer by explaining phenomena at a level of grain different from that demanded by the question.

(3a/b) and (4a/b) do not obviously presuppose broad and deep structural conditions like:

- (5) a. Lisa is a woman.
- b. Lisa is a wife-mother.
- c. Lisa is part of a family of kind *f*.
- d. Lisa is engaged in wage-labor relation of kind *l*.

Broad and deep features, like (5a-d), do not satisfy any of the definitions provided above. It is not the case that in order to even successfully count as asking (3a/b) or (4a/b) one must presuppose that Lisa is a woman or part of a family of kind *f*. Neither are any of (5a-d) entailed by all possible answers to (3a/b) or (4a/b). Neither are the truth of any of (5a-d) necessary for there being a true (correct) answer to (3a/b) or (4a/b).

(ii): Lisa's being a wife-mother, a woman, part of a broad kind of family structure, or part of a broad kind of employment structure are arguably not needed to provide an exhaustive answer – i.e., an answer that entails all accurate answers to (3a/b). Moreover, neither of these structural features are relevant, arguably, in that neither entails a partial answer to (3a/b).¹² For example, that Lisa is a woman and Larry a man doesn't *entail* that she, as opposed to him, occupies the node with 75% salary. That Lisa is an employee of a particular kind of employer with employment practices *P*, does not *entail* that Lisa as opposed to Larry occupies the node with 75% salary (unless one of those practices includes paying employees – e.g. only female employees – lesser salaries¹³). Likewise, for the other broad and deep features.

Someone asking questions from a feminist or critical perspective might respond that when asking questions relevant to people's circumstances and decisions, we should by default assume that gender is almost always relevant. However, there are reasons to think this would be a mistake (and here I don't think I say anything Haslanger disagrees with).

Someone might respond at this stage by claiming that structural features like gender are more often presupposed and relevant than one might otherwise think (perhaps especially where the question is asked from a feminist or critical perspective). But consider again the Mary case: The answer to (2a/b) is not that Mary is a woman and wrote the best final.¹⁴ Further, doing so may be in tension with the list of virtues (i)-(iv) from section 2. For example, such a proposal seems in tension with virtue (ii): It is a virtue of the structural answer to (2a/b) that it have a certain stability:

In explaining why Mary earned the A, it doesn't matter where she was born, who her parents were, or what she had for breakfast: what matters is that only one A was possible, and her final was better than all the others. (2016, p. 119)

If it doesn't matter what Mary ate for breakfast or who her parents were, then we can plausibly say that it doesn't matter that she is a woman.

¹² Cf. Roberts (2011, p. 12) for this definition of relevance.

¹³ One could argue here that there is such a practice, but then my aim here is to suggest that we need such an argument.

¹⁴ Though, someone might indeed push this point.

(iii): Finally, to answer (3a/b) in terms of broad and deep structural features, even when adequate, is arguably to over-answer – to answer the question at a level of generality beyond what the question asks. To add that Lisa is a woman may not make the explanation inadequate, it is to provide more information than is required. I argued in section 3, that this can interfere with preservation of the virtues (i)-(iv) (cf. also the next section).

Suggestive or Rhetorical Questions: To end this section, a note of caution. There is a potential hazard in endorsing the idea of theorizing with a purpose (Haslanger, *forthcoming*) and the view that explanations are answers to questions, that one needs to be careful to avoid, or at least be aware of (it may also be useful in correcting one's opponents).¹⁵ *Why*-questions are often used *rhetorically* or *suggestively*. Take for instance, the following example:

(5) Why would Lisa quit?

A question like (5) can easily take the place of (3a/b) in theorizing and considering hypothetical cases. It can also easily be asked rhetorically, where the speaker has a negative bias and assumes a negative answer is correct (i.e., Lisa wouldn't quit). Further, such a question can be suggestive – in that it implies a certain kind of answer, and it can be unbalanced in that it asks a question while presupposing or confirming a particular point of view. In theorizing with a purpose, especially when those purposes are important and pressing, it is hard not to let those purposes get (too) hard-wired into the inquiry – into the questions, and the answers to the questions. As such it is important to be aware of how one is asking and answering questions. This is of course true of any inquiry, but especially when a lot is at stake – theoretical bias is hard to avoid, but even harder and more important to avoid when the stakes are high.

9. Some Virtues of Local and Flexible Explanation

I now turn to describing two additional benefits of local and flexible explanation.

*Counterfactual Support*¹⁶ – There are explanatory costs to a broad and deep explanation of why Lisa quit her job. Broad and deep explanations are modally too coarse grained to be helpful in answering counterfactual questions, like the following:

(Q1) If Lisa had had a better job, would she have quit?
If Lisa had had a better job, then she would not have quit.

(Q2) If Lisa had had a better employer, would she have quit?
If Lisa had had a better employer, then she would not have quit.

If the explanation of why Lisa quit is broad and deep, then one is committed to answering *yes* to (Q1) and (Q2) (also for more precise versions of (Q1) and (Q2) – e.g., a job with 120% salary):

¹⁵ To be clear, I am not claiming that Haslanger does anything like this. I merely think it is an interesting point worth considering from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

¹⁶ See also, Garfinkel (1981, p. 58) on *redundant causality*. By providing similar considerations to the foregoing, I would argue that the outcome of Lisa quitting is not causally redundant.

Depth is in part a modal property of structures and constraints on structures (at least the way I am understanding the term). If a structure or its constraints are deep, then these will not differ in close counterfactual worlds. Consequently, an explanation of Lisa's situation involving deep structures or constraints will not allow for differences in close counterfactual worlds. Without differences in close counterfactual worlds, we cannot answer (Q1) and (Q2) negatively. This is problematic because good explanations should be counterfactual supporting.

The local and flexible explanation of why Lisa quit, by contrast, is modally fine-grained enough – the structure and its constraints differ in the relevant respects in close possible worlds. Hence, the local and flexible explanation can provide negative answers to (Q1) and (Q2), and is counterfactual supporting.

Moreover, here's a practical benefit of this approach. If one of the goals of our theorising is to somehow use the information yielded by our theories to improve the situation of individual women, like Lisa, then there are costs to broad and deep explanation in this regard. If the explanation of Lisa's situation is broad and deep, then how we go about improving Lisa's situation will likewise be broad and deep. But, at least from Lisa's point of view, it would be much preferred to implement structural changes that are tailored to her life and her situation. And that's true not just for Lisa, but for everyone.

This is not to say that the strategy for improving the situation of women as a group should always be individualised. It is, rather, to point out that solutions and interventions should often be tailored to something like the system level, and insofar as we can generalise from these to kinds of systems or structures, then solutions and interventions can apply to these. In general, it is worthwhile to recognize the wide variety of things that can be done independently of any broad and deep features affecting women as a group, and that broad and deep features will often abstract away from important aspects affecting even very many individual women. Haslanger's account of social structures at the local and flexible level gives us excellent tools for pre-emptively and concurrently addressing structural problems, since practices for Haslanger are largely collective solutions to coordination problems:

Social practices are, in the central cases (though not all cases), collective solutions to coordination or access problems with respect to a resource. The solution consists in organized responses to the resource. (2016, p. 126)

Haslanger's account gives us the tools to emphasise the role of coordination and deliberation at the system level as especially important to establishing and maintaining just social structures, and in avoiding and challenging unjust ones. Individual women often face injustices as a result of being positioned in disadvantaged nodes when they are parts of systems.¹⁷

Another issue with using broad and deep explanation in informing how to address Lisa's situation is that broad and deep changes are often hard to implement. And, even if we could implement broad and deep changes to some level of generality, there is a distinct chance that

¹⁷ Note that this is not to say that women have been or are bad at coordinating or deliberating, since there are a variety of things that can explain why women are so positioned despite having great capacity to coordinate and deliberate.

these changes would not affect Lisa's life or improve her situation (Lisa may be an exception and there may be numerous exceptions).¹⁸

Issues of intersectionality¹⁹ are relevant here: Suppose that Lisa is Hispanic. Supposing we are giving a broad and deep explanation, Lisa being Hispanic would (or at least could) add an additional broad and deep feature to our explanation of why she quit, but importantly since the structures of gender and race are overlapping,²⁰ the constraints associated with these features will be additive: Any constraints Lisa faces as a result of her gender and race will simply be the constraints she faces in virtue of her gender and the constraints she faces in virtue of her race taken together independently.²¹ This is the wrong result from the point of view of intersectionality theory.²²

The upshot here is that even when Lisa is a woman and Hispanic and faces structural injustices, those injustices needn't always be in virtue of her gender and race, and when they are, intersectionality theory and other considerations give us good reason to think these injustices are a result of local and flexible structures and constraints. This is not to say that some structural injustices are not pervasive, modally robust and explanatory: It is just to say that whether or not they are (often) supervenes on facts about local and flexible systems/groups and their constraints.

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¹⁸ This is not to say we shouldn't address any general broad and deep issues. It is just to say that they are not always helpful in addressing Lisa's situation. (They are perhaps more likely helpful to future Lisa, or as an investment in future generations.)

¹⁹ Cf. Crenshaw, K. (1989).

²⁰ Cf. Haslanger (2014b).

²¹ See Jones (2014) for similar considerations related to intersectionality and Haslanger's analyses of race and gender. Haslanger (2014b) offers a reply, however, I remain unconvinced. Perhaps the considerations brought up in this paper offer an alternate way out.

²² One might try to address the additivity worry using some form of intersectionality theory. Ultimately, I think such solutions will lead one towards more local-flexible structures.

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