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# Notes from a Structural Epistemologist

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In answering my undergraduate students' questions about what I do, I keep coming back to the term *structural epistemology*. If some students push me further to not hide behind terms, I tell them: I study structures (social, political, and cultural institutions and arrangements)—not all of them at the same time, obviously—and what they do to our knowledge practices (what we know and how we know). And I give some examples: how refugee regimes *know* "persecution," I tell them, matters, particularly for asylum seekers. I also tell them that mine is *a kind* of structural epistemology guided by structural concerns in women of color feminist theories. This essay is a long way of answering the question: What do I do when I do structural epistemology? I consider this question to be an important one not only as part of an effort to rethink what I take myself to be doing in professional philosophy but also as an effort to characterize *commitments* and *strategies* I am influenced by and work with as a structural epistemologist.

Within structural epistemology, the term *structural* takes on many different meanings, and only occasionally is it used in a clearly defined way. Sometimes, the word *structural* helps us highlight how institutional environments can set up and maintain a collection of practices systematically, which, in turn, produces harms and benefits for certain groups. "Structural epistemic injustice" (for example, Doan 2017), for instance, calls our attention to the institutional ability to set up and maintain economies of credibility, which systematically assigns credibility deficits and excesses. Other times, the word *structural* becomes a way of paying attention to our reliance on how social and political arrangements and institutions manage ignorance and knowledge, that is, how they influence "what's considered to be relevant" for knowledge-production and how we should understand that relevance (for example, "structural epistemic dependence" [Sertler 2022]). In the case of "structural gaslighting," for instance, the word further emphasizes the ability of conceptual works to consistently obscure the "nonaccidental" relationships between structures of oppression and the "patterns of harm" they enable and produce (Berenstain 2020, 733).

My aim here is not to offer a comprehensive and definite definition of the term *structural*. Rather, I want to offer a perspective on structural epistemology based on a certain way of pursuing it. This, in turn, will somewhat elucidate the term *structural* in structural epistemology. Furthermore, I consider it helpful to rely on a tentative definition of structures. I use structures, here, to refer, first, to particular institutional environments (for example, universities, hospitals, courts) and second, to different sociopolitical

arrangements carried through particular institutions with systematic practices (for example, scientific research, immigration systems) (Lugones 2003; Haslanger 2015; Berenstain et al. 2022). In other words, I take structures to refer both to *institutional* environments and *institutionalized* practices of sociopolitical arrangements that regulate and generate "common sense" and various forms of "normativity."

In this essay, I will outline *commitments* and *strategies* that underlie my work as a structural epistemologist in the hope of furthering the metaphilosophical conversation of what I, for instance, take myself to be doing when I work as a structural epistemologist. I see structural epistemology as a powerful way of getting purchase on some of the forces that shape and constitute our world while simultaneously concealing their operation. In this sense, this is a personal and passionate defense of structural epistemology as a way to take an analytic and political stance toward a world that constitutively resists any analytic distance we want to put between us and it.

## I. Guiding Commitments

A commitment, here, refers to an organizing principle for an inquiry, that is, a principle that enables certain kinds of questions and limits others in order to shape both what the inquiry considers to be salient and the direction of the inquiry.[1] When I think about the commitments that guide my work as a structural epistemologist, two in particular come to mind: "a commitment to identify and question extant and concrete conditions of possibility and impossibility" and "a commitment to avoid one-off explanations." Given that my approach to structural epistemology is guided by structural concerns in women of color feminist theories, these two commitments rely heavily on the different forms of structural critique I locate in women of color feminist thought. Thus, there is a connection I am assuming as well as building here between structural concerns of women of color feminist thought and structural epistemology. This connection derives from two things: First, structural approaches in women of color thought prioritize *understanding* organization of domination (Ruíz 2022, my emphasis). Second, as Kristie Dotson reminds us with Patricia Hill Collins, "knowledge economies are engines" (Dotson 2015, 2322) for organization of domination in the sense that they play a key role in creation and sustenance of "unlevel knowing fields" (Bailey 2014, 62) that mark routine operations of oppression. This is to say that structural epistemological approaches as studies of the conditioning of knowledge by structures are an integral part of women of color feminist thought. This is both because of the concern with understanding organized domination and because of the efforts to capture the relationship between our practices of knowing and everyday operations of oppression. Keeping this connection in mind, in what follows I discuss two commitments that guide my work as a structural epistemologist.

### *Commitment to Identify and Investigate Extant and Concrete Conditions of Possibility and Impossibility*

"A commitment to identify and investigate extant and concrete conditions of possibility and impossibility" corresponds to organizing inquiries in a way that emphasizes how the phenomena we recognize as "problems" are enabled and maintained by structures, for example, institutions. In other words, this commitment encourages questions that aim to identify and critically examine how structures condition the lives of people (Combahee River Collective 2013). In this sense, a commitment to investigate extant

and concrete conditions of possibility and impossibility, in an effort to understand our realities, highlights the question of what is "reproducing" those realities (Smith 2012, 201). This commitment encourages us to examine *how exactly* the existing arrangements and institutions can create, sanction, and sustain "multilayered and routinized" practices for domination and how they have been doing so (Crenshaw 1991, 1245; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 797).[2] This means not only understanding *how* and *why* certain predicaments and vulnerabilities came to exist and are "selectively imposed" upon certain bodies but also questioning *how* and *why* they persist (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 803).

"A commitment to identify and investigate extant and concrete conditions of possibility and impossibility" can also motivate an inquiry into what gets foreclosed in discourse and in practice (Davis 2005). This inquiry is critical for two reasons. First, asking "what gets foreclosed in discourse and in practice" is an important way of rendering visible, for us, the conditioning that structures do. This means studying how existing structures *work to prevent* certain things, experiences, and ideas—including their own operations—from becoming available to us (Moraga 2015). This is about, in other words, paying attention to how structures, as part of the practice of enabling and maintaining domination, can condition, enable, and constrain the availability and unavailability of certain experiences, ideas, and phenomena. Second, the question of "what gets foreclosed in discourse and in practice" aims to pluralize social imagination. Impossibility-focused questions encourage imagination-triggering questions "that permit us to see beyond the given" (Davis 2005, 20) and open "new conceptual terrain [s] for imagining alternatives" (Davis 2003, 112). One might say that interrogating conditions of possibility and impossibility enables one to emphasize *what's been rendered un-real, un-available, un-doable, un-imaginable by structures.* And this emphasis aims to pluralize social imagination and cultivate an openness toward envisioning transformations for social and political structures (Davis 1998; 2003; Medina 2013).

### Commitment to Avoid One-Off Explanations

The second commitment that guides my work as a structural epistemologist—"a commitment to avoid one-off explanations"—comes from women of color feminist thought's prioritization of systems-based approaches to organized domination (Ruíz 2022; see also Dotson 2013). Prioritizing systems-based approaches to organized domination means, among other things, highlighting both the interlocking nature of systems of oppression and the persistent and pervasive nature of organized domination. Focusing on this persistence and pervasiveness motivates an understanding of our worlds that challenges seeing certain phenomena as one-off occurrences (Ruíz 2022, 183). I understand avoiding one-off explanations, here, in three different ways, as avoiding individualism, accidentalism, and newness. The creation and sustenance of organized domination is not an individual affair, is not accidental, and is not new (though it might take place in different ways). Collins's discussion of the systemic disregard of Black women's intellectual tradition, for instance, speaks to this commitment (Collins 2009). The disregard does not take place in isolated individual cases and is not a single individual's doing (two different kinds of nonindividualism). The systemic disregard is not accidental and not new. It does not happen out of nowhere; it has a past and present. This past and present is designed to and functions to secure a certain kind of future (thus indicating a certain form of designed persistence and inertia in structures) (Ruíz 2022). The systemic disregard happens all the time and consistently, so

it is persistent and pervasive. Certain patterns and norms in our institutional environments enable this disregard, encourage it, and do their best to obscure this encouragement and this disregard (Collins 2009, 5; see also Dotson 2017).

I consider these two commitments—"a commitment to identify and question extant and concrete conditions of possibility and impossibility" and "a commitment to avoid one-off explanations"—to be guiding my work as a structural epistemologist. They organize my structural epistemological inquiries. In its effort to understand the relationship between our practices of knowing and structures that enable and constrain those practices, structural epistemology, as I understand it, prioritizes questions about conditions of possibility (and impossibility) and discourages one-off answers.[3] I now turn to the strategies I am influenced by and work with as a structural epistemologist.

## II. Constitutive Strategies

In this section, I outline two strategies that constitute my pursuits in structural epistemology and that I regularly identify in various structural epistemological approaches. I call the first one "agency/labor strategy" and the second "production strategy." "Agency/labor strategy" refers to a compilation of tactics used by structural epistemological inquiries in order to understand how contours of epistemic labor and agency are drawn within institutional environments and via institutionalized practices. "Production strategy," in turn, refers to a compilation of tactics used by structural epistemological inquiries in order to understand how knowledge-production is governed within and via institutions. Epistemic labor refers to the embodied cognitive work we do when collectively and/or individually attending to, noticing, processing, and making sense of aspects of the world. Epistemic agency concerns "the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given community of knowers in order to participate in knowledge-production and, if required, the revision of those same resources" (Dotson 2014, 115; see also Townley 2003). Governance, in turn, refers to a complex set of acts and processes of enablement, containment, organization, and management as well as its guiding norms (Whyte 2018; Berenstain et al. 2022). In what follows, I first discuss Dotson's definition of structure-centered epistemological inquiries. I then suggest the two strategies (agency/labor and production) as key for studying the conditioning of knowledge by institutional environments and institutionalized practices.

Dotson has recently named investigations focusing on this relationship between structures and knowledge-production "structure-centered epistemological inquiries" (Dotson 2018a). Structure-centered epistemological investigations, according to Dotson, prioritize understanding how social, cultural, and institutional environments influence *what one knows* and *how one knows* (Dotson 2018a, 134). If we use the language of analytic epistemology, structural approaches emphasize that "S knows that p, in context c" given "*social, political, cultural, and institutional environment E*" (146). Dotson notes: "An assumption in what I call structural epistemology is that who S is, what p concerns, and what contextual features have epistemic impact, *are all conditioned by social, political, cultural, and institutional environments*" (146). This is to say, for Dotson, many structural epistemologists hope to trace how *extra-epistemic* features condition "what is allowed to become knowledge" and in turn how we are affected by this conditioning (146). In other words, "who knows," "what we know," and "how we come to know" are "contingent on extra-epistemic features of our worlds, that is, nonepistemic features of our lives that have epistemic impact" (146).[4] Structural

epistemology is, then, about studying this epistemic impact of institutional landscapes or sociopolitical arrangements.[5]

If structural epistemology is, in general, about studying the epistemic impact of institutional environments and sociopolitical arrangements, my aim here is to offer some insights into one way a structural epistemologist like me, influenced by others, goes about doing so. I consider this effort to be a fruitful one for furthering our understanding of structural epistemology and of the tools it offers. In other words, if structural epistemology is about looking into how structures condition our practices for knowledge in general, the question is: How do we study this conditioning? In an effort to answer this question, I indicate two strategies I rely on: "agency/labor" and "production." In what follows, I will explain each strategy and discuss various tactics I identify within each strategy. "Agency/labor strategy" offers at least two tactics for understanding the contours of epistemic agency and labor within institutional environments: one outlining "epistemic status set-up," and one concerning "intervention/resistance ratio." "Production strategy," on the other hand, offers at least two tactics for examining how knowledge-production is governed within institutional environments or via institutionalized practices: one focusing on "norms of organization," and one on "norms of assessment." It is important to note here that in compiling each strategy (and its tactics), I draw on various scholars who have prioritized understanding how our institutional landscapes impact "what is allowed to become knowledge."[6] Thus I rely on their discussions in exemplifying different aspects of these strategies.

## Agency/Labor Strategy

"Agency/labor strategy" refers to a compilation of tactics used by structural epistemological inquiries that prioritize understanding how the contours of epistemic agency and labor are drawn within an institutional environment or via institutionalized practices. Agency/labor strategy involves at least two tactics for studying institutional environments and institutionalized practices: "epistemic status set-up" and "intervention/resistance ratio." Let me explain each in turn.

### Epistemic Status Set-up

"The set-up of epistemic status" is concerned with how institutions assign high or low epistemic status to people or groups (and to their labor) and how they attribute epistemic competence to people (Dotson 2018a).[7] In other words, the set-up of epistemic status inquires into formal hierarchies within institutional efforts to draw and redraw contours of epistemic agency and labor. In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Collins provides two cases of epistemic status set-up. The practice of ranking, that is, hierarchical arrangement, of different disciplines in higher education is one example of this. Collins notes that "Western colleges and universities" regularly "rank the sciences over the humanities" (Collins 2019, 47). This is institutional environments assigning lower epistemic status to humanities (and therefore to epistemic agents working withing humanities and to their labor) in understanding and producing knowledge about our world(s). Capturing and analyzing this set-up is important to understand how structures impact "what's allowed to become knowledge." Similarly, institutional environments and institutionalized practices can also attribute epistemic competence to people. As Collins encourages us to ask: What does it mean, for example, that the knowledge-production around the word "critical" has emanated from "such as short list of people, within such a small body of work, that occurred during a particular

time, and within a particular nation-state" (80). What is portrayed as critical theory in these cases, then, has been conditioned by the specific institutional practices during those particular times and within those particular nation-states. Thus, how structures set up epistemic status and assign epistemic competence for the investigation of "what it means to produce critical theory" matters for the knowledge-production around and on the word "critical."[8]

### Intervention/Resistance Ratio

In addition to "epistemic status set-up," the "agency/labor strategy" offers another tactic to understand how the contours of epistemic agency and labor are drawn within institutional environments and via institutionalized practices: the "intervention/resistance ratio." The intervention/resistance ratio highlights how institutional environments can enable and limit possibilities for intervention by epistemic agents. In other words, this ratio encourages us to question *how* an epistemic agent can intervene with the processes of knowledge-production and to what degree, and how much resistance they face. This is about the space for challenge provided by institutional environments and institutionalized practices to knowers and about how resistance-free these challenges can be carried out. Here, for example, drawing on Collins again, we can think about the different levels of resistance that Black feminist intellectuals face when they develop Black feminist analyses using standard epistemological criteria vs. when they challenge "the very terms of intellectual discourse itself" (Collins 2009, 18). The difference encountered in resistance speaks to the extent of interventions that can be carried out comfortably and who can do so.

So far, I have suggested that structural epistemological inquiries utilize a compilation of tactics I refer to as "agency/labor strategy." This strategy offers two tactics—"epistemic status set-up" and "intervention/resistance ratio"—in order to understand how the contours of epistemic agency and labor are drawn within institutional environments and via institutionalized practices. However, structural epistemological inquiries, while studying the epistemic impact of institutional landscapes, can also focus on knowledge-production more directly. The strategy I will discuss next, "production," is an outcome of that focus. "Production strategy" and "agency/labor strategy"—insofar as they are strategies for studying the epistemic impacts of institutional environments and institutionalized practices—highly interact with each other in structural epistemological projects. Concerns around epistemic agency and labor after all are not independent of how knowledge-production takes place, how it is organized, and so on, and vice versa. Nevertheless, I find the separation here analytically useful in underlining different kinds of emphases and tactics within structural epistemological inquiries. With that being said, I now turn to the "production strategy" and its two tactics: "norms of organization" and "norms of assessment."

### Production Strategy

"Production strategy" refers to a compilation of tactics used by structural epistemological inquiries that prioritize understanding how knowledge-production is governed within institutional environments or via institutionalized practices. I present this compilation of tactics under two categories: "norms of organization" and "norms of assessment." The "norms of organization" tactic concerns both how knowledge-production is organized, that is, which interests and lack of interest it is linked to, and which epistemic resources are encouraged and discouraged within this organization. The "norms of

assessment" tactic refers to practices of assessment of knowledge-production. Let me explain each in turn.

### Norms of Organization

A "norms of organization" tactic questions the interests as well as the lack of interest linked to a knowledge-production project and the epistemic resources encouraged/discouraged by that project. Nancy Tuana, for instance, in "Speculum of Ignorance," highlights how funding entities' interests—institutional interests, cultural interests—around gender can be influential for the knowledge-production that takes place (or doesn't take place) around male and female contraception (Tuana 2006). Both the interest in perceiving contraception as women's responsibility and the lack of interest of pharmaceutical companies in investing in male contraception influence how knowledge-production around contraception is organized. Similarly, Robyn Bluhm, in "Self-fulfilling Prophecies," calls our attention to how certain cultural interests in maintaining gender differences and gender stereotypes (such as women being more emotional than men) organized (problematic) knowledge-production in neuroscience (Bluhm 2013).

We can also look into what type of interpretive frameworks are encouraged and/or discouraged in institutional settings (Collins 2009). Institutions can enable, encourage, and legitimize or discourage different frames of intelligibility, which, in turn, enable and limit what can be understood or made sense of within a particular setting. For instance, as discussions of multiple scholars have shown, neither accurate comprehension of the work of faculty of color nor reflection on the significance of that work is structurally encouraged in many institutional settings (Collins 2009; Dotson 2015; Settles et al. 2021). Dorothy Roberts, for example, documents how "basic tenets of racial thinking" (for instance, races being composed of uniform individuals) is still used as a conceptual resource within genomics research, which in turn encourages flawed sampling methods and thus impacts knowledge-production in genomics research significantly and problematically (Roberts 2011, 65).[9]

### Norms of Assessment

In addition to "norms of organization," the "production strategy" offers another tactic to study how knowledge-production is governed within institutional environments and via institutionalized practices: "norms of assessment." A "norms of assessment" tactic investigates what plays a significant role in assessments of knowledge-production, that is, which measures are prioritized in assessing a project of knowledge-production. Institutional norms of assessment matter for knowledge-production in the sense that they enable, constrain, and maintain how knowledge production should be sustained and revised. In "Epistemic Exclusion," Isis Settles and colleagues provide different examples demonstrating the significance of the norms of assessment (Settles et al. 2021). What granting entities think is valuable already encourages certain projects and discourages others, and thus helps organize interest and lack of interest. Institutions of higher education can, in turn, use what granting entities think as meaningful criteria for the projects, which enables and encourages certain projects over others. Furthermore, how publication outlets are organized and used for assessment influences knowledge-production as well. For instance: "If mainstream journals tend not to publish work on topics that faculty of color are more likely to engage in and specialized journals are deemed less respectable, then an evaluation system that privileges

only a few publication outlets results in epistemic exclusion of certain types of scholarship and scholars" (Settles et al. 2021, 499).

Relatedly, where statistically significant results become an indication of successful knowledge-production in certain scientific research, researchers are encouraged to invent differences in order to present their knowledge-production as successful (Roberts 2011; Bluhm 2013). What exacerbates these issues is also the ambiguity, unclarity, and inconsistency that institutions afford themselves in creating, shifting, and using standards for assessment (Settles et al. 2021). This affordance enables institutions to consistently re-align their norms of organization and assessment.

I started this section of "constitutive strategies" with the question: How do we study the conditioning of knowledge by institutional environments and institutionalized practices? My aim was to pinpoint strategies, that is, compile tactics, that I come across in various structural epistemological approaches and that constitute my pursuits in structural epistemology. I identified two strategies: "agency/labor" and "production." "Agency/labor strategy," I suggested, includes two tactics: "epistemic status set-up" and "intervention/resistance ratio." Both tactics are helpful to understand how the contours of epistemic agency and labor are drawn within an institutional environment and via institutionalized practices. "Production strategy," in turn, offers "norms of organization" and "norms of assessment" as two tactics to interrogate how knowledge-production is governed within institutional environments and via institutionalized practices. These two strategies—agency/labor and production—respond to the question of how a structural epistemologist like me, influenced by others, goes about studying the epistemic impact of institutional landscapes or sociopolitical arrangements.

### What's Next?

Structural epistemology admits of two realizations: knowledge plays a significant role in shaping our day-to-day lives, and structures, in turn, play a key role in impacting knowledge. It houses a valuable set of inquiries, aiming to track what enables the continuity, the capacity, and the complicity of structures in creating and sustaining oppressive practices. In light of this I have tried to answer: What do I do when I do structural epistemology? This effort led me to identify two guiding *commitments*—"a commitment to identify and question extant and concrete conditions of possibility and impossibility" and "a commitment to avoid one-off explanations"—and two constitutive *strategies*—"agency/labor strategy," interrogating how contours of epistemic labor and agency are drawn, and "production strategy," examining how knowledge-production is governed within and via institutions—in my work as it relies on the works of others. This piece, for me, serves as an invitation to further the metaphilosophical conversation about what we can be understood to be doing when we work as structural epistemologists as well as to expand the toolbox of structural epistemology by identifying what some people *do* when they do it.

## Notes

**1**  In choosing the language of commitments, I draw heavily on Elena Ruíz's discussion of commitments in "Women of Color Structural Feminisms" (Ruíz 2022).
**2**  Within this approach, structural explanations are not disconnected from the need to identify and critique structural injustice (cf. Haslanger 2015).

3  I take this phrase of "enable" and "limit" from Lorraine Code's "Taking Subjectivity into Account" (Code 1993). I find this language very useful in explaining what structures do for knowledge.

4  It is important to note here that emphasizing the epistemic impact of extra-epistemic features is crucial for Dotson because she is cautious about representing structures as not purely epistemic entities (if there is such a thing).

5  Dotson's definition goes beyond institutional landscapes. However, since I'm using institutions in a very broad sense in this article, I'll continue with focusing on that aspect.

6  It is also important to note that in thinking about how our institutional landscapes impact "what is allowed to become knowledge," I am influenced by multiple conversations and discussions within women of color feminist theories as well as feminist social epistemologies, feminist philosophies of science, and epistemologies of ignorance. Not all the key contributors to these conversations and discussions are cited here.

7  In other words, one can say that it is fruitful to analyze how institutions approach and manage knowledge-possession and knowledge-attribution (see Dotson 2018b).

8  Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff's discussion of the epistemic status of midwives and their labor and knowledge within medical institutions could be another example in this section (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993).

9  See also Harding 2004, for instance, for further discussion on and examples of organizing knowledge-production and norms of organization.

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