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How to Hold Unjust Structures Responsible in International Relations

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Recent public discourse and political theory center on "structural" approaches of assigning responsibility for injustice in contrast to an "interactional" perspective. The interactional approach corrects discrete harms between agents to return to a just baseline, whereas the structural approach casts a wider net implicating agents in harmful structures for systemic transformation. This theory note advances the understanding of structural responsibility in international relations by defending it against common critiques of underspecification and lack of targeted accountability. We argue that structural arguments are better understood as constituting a framework on the nature of injustice rather than a theory or descriptor of particular harms. We present a "framework, theory, action" heuristic, drawing from constructivism's evolution from a theory (like realism and liberalism) when it first appeared to a framework (like rationalism) more recently. Our framework heuristic makes available a fuller range of conceptual tools to hold unjust structures responsible, including through targeted blame and liability, and discards the need to invent new actions to discharge structural responsibility. Rather than settle on one definition of structural responsibility—what it means, where it is located, and how it is discharged—we direct scholars to the numerous ways structural responsibility may be theorized and enacted.

El discurso público reciente y la teoría política ponen en el centro los enfoques "estructurales" de asignar la responsabilidad de la injusticia en contraposición a una perspectiva "interaccional." El enfoque interaccional corrige los daños discretos entre los agentes para regresar a un punto de referencia justo, mientras que el estructural despliega una red más amplia que involucra a agentes en estructuras dañinas para la transformación sistémica. Este artículo teórico promueve el entendimiento de la responsabilidad estructural en las relaciones internacionales (RI) defendiéndola contra las críticas comunes por infraespecificación y falta de responsabilidad dirigida. Sostenemos que los argumentos estructurales se entienden mejor como constituyentes de un marco sobre la naturaleza de la injusticia más que como una teoría o un descriptor de los daños particulares. Presentamos una heurística de "marco, teoría y acción," basada en la evolución del constructivismo de la primera aparición de una teoría (como el realismo y el liberalismo) a un marco más reciente (como el racionalismo). La heurística de nuestro marco proporciona una variedad más completa de herramientas conceptuales para hacer responsable a las estructuras injustas, incluso a través de la culpa y la obligación dirigidas, y descarta la necesidad de inventar nuevas medidas para cumplir con la responsabilidad estructural. En lugar de fijar una definición de la responsabilidad estructural, es decir, lo que significa, dónde se encuentra y cómo se cumple, dirigimos a los académicos a las numerosas maneras en que la responsabilidad estructural puede teorizarse y representarse.

Le discours public récent et la théorie politique se concentrent sur des approches « structurelles » de l'attribution de la responsabilité des injustices au lieu, au contraire, d'adopter un point de vue « interactionnel ». L'approche interactionnelle corrige les nuisances discrètes entre agents pour revenir à une base juste alors que l'approche structurelle jette un filet plus large impliquant les agents des structures nuisibles pour une transformation systémique. Cet exposé théorique fait progresser la compréhension de la responsabilité structurelle en relations internationales en la défendant contre les critiques courantes de sous-spécification et de manque de responsabilité ciblée. Nous affirmons que les arguments structurels sont mieux compris comme constituant un cadre sur la nature de l'injustice plutôt qu'une théorie ou un descripteur de préjudices particuliers. Nous présentons une heuristique « cadre, théorie, action » s'inspirant de l'évolution du constructivisme, qui est passé d'une théorie (comme le réalisme et le libéralisme) lors de sa première apparition à un cadre (comme le rationalisme) plus récemment. Notre cadre heuristique met à disposition une gamme plus complète d'outils conceptuels pour tenir les structures injustes pour responsables, y compris par le biais d'accusations et de responsabilités ciblées, et écarte le besoin d'inventer de nouvelles actions pour décharger la responsabilité structurelle. Plutôt que de se contenter d'une seule définition de la responsabilité structurelle—ce qu'elle signifie, où elle réside et comment elle est déchargée -, nous orientons les chercheurs vers les nombreuses façons dont la responsabilité structurelle peut être théorisée et mise en œuvre.

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Introduction

There has been a recent shift in how responsibility for injustices is framed in public discourse. In the United States, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has demanded structural criminal justice reform (Forliti 2020), medical schools have reevaluated curricula in light of the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on marginalized communities (Iwai 2020), and faculty have gone on partial strikes to push universities for "more than diversity" to address systemic racism in academia (More than Diversity 2020). The renewed urgency to confront structural injustices faces a deceptively simple question: What do we do? This note tackles the question in international relations (IR) to clarify how to hold unjust structures responsible. Rather than settle on one definition of structural responsibility—what it means, where it is located, and how it is discharged—we direct IR scholars to the numerous ways structural responsibility may be theorized and enacted.

International political theory identifies two broad classes of harm, interactional and structural, with corresponding approaches to responsibility (Fanon 2008 [1952]; Young 2011; Lu 2017; Nuti 2019). The interactional approach locates responsibility for injustice in the interactions between agents. This view is predicated on a "cause + control" model of responsibility, where an agent is deemed responsible if and only if their actions helped cause the harm *and* their actions were fully under their control (Hayward 2017). The interactional approach assumes a "just or morally acceptable baseline, against which individuals' wrongful actions constitute aberrations" (Lu 2017, 101). Interactional responsibility requires identifying discrete harms and correcting them to return to the just baseline (Young 2011, 120). In this view, a just world is possible if the right principles, actions, and institutions are identified and followed. Interactional responsibility then concerns "a series of debts that can be identified in advance, reckoned up, negotiated, balanced out, and discharged" (Satkunanandan 2015, 2). The interactional approach is largely associated with legal accountability meant to correct backward-looking violations (Vetterlein and Hansen-Magnusson 2020, 10).

The structural approach frames responsibility for injustice in the broader structures perpetuated by agents. Structural arguments claim that "individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes" (Young 2011, 105). Outside "cause + control," individuals uphold unjust structures unintentionally "through their ordinary day-to-day actions" (Digeser 2018, 8). The structural approach assumes that "individuals' wrongful actions typically conform to, rather than deviate from, a morally defective baseline" (Lu 2017, 101). A common example of structural injustice is homelessness, an unjust outcome produced in "a complex combination of actions and policies by individual, corporate, and government agents—actions and policies that most people consider normal and acceptable, or even necessary and good" (Young 2011, 99). The structural approach is thus associated with taking on responsibility for forward-looking repairs where the "point is not to compensate for the past, but for all who contribute to processes producing unjust outcomes to work to transform those processes" collectively (Young 2011, 108).

IR has long studied structural injustice from perspectives rooted in Marxism (Cox 1987; Anievas 2010), feminism (Enloe 1989; Tickner 2001), dependency theory (Dos Santos 1970), postcolonialism (Chowdhry and Nair 2003), and decolonialism (Sabaratnam 2011; Shilliam 2021). However, the field has only recently begun to theorize how to assign responsibility for structural harms (Lu 2017; Ackerly 2018) outside a liberal normative framework (Beitz 1979; see Nili 2015 for a review). This international structural responsibility scholarship argues that while interactional accountability may be appropriate to address harms perpetrated between clearly identifiable agents equal under the law within a shared political system, such conditions are not always met in global politics. For instance, Catherine Lu's (2017, 20) examination of ongoing inequalities and traumas stemming from colonialism reveals that a focus on interactional accountability masks the broader structures that perpetuate "political catastrophes" in former colonial societies. Per Lu, adequately addressing colonial legacies of injustice will require more than post-hoc attributions of causal responsibility to specific actors or institutions; it will require a fundamental restructuring of the statist world order to rectify the global hierarchies entrenched during colonialism.

Related IR research in collective memory (Subotić 2011; Rothberg 2019) and indigenous studies (Wilkins 2013; Sloan Morgan 2018; Midzain-Gobin 2021) criticizes individualist approaches to responsibility. In transitional justice, pursuing discrete individualist accountability "may remove the urgency of addressing the causes of crimes and the policies that led to them" (Subotić 2011, 159). Some international ethicists identify "'excesses of responsibility' involved in atrocities that legal practices of assigning individual criminal responsibility cannot capture" (Ainley 2011, 408). For others, moral responsibility is insufficient: "In a world beset by empirical global problems and global collective inaction, we need less to speak of the moral responsibility of political agents than to develop a new language of political responsibility that has purchase on practical politics" (Beardsworth 2015, 72). In this vein, there is a turn to studying "implicated subjects" who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without themselves being direct agents of harm" (Rothberg 2019, 1). For instance, contemporary settler societies implicate "settler comfort" where "liberal citizenship is bound up in settler coloniality through the way it allows certain subjects access to benefits" (Midzain-Gobin 2021, 4). IR scholars interested in pushing beyond individualist accountability and moral responsibility would find an alternative in structural responsibility, just as Hannah Arendt (1963, 2003) did when theorizing "political responsibility."

While theorists have greatly advanced our understanding about structural responsibility since Arendt (Young 2011; Schiff 2014; Satkunanandan 2015; Hayward 2017; Lu 2017; Ackerly 2018; Nuti 2019; Sardo 2020), they struggle to confront two common critiques related to making structural responsibility actionable. First, that the practices of reforming unjust structures are underspecified (Eisenberg 2018; McKeown 2018; Weldon 2018). What kinds of actions lead to more just structures? Are these actions reconcilable with legal accountability? Or does structural responsibility necessitate moving beyond law? Second, that the diffuse nature of structural injustices works against targeted accountability for redress (Nussbaum 2011; Goodhart 2017), especially in historical injustices (Nuti 2019; McKeown 2021). Structural theorists claim that individual blame and state liability are best left out of their approach (Young 2011; Lu 2017, 2018b). They ask to think beyond "'accountability' and 'reparations' to construct innovative practices of justice and reconciliation" (Lu 2017, 267). But, absent blame, who mobilizes to change unjust structures? Absent liability, how can states be held responsible for historical structural injustice?

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We argue that structural responsibility is best understood as an organizing *framework* within which many theories dictate a variety of responsible actions. While structural proponents sometimes refer to their approach as a framework or frame (Lu 2017, 2018a), there is more work to be done to specify why structural responsibility can *only* operate as a framework. We draw an analogy to IR frameworks of rationalism and constructivism within which, for instance, realist or liberal theories infer state conflict or cooperation. The heuristic of layering framework, theory, and action accommodates the two critiques of structural responsibility. First, we clarify that claims of individual blame and state liability operate on the level of theory rather than framework, meaning that just as one can build liberal theories within both rationalist and constructivist frameworks, we may advance blame and liability within both interactional and structural frameworks. Holding individuals blameworthy and states liable is compatible with structural responsibility given the framework's emphasis on acknowledging complicity in unjust structures (Hayward 2017; Abdel-Nour 2018). Second, we show that there is no need to invent new actions to discharge structural responsibility nor can structural responsibility *only* be discharged collectively. Laws can enact both interactional and structural responsibility, as can reparations. However, similar practices hold different meanings. What differentiates laws or reparations in a structural framework is addressing injustices as power relations in which we are all enmeshed rather than promoting only enough perpetrator accountability to return to a just baseline.

The rest of this note proceeds as follows. We first introduce structural responsibility and its two critiques. Then, we conceptualize the "framework, theory, action" heuristic, drawing on IR traditions. Finally, we unpack the implications of conceptualizing structural responsibility as a framework for theorizing and enacting responsibility in unjust structures.

Structural Responsibility

Given that structural responsibility identifies structures as the source of harms, responsibility is a product of being entangled and implicated in these structures. The structural approach thus begins by assuming a persistent disposition to act to repair harmful structures by continually widening the net of contributory agents. For Hans Jonas (1984, 6), such an "imperative of responsibility" derives from technological advancements expanding the reach of human agency in a "realm of collective action where doer, deed, and effect are no longer the same." Jonas further charges us with a "duty toward the existence and the condition of future generations"—that is, "in the first place, with ensuring that there *be* a future mankind" and then "with a duty toward their *condition*, the quality of their life" (Jonas 1984, 40, emphasis original). Structural responsibility recognizes that inequality is a constant feature of our shared sociopolitical environments.

Structural responsibility also foregrounds politics. Arendt argues, "the question is never whether an individual *is* good but whether his conduct is good for the world he lives in. In the center of interest is the world and not the self" (Arendt 2003, 151, emphasis original). Consider the Socratic proposition, "It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong," which Arendt (2003, 153) counters: "The political answer to the Socratic proposition would be 'What is important in the world is that there be no wrong; suffering wrong and doing wrong are equally bad'. Never mind who suffers it; your duty is to prevent it." For Arendt, by virtue of inhabiting a political world where we are bound to the actions of others, both as conditions of our own possible action and as the unforeseen impacts of our action, we are always-already responsible. Jonas deploys the same critique to claim "we ask the question not, as Socrates did, for single actions committed and suffered here and there, but for the constant effects on the victims of a *system* of injustice" (Jonas 1984,171, emphasis original).

But how can individuals bear responsibility for harms they did not directly cause? Arendt separates "political (collective) responsibility" from "moral and/or legal (personal) guilt" (Arendt 2003,151). For Arendt (2003, 157–58),

> No moral, individual and personal, standards of conduct will ever be able to excuse us from collective responsibility. This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.

Arendt's distinction between moral and political responsibility first appears when she considered individual moral blame for Adolf Eichmann—a Nazi officer who oversaw transportation to the extermination camps—as a separate question than his collective complicity in the German state's actions done in his name (Arendt 1963, 51–53). For Arendt, Eichmann and other Germans "bore political responsibility for the crimes because citizens had failed to maintain the public–political world for which they were all collectively responsible" (McKeown 2018, 486). Arendt found moral philosophy lacking for addressing responsibility inhering in political structures. However, Arendtian political structures are focused exclusively on the state, limiting political standing to citizens like Eichmann over refugees and stateless people (Ackerly 2018, 44–45).

Iris Marion Young builds on Arendt while extending political structures beyond the state in the "social connection model," a canonical contribution to structural responsibility. Young thinks with Arendt in identifying Eichmann's failing as "not that he was cruel, malevolent, self-serving, or stupid, but that he was *thoughtless*. He failed to think about the meaning of his actions and their consequences, failed to understand the bureaucratic system from the point of view of its victims, failed to reflect upon the wider meaning of the social and political system in which he participated" (Young 2011, 84, emphasis original). But Young shuns Arendt's statism, arguing that "responsibility in relation to injustice … derives not from living under a common constitution, but rather from participating in the diverse institutional processes that produce structural injustice" (Young 2011,105). Thus, in global supply chains "workers, owners and even the nation–states that have jurisdiction over them are embedded in transnational economic structures which connect individuals and institutions in faraway corporate boardrooms and retail outlets to them" (Young 2004, 374–75). Young develops the social connection model, arguing that "all individuals 'connected' to structural injustice share political responsibility … to collectively struggle against it" (McKeown 2018, 484). Jonas' *system* of injustice looms behind the social connection model as Young considers "the cumulative effect of millions of distinct actions by particular individuals, the unknowableness of the harm being caused, and the sweeping away of the conditions of containment and proximity for ethics" (McKeown 2018, 486).

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Theorists have expanded on the social connection model by fleshing out structural responsibility as stymying ongoing reproduction of harms, which occur through social practices and norms and result in exclusions from—or denials of—identities, roles, agency, or aspirations held or sought by particular persons or groups (Lu 2017, 3) and their "structural descendants" (Nuti 2019, 62). Structural responsibility requires that individuals and groups engage "in collective political action to reform the institutions, structures, and relationships of power to promote rather than inhibit human flourishing" (Sardo 2020, 2). In short, structural interventions disrupt practices and norms that perpetuate exclusions and harms.

Moreover, structural responsibility requires a critical stance and continual interrogation of current structures and norms, given that we cannot presume existing structures or norms provide an adequate basis to evaluate injustice. Thus, the structural approach challenges the interactional view's assumption of a just baseline, which obscures injustices that are built into the very baseline conditions of life. For example, colonialism was far from an aberration prior to World War II; it was a legal and commonly held practice of "civilized" nations (Lu 2017, 58). The goal of allocating responsibility in the structural framework is not to return to a prior "just" state, but to transform unjust structures and continually push in the direction of justice, recognizing that justice is a regulative ideal rather than achievable reality. Like an asymptote, while we may get ever closer to "justice," it is something that society can only strive toward, not reach.

Yet, eschewing a just baseline presents a problem for establishing even the "direction" of justice. Structural responsibility proponents aim not to provide alternative criteria to the just baseline. Instead, they argue that at the heart of structural responsibility is an understanding of injustice as "a power relation, not merely the consequence of a power relation" (Ackerly 2018, 72). Power relations are socially constructed and structural justice involves finding and rectifying recurring social vulnerabilities:

> The pursuit of justice that responds to structural injustices is fundamentally corrective, not of an agent or an interaction, but of the conditions in which agents interact and relate to themselves, each other, and the world. In this form, corrective structural justice responds to structural injustices or defects that enabled or produced objectionable harms and losses that placed some agents in objectionable social positions of vulnerability or privilege that made unjust interactions or objectionable conditions systematically possible or even probable. (Lu 2017, 35–36)

Thus, the structural framework "describes a political ethic, a way of orienting oneself in and to political life, in which complicity in injustice is constitutive of the political condition" (Sardo 2020, 12). Bending toward justice is a disposition of acknowledging complicity and working to change the conditions. While ideals like "equality" or "democracy" can be useful in challenging unjust power relations, they are not in and of themselves the standard by which injustices are measured in a structural approach. Rather, these ideals are footholds that offer traction until the next asymptotic destination appears.

Critiques of the Structural Approach

While structural arguments provide a sound foundation for understanding the origins and manifestations of structural injustices, they offer less sure footing when it comes to taking action. In Lu's discussion of structural justice above, how does one correct the "conditions in which agents interact and relate to themselves, each other, and the world"? Thus, the first common critique of structural responsibility is underspecification: "What counts as disassembling structural injustices such as colonialism, statist bias, racism, or capitalism?" (Eisenberg 2018, 27). Young's social connection model is regarded as too thin: "She does not explain what she means by 'connection' to structural injustice. She does not explicitly tell us what *kind* of connection to structural injustice generates political responsibility for it" (McKeown 2018, 484, emphasis original).

Underspecification is in some ways baked into the structural perspective since the very pervasiveness of social structures makes it difficult to observe them. Novelist David Foster Wallace (2009, 1–2) captures this dynamic:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?"
>
> And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

Let us further imagine that in Wallace's parable the young fish are living in toxic water, reducing their life expectancy. How might they confront the toxicity without even knowing about water? Importantly, how do they "dismantle toxic structures"? Moving from fish to humans, the underspecification critique highlights that we are much better at identifying structures (*this is water*) and structural injustice (*this water is toxic*) than proposing remedies (*this is how you fix toxic water*). Consequently, structural reforms may feel removed from lived experiences of injustice, potentially disempowering those seeking concrete steps to address injustices (Weldon 2018, 39). Scholars of transnational activism acknowledge that "problems whose causes can be assigned to the deliberate (intentional) actions of identifiable individuals are amenable to advocacy strategies in ways that problems whose causes are irredeemably structural are not" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 27).

The second common critique of structural approaches is that the diffuse nature of structural injustices works against targeted accountability. Young follows Arendt in theorizing individualist blame as representative of moral rather than political responsibility because blaming seeks to avoid causing harm without disrupting harmful policies. For Young (2011, 89), to be political, responsibility must be exercised publicly with the aim of sparking collective action to intervene against unjust structures. Young contrasts her social connection model with what she calls the "liability model" that "looks backward to figure out who did what to whom" (Digeser 2018, 8). Young (2004, 381) notes blame as important for the liability model in "morality and law," and aims to "supplement" (Young 2004, 368) liability through the social connection model, "where the issue is how to mobilize collective action for the sake of social change and greater justice" (Young 2004, 381). In the latter context, Young argues "blame and finger-pointing … lead more to resentment and refusal to take responsibility than to useful basis of action" (Young 2004, 381). However, this position has led some to surmise that Young would not hold agents liable for structural injustice (Nussbaum 2011). Others deem Young inconsistent: "If people's continual search for bargains foreseeably leads to the structural injustice of sweatshops, why shouldn't we consider it blameworthy—at least once the connection is

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understood—and hold them responsible for it?" (Goodhart 2017, 180). If there is no direct blame or liability, then structural responsibility may become unactionable by being too diffuse to implicate any one agent (Eisenberg 2018, 28).

A related issue is that while Young and Lu consider the social connection model as supplementing the liability model in contemporary structural injustice, in *historical* structural injustice—such as slavery or colonialism—both argue against victim reparations, claiming "that the liability model should be rejected outright and that the focus should be on forward-looking transformation of contemporary structural injustice" (McKeown 2021, 8). Young asserts: "The remedies for racialized structural injustice in the United States concern institutional reform and investment, rather than payment construed as compensation to some present persons for wrongs done directly to other persons before they were born" (Young 2011, 185). For Lu (2017, 178–79), the structural approach requires

> endorsing a bitter, and contentious, claim: whatever contemporary agents may do in response to historic injustices of the distant past, their actions will not wipe the historic slate clean, or make whole what was smashed, or redeem the suffering of victims, or have any punishing or rehabilitative effect on those who participated in or contributed to the wrongs of the past. … While this view about the relationship between contemporary agents and historic agents is bitter, it may also be motivational, as it concentrates contemporary agents' moral energies on doing justice in our own time.

By dismissing reparations that assign liability to contemporary agents for their ancestors' harms, the structural approach confronts "a significant gap" in allocating responsibility (Nuti 2019, 157).

Why has it proven difficult to locate responsibility for structural injustice and make it actionable? We argue that the difficulty results from a misunderstanding of structural responsibility's conceptual contribution. Rather than understanding the structural approach as a class of harm or a theory articulating which actions lead to more responsible outcomes, structural responsibility should be understood as a framework for conceptualizing how *all* injustices arise.

Framework, Theory, Action

Frameworks are foundational assumptions that are the skeletons of theorizing. Two prominent frameworks in IR are rationalism and constructivism. The evolution of constructivism from a theory to a framework mirrors our intervention with structural responsibility. Unlike realism and liberalism (and their neovariants), rationalism and constructivism are not theories of international politics. Instead, rationalism and constructivism contain foundational assumptions about the world on which theories are built. As such, "neither approach makes many interesting empirical predictions about the world. … It is only with the addition of auxiliary assumptions—a particular theory of preferences, for example—that such predictions emerge" (Fearon and Wendt 1996, 53).

Figure 1 schematizes the layering of framework, theory, and action in international security. By "theory," we broadly mean articulated reasons; by "action," we mean observable practices. To be sure, frameworks are not atheoretical or removed from practice, which is why we separate the layers through dashed lines to indicate permeability. The heuristic only clarifies that frameworks cannot dictate action by

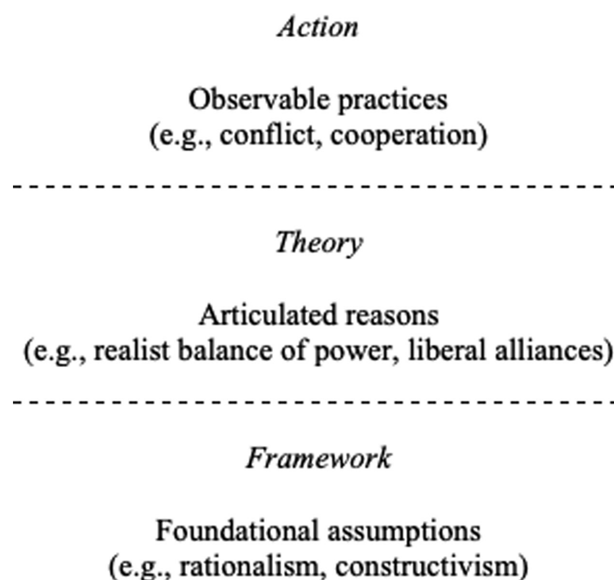

Figure 1. The layering of framework, theory, and action in international security.

themselves. Thus, rationalism or constructivism alone cannot predict conflict or cooperation. Instead, frameworks are filled by theories, such as realist balance of power or liberal alliances, which offer arguments about relationships between agents that cohere with the framework's foundational assumptions. This means that just as rationalism can undergird realist and liberal theories, so too can constructivism (Barkin 2010). While scholars acknowledge building on rationalism, constructivism is less commonly invoked this way. As constructivism appeared from the mid-1980s, it was forced to compare its contributions against existing IR theories, predominantly realism and liberalism, even though it was *not* a theory (McCourt 2016). To move past this conflation, some label "relationalism" as the constructivist framework (Jackson and Nexon 1999) and others promote varieties of social construction (Srivastava 2020a).

Just like the early constructivists established their work against dominant IR theory at the cost of some analytical clarity, the structural responsibility approach contrasts itself against the dominant liability model (Young 2011; Lu 2017). We explore this disagreement at greater length in the next section. For now, we clarify that instead of contrasting the liability model, which operates on the theory level, structural responsibility is better understood in juxtaposition to the interactional approach as competing frameworks with differing assumptions about the nature of injustice. Structural proponents would not disagree that structural responsibility requires additional theories to be enacted. Their own language searches for a more expansive notion than "theory": Young deploys "model," whereas Lu uses "frame" or "framework." Yet Lu does not identify "framework" as doing any layering work alongside theory and action. We argue instead that (1) structural responsibility can *only* operate on a framework level, (2) broadening the tools available in a structural responsibility framework to include theories invoking blame and liability, which (3) together accommodate the underspecification and targeted accountability critiques.

Figure 2 schematizes the layering of the framework, theory, and action in conceptualizing responsibility. The structural and interactional frameworks are the foundations from which theories make arguments about responsibility for

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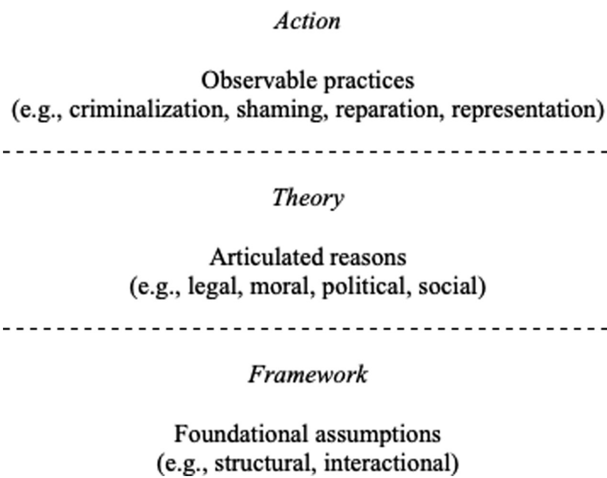

Figure 2. The layering of framework, theory, and action in responsibility.

harms based on law, morality, social norms, and political obligations. For instance, corporations may be held responsible based on theories that promote legal liability for corporate crimes (Sutherland 1949), moral responsibility for upholding human rights (Karp 2014), political responsibility for governance decisions (Scherer and Palazzo 2011), and social responsibility to broader communities (Auld, Bernstein, and Cashore 2008), among many articulated reasons. Actions that demonstrate responsibility follow from such theories. Thus, corporations may be held responsible in many ways, including criminalization that puts individuals in jails or shutters firms, reputational sanction with bad publicity that affects share price or leads to consumer boycotts, reparation that imposes fines or mandates higher wages, and representation through stronger union participation or diversifying executive leadership. Importantly, *all* these practices may be justified using either structural or interactional frameworks. We do not need to invent new kinds of action to discharge structural responsibility, a point we return to later.

By situating interactional and structural approaches at the framework level, we are better able to appreciate different theorizations of responsibility and where action should be focused. We elaborate on these payoffs next.

Theorizing Responsibility in the Structural Framework

The interactional and structural frameworks have different assumptions about injustice, which has implications for theorizing responsibility. In the interactional framework, injustices are conceptualized as deviations from a just baseline and responsibility is understood as correcting discrete interactions between agents. While direct violations between discrete parties work well for theorizing responsibility in an interactional framework, less direct harms spanning political communities do not.

The 2007–2008 global financial crisis provides an illustration. Although many believed there should have been a correction of the conditions that led to or permitted unjust practices that resulted in a global recession, the interactional framework provides little leverage to allocate responsibility to agents except in those exceptional cases where they could be identified as engaging in specific actions that violated established rules. One might even go so far as to say that the interactional framework cannot recognize the financial crisis as an injustice: unfair, certainly, as well as an undesirable policy outcome, but the interactional framework does not provide a solid basis for theorizing how individual agents could have both "cause + control" for harmful outcomes like unemployment, food insecurity, and bankruptcy from discrete acts like lending subprime mortgages or shorting the market. This is exemplified by then Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation James Comey's justification for not prosecuting high-level bankers: "Risky behavior isn't a crime, no matter how many innocent people got hurt by [it]. In this country, we put people in jail when we prove they knew that they were doing something criminally wrong" (Srivastava 2020b).

The structural framework locates injustice in the systemic linkages that condition agents' interactions. Rather than focusing on discrete interactions that produce harm, the structural framework focuses on identifying practices that (re)produce injustices (Ackerly 2018, 82). Responsibility is allocated to those who engage in such practices in order to challenge previously unquestioned actions and values to transform unjust systems. The logic of theorizing responsibility is different than that found in the interactional framework:

> If, today, we go for very different walks—I along a safe path, you along one fraught with danger—I might not be causally, and hence I might not be morally, responsible for the harms that you suffer. Still, I might share with you, and with all who walk these paths, political responsibility for working to change our (socially made) environment. In such a situation, no compelling principled argument justifies my washing my hands of the obligation to help remedy the structures we inhabit. (Hayward 2017, 397)

Theories for allocating responsibility within a structural framework focus on an agent's capacity to act differently and not further benefit from or reify unjust systems, rather than causally linking actions to harms.

Returning to the financial crisis, theorizing responsibility within a structural framework would identify those agents, beyond the bankers trading risky assets, who contributed to the unjust system that produced predatory lending and unequal distribution of risk in the financial system. As Occupy Wall Street (OWS) took over Zuccotti Park in 2011, protestors framed concerns structurally by pointing out how Wall Street is enmeshed in unjust structures of predatory capitalism and government corruption. OWS aimed to break through the "standard form of political participation" seeped in "individualism [and] token gestures of solidarity"—for instance, moving one's personal savings from a large to small bank—to promote instead that "acceptable results cannot be achieved if individuals are left alone to pursue their own advantage within a broken system" (Selinger and Seager 2011). Some argue that OWS adopted a new way of confronting injustice: "Occupy protesters have to create not just a set of demands, but a set of new ways of demanding. That sort of social experiment requires breaking from the status quo to find new leverage points on existing power structures" (Selinger and Seager 2011). But for others, OWS did not push for enough systemic transformations as its "consensus decision-making led to a lowest-common-denominator set of demands" (Srnicek and Williams 2015). Still, OWS' structural linkages opened political space for later proposals such as doubling the federal minimum wage.

Theorizing within the structural framework can also invoke blame and liability. Young left individual blame to

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the "backward-looking" liability model, arguing blame could hinder political action in the "forward-looking" social connection model. Martha Nussbaum's (2011, xxi) foreword to Young's book dismisses the forward/backward distinction "for the simple reason that time marches on." Others concur that "blame and liability are not unavoidable considerations that somehow taint the entire conceptual toolkit" of the structural framework (Abdel-Nour 2018, 19, footnote15). However, Lu (2018b, 45) pushes back: "Participants in a social structure that is structurally unjust are not complicit in the specific wrongdoing of culpable agents, but they are morally and politically responsible for creating or entrenching social conditions that may make some category of persons more vulnerable to suffering interactional wrongs or objectionable harms."

In contrast to Young and Lu, we argue that allowing theories relying on blame and liability into the structural framework does not make agents liable for *others'* wrongdoing, but only acknowledges that blame is invoked as soon as one begins deliberating responsibility for an agent's actions, whether within an interactional or structural framework. Indeed, "the practice of blaming … is a psychologically powerful mechanism for motivating people to work with others" to transform unjust structures (Hayward 2017, 400). Frameworks of responsibility inherently rest on a logic of blame, i.e., that one is connected to the harmful outcome and should take action to remedy it. Theorizing responsibility in the structural framework "may involve holding particular individuals, corporations, politicians, and governments accountable for specific harms they have perpetrated, such as misleading or defrauding the public. Young's insight is that while such efforts may be necessary aspects of [structural] responsibility they do not exhaust it, if only because holding individuals liable requires political action" (Sardo 2020, 12).

Prominent proponents of structural responsibility (Young 2011; Lu 2017, 2018b) deny that blame and liability can exist as easily within the structural framework as they can in the interactional framework. We join others (Hayward 2017; Abdel-Nour 2018; Sardo 2020; McKeown 2021) in cautioning against creating an artificial barrier between blame and liability and structural responsibility. Our "framework, theory, action" heuristic makes evident *why*: just as we would not deny realist theories access to the constructivist framework to explain conflict, theories involving blame and liability cannot be excluded from the structural framework to allocate responsibility.

Enacting Responsibility in the Structural Framework

The same action can emerge from the interactional and structural frameworks, just as conflict is equally possible within rationalist and constructivist frameworks. Theories using frameworks guide the content of the action, not the frameworks alone. We thus differ from Young and Lu, who present the structural framework as promoting different practical tools than the interactional framework, for instance by regarding victim reparations as inappropriate for redressing historical structural injustices. We contend that reparations fit just as well in a structural framework as an interactional one. However, assumptions driving action are different in the frameworks. Constructivists might extract different meanings from conflicts than rationalists. In the interactional framework, reparations are for discrete accountability to return to a just baseline. In the structural framework, reparations are one in an ongoing chain of "justice-promoting" practices (Hayward 2017, 398).

Consider the BLM protests in 2020 after the death of George Floyd by police officers. BLM framed the problem structurally: "The institution that is American policing keeps killing Black people, keeps doing terrible things, people keep trying to fix it, and it won't be fixed" (Kennedy 2020). One response from US Congress focused on making it easier to prosecute police officers for misconduct, requiring body cameras to always be on, creating more civilian review boards, and mandating antibias and de-escalation training (Edmondson 2020). Some in BLM pushed further, calling for police departments to be defunded or even abolished outright, arguing "the only way to diminish police violence is to reduce contact between the public and the police" (Kaba 2020). However, structural responses also go beyond officers, police departments, and their budgets. The unjust structures implicate many institutions: "The Supreme Court of the United States creates case law that makes it nearly impossible to hold officers accountable for killings and shootings. Cities, pressured by the political clout of police unions, give away the powers that would let chiefs fire officers they know are toxic and make departments reinstate the officers they have managed to get rid of. Police union heads sully the names of Black men killed by their members and get reelected" (Kennedy 2020). Thus, the problems of American policing are not just limited to police departments but have seeped into and reflect dysfunctions in other sociopolitical institutions. Actions guided within a structural framework would acknowledge and grapple with these intertwined connections.

Resultantly, the structural and interactional frameworks will produce different outcomes even when they rely on the same practices to respond to injustice. Imagine that a vacant lot in a neighborhood keeps getting vandalized. Practices of responsibility using legal liability theories within an interactional framework may include criminalization or imposing civil penalties like a fine. Practices of responsibility using legal liability theories within a structural framework may also include criminalization or fines; however, these would be motivated to repair harms to the community's structural position, perhaps using the fines to beautify the space, such as making it into a park or community garden. The difference between the two outcomes is whether the weight of responsible action falls exclusively on agents or whether the weight is dispersed to also include their structural linkages. In the interactional framework, the vandals are treated as largely autonomous and therefore endure all or most of the responsibility for a just end. In the structural framework, the vandals' actions are seen as a manifestation of injustices in their embedded structures. Within the structural framework, while the vandals bear some responsibility, responsibility is also attributed to the underfunding of community resources that positioned vandals to enact that harm. Indeed, activists now refer to the poor or marginalized as "under-resourced communities" (ICIC 2020).

Meaningful action for transforming unjust structures can take many forms. The broad and pervasive nature of structures can make it difficult to identify what changes are appropriate in a given context (Eisenberg 2018, 26). However, structural injustices leave observable marks as they "inform laws, norms, and discourse; shape the design and purposes of institutions and social practices; and produce material effects" (Lu 2018a, 3). Transforming unjust structures begins with identifying these marks and mapping how the parts fit together. Structural mapping of international injustices may reveal redresses such as "limiting the rights of states to control the application of territorial borders to transboundary groups," retracting "public recognition and valorization

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of historic figures who were active perpetrators of historic wrongs," and "pluralizing the agents that can have political standing in international and transnational institutions and structures" (Lu 2017, 269,272, 277; cited in Abdel-Nour 2018, 14).

Key to enacting structural responsibility is an explicit linkage to systemic harms. For instance, recent climate justice practices range from "traditional political action, such as advocating for and supporting candidates who support sustainable policies, … protests and other direct action, or public advocacy, communication, and deliberation to encourage shifts in public opinion and action" to "collective action to pressure employers and workplaces to decarbonize and divest from the fossil fuel industry" (Sardo 2020, 15). These existing actions already contain the potential to enact structural responsibility. What is important for the structural framework is that the practices of assigning responsibility are explicitly tied to remedying concrete systemic injustice. In this vein, some global environmental scholars have recently argued that corporate tax reform *is* climate policy to move "beyond mundane fights about the appropriate design of carbon pricing" (Green 2021). The US Green New Deal bill also links climate change to other systemic issues such as wage stagnation and declining life expectancy and proposes to lift "frontline and vulnerable communities" that were left behind by the New Deal into the middle class.

However, structural mapping and linkages are insufficient if agents do not also collectively come to terms with their own complicity in reproducing unjust structures. In fact, "actually assuming our responsibility for structural injustice requires that we first acknowledge and experience our implication in it" (Schiff 2014, 28). It is not obvious that agents, especially those advantaged by the status quo, would take the necessary step to implicate themselves in unjust structures. Indeed, our desire to protect our privilege and our self-image as a "good" person can result in what Charles Mills calls "epistemologies of ignorance," a form of motivated reasoning that guards those with privilege from acknowledging their role in injustice and is not easily overturned by facts or reason because it is "an ignorance that resists … an ignorance that fights back … an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly" (quoted in Hayward 2017, 404). For Clarissa Hayward (2017, 405), such ignorance can only be challenged through "disruptive politics," meaning "boycotts, mass protests, sit-ins, die-ins, and other forms of unruly political action" associated with the civil rights, OWS, and BLM movements. Importantly, disruptive politics do not aim to "convince those who are systematically advantaged by structural injustice that they ought to 'do the right thing' than to make it all but impossible for the privileged to not hear the voices of, to not know the political claims of, the oppressed" (Hayward 2017, 406).

Structural responsibility may also be discharged by empowering others. This is expressed in solidarity movements that build coalitions across disparate groups to transform unjust international structures. Brooke Ackerly (2018, 25) promotes a capacity-based "connected activism" model in global capitalism, where "actions [by consumers] are carried out in the context of political relationships that are working toward political transformation of [global] hierarchies." In reference to Bangladesh's 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory collapse that killed over 1,100 people, instead of boycotting clothes made from cheap labor that ultimately does little to rectify the structural precarity of workers, Ackerly (2018, 55) recommends supporting the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) as it builds a "political infrastructure that enables workers' active participation in the transformation of power dynamics of the global garment industry and the mitigation of its most harmful effects." In the structurally driven connected activism model, "conscientious consumer activists" "draw attention to the political and economic impact of causal actors' responsibilities," "contribute to shifting the power dynamic between workers and brands," and "bring political and economic pressure even though they do not have full information and may base their knowledge entirely on sources they deem credible" (Ackerly 2018, 59–60). Thus, many contrasting practices—assigning blame for what one has done or for what one has *not* done, engaging in disruptive politics or solidarity building—can coexist in the structural framework.

Conclusion

This theory note argued that structural responsibility is best seen as a framework that offers opportunities for different legal, moral, social, and political theories of responsibilities to build on its foundational assumptions. We overviewed how the interactional framework to responsibility corrects discrete harms between agents to return to a just baseline, whereas the structural approach casts a wider net implicating agents in transforming harmful structures for asymptotic justice. Varieties of theorization and action are consistent with taking or assigning responsibility in the structural framework. We departed from some structural scholars and aligned with others by treating blame and liability as appropriate for structural responsibility. Moreover, by presenting structural responsibility as a framework, we accommodated its two common critiques of underspecification and lack of targeted accountability. Ultimately, our intervention opens up space for enabling more responsible action through new configurations of the structural framework and theories of responsibility.

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