

# What is White Ignorance?

Annette Martín

**Abstract:** In this paper, I identify a theoretical and political role for ‘white ignorance,’ present three alternative accounts of white ignorance, and assess how well each fulfills this role. On the Willful Ignorance View, white ignorance refers to white individuals’ willful ignorance about racial injustice. On the Cognitivist View, white ignorance refers to ignorance resulting from social practices that distribute faulty cognitive resources. On the Structuralist View, white ignorance refers to ignorance that (1) results as part of a social process that systematically gives rise to racial injustice, and (2) is an active player in the process. I argue that, because of its greater power and flexibility, the Structuralist View better explains the patterns of ignorance that we observe, better illuminates the connection to white racial domination, and is overall better suited to the project of ameliorating racial injustice. As such, the Structuralist View should be preferred.

**Keywords:** white ignorance, social structure, racism, oppression, ideology, wilful ignorance

## Introduction

There appears to be a considerable gap between Americans’ perceptions of racial injustice and the reality of racial injustice in the United States today. Only 61% of white Americans agree that Blacks are treated less fairly than whites by the criminal justice system, despite evidence suggesting that Black Americans are more likely to be stopped, searched, handcuffed, and arrested than white Americans, and more likely to receive harsher sentences for similar crimes.<sup>1</sup> In the financial domain, respondents estimated that Black families earn \$85 for every \$100 that white American families earn, and hold \$85 for every \$100 that white families hold in family wealth.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the gap is much larger: Black families only earn \$57.30 for every \$100 earned by white families, and hold just \$5 for every \$100 in white family wealth.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to

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<sup>1</sup> Even when controlling for factors such as crime rates, and racial and socioeconomic demographics. See (Commission 2018; Eberhardt et al. 2006; Hetey et al. 2016; J. Horowitz et al. 2019; Starr and Rehavi 2013).

<sup>2</sup> (Kraus et al. 2017).

<sup>3</sup> (Kraus et al. 2017).

lending, only 38% of whites (and 74% of Blacks) think that Blacks are treated less fairly than whites when applying for a loan or mortgage when in fact, a 2018 analysis revealed that Blacks applying for home loans were 1.8 to 5 times more likely to be denied than whites in 48 cities across the country, particularly in the South.<sup>4</sup> The apparent gap between perception and reality is even worse when it comes to health: only 26% of whites (and 59% of Blacks) think that Blacks are treated less fairly than whites when seeking medical treatment, and yet a 2017 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report shows that the medical care that Blacks receive scores lower on 40% of health care quality measures as compared to the care that whites receive.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, these gaps between what people believe and what the evidence suggests indicate that there is widespread ignorance about the state of race and racial inequality in the United States, particularly on the part of white Americans.

Of course, it is a banal fact that ignorance abounds. We are beings with limited time, energy, perceptual access, technological skills, and cognitive resources inhabiting a vast and complex universe that far exceeds our epistemic capacities. Ignorance, then, is needfully pervasive.

Nonetheless, the inevitability of ignorance in general does not mean that we should always respond to particular instances of ignorance with a shrug. There can be both theoretical and practical reasons for caring about ignorance. Ignorance is theoretically interesting, for instance, if it is patterned in surprising and distinctive ways. At the same time, ignorance can have bad consequences, ranging from the mildly inconvenient to the utterly devastating; and sometimes there are facts that an agent should know.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for various practical, moral, and theoretical reasons, ignorance sometimes merits sustained consideration.

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<sup>4</sup> Even when controlling for various economic and social factors such as applicant's income, loan amount, ratio between loan amount and applicant's income, type of lender, racial makeup of neighborhood, and median income of neighborhood. (Glantz and Martinez 2018; J. Horowitz et al. 2019).

<sup>5</sup> ('2017 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report' 2018; J. Horowitz et al. 2019).

<sup>6</sup> See (Goldberg 2018; Rosen 2008; Smith 1983, 2016).

‘White ignorance’ is meant to capture one of those forms of ignorance that merit our consideration for both theoretical and practical reasons. Epistemologists of ignorance have coined the term ‘white ignorance’ to refer to patterns of ignorance— like the ones I started off with— that are not merely coincidental or easily ascribable to the limits of finite beings, but instead systematically emerge from our social practices and are importantly related to the persistence of racial inequality.<sup>7</sup> White ignorance is, further, of great practical and moral concern because it has bad consequences: it plays a role in sustaining racial injustice. As such, I take the point of theorizing white ignorance to be to elucidate the epistemic dimensions of systemic racial injustice; the goal is to provide a clear account of white ignorance that will serve as an effective tool for diagnosing and critiquing the epistemic dimensions of white racial domination.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the central question of this paper is how we should conceptualize white ignorance so as to best aid the fulfilment of the relevant political and theoretical aims.

Despite being frequently invoked in critically-oriented discussions, direct theorizing of “white ignorance” has largely been neglected. As it stands, Mills (2007) provides the most extensive discussion of white ignorance. He does not provide an account of white ignorance, however, but rather “gesture[s] toward some useful directions for mapping white ignorance and developing, accordingly, epistemic criteria for minimizing it.” Until now, that mapping has not been done.<sup>9</sup> Clear presentations of a substantive account of white ignorance are missing, as are evaluations of possible accounts.

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<sup>7</sup> The term “white ignorance” is due to (Mills 2007). See also (Alcoff 2007; Bailey 2017; Fricker 2016; Medina 2013; Mills 2015; Outlaw 2007; Spelman 2007; Woomer 2019).

<sup>8</sup> By “white racial domination” I mean, roughly, a state of affairs in which there is a system of racial oppression that arranges racial groups into a hierarchy of social power and access to material benefits, with whites at the top of the hierarchy. I am assuming here that racial injustices are best understood as being structural and systematically linked such as to constitute racial oppression, and more specifically, white racial domination. Although I do not believe much hangs on it in this paper, like (Mills 2007), I favor a social constructivist account of race.

<sup>9</sup> The literature largely consists of very brief characterizations of white ignorance in the context of discussing some related topic. (Alcoff 2007; Fricker 2016; Medina 2013; Spelman 2007; Woomer 2019)

In this paper, I take up the project of determining how we should develop the notion of white ignorance to best aid our political aims. To accomplish this, I do three things in this paper. First, I consider the purpose of having a concept of white ignorance, and use this to develop desiderata for an account. Second, drawing on examples found in the literature, I offer reconstructions of two seemingly popular positions – the Wilful Ignorance and Cognitivist views – and evaluate them with respect to the desiderata. In so doing, I provide not only the first explicit articulation, but also the first critical evaluation of an account of white ignorance. Third, I propose a new account – the Structuralist view – that analyses white ignorance in terms of its connections to the social structural processes that generate and sustain white racial domination. Ultimately, I will argue that, as compared to the alternatives, the Structuralist account better accounts for the patterns of ignorance that we observe, better illuminates the connection to white racial domination, and is better suited to the project of ameliorating racial injustice.

## 1. Methodology

Before I begin to assess accounts of white ignorance, I want to clarify the nature of the project. I want to begin by noting what I am *not* doing in this paper.

First, I am not providing an analysis of our ordinary concept of ‘white ignorance.’ For one, there appears not to be an ordinary concept on which I could perform such an analysis. But even if there were, my aim is not to pin this down.

Second, I am not providing a causal analysis of empirical phenomena. Causal relationships do play important roles in the accounts that I will be discussing, and I will stipulate that certain causal relations hold in fictional examples as a way of providing concrete illustrations of these views. I hope it will seem plausible that similar relations might hold for their real-world counterparts, but I do not intend to settle this from the armchair.

The project I *am* engaged in is one of theory-building. The aim is to determine how we should develop the concept of white ignorance in order to best serve our practical and theoretical aims. Ultimately, this is part of a larger project of theorizing

(racial) oppression, which is itself part of a larger political project aimed at reducing and ultimately eliminating (racial) oppression. The role of theory-building in this context is to develop conceptual tools that will be useful for the political project insofar as they make room for, draw attention to, and help elucidate phenomena that play an important role in sustaining racial oppression.

As such, the inquiry that I am performing when asking “what is white ignorance?” is normative.<sup>10</sup> I am interested in how we should conceptualize ‘white ignorance’ in order to best inform the political project of ameliorating racial oppression. It may help to contrast this with a moral approach. If the goal here were to identify what is morally objectionable about certain patterns of ignorance, then our theorizing should draw attention to and help us distinguish between certain normatively relevant features such as individual control, how easy it would have been to achieve knowledge, etc. In contrast, here it may be appropriate to direct our attention to patterns of ignorance for which no one is blameworthy. The change in ends calls for a corresponding shift in attention. Note that in engaging in this kind of normative theorizing, it is important to avoid an analysis that, in the desire to prescribe solutions, is too narrow or oversimplified.<sup>11</sup>

These big-picture considerations give rise to three central desiderata for an account of white ignorance. An account of white ignorance should:

**(1) Account for important patterns of ignorance about matters pertaining to race and racial inequality.** An account of white ignorance should be able to account for observed patterns of ignorance, and features of those patterns of ignorance, that play an important role in white racial domination. More specifically:

- 1a) For any particular pattern of ignorance, the account should be able to make sense of why ignorance about that matter is so *widespread*.

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<sup>10</sup> As such, the project bears an important resemblance to ameliorative analyses. The key difference is that an ameliorative analysis begins with some concept that already plays an important role in our thinking. See (Haslanger 2000, 2005, 2012; Manne 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point.

- 1b) The view should be able to make sense of *demographic trends* in the distribution of ignorance. For instance, in many cases (like examples I started with), white individuals are more likely to be ignorant about some matter relating to racial inequality than non-whites are.
- 1c) An account of white ignorance should be able to make sense of the *form(s)* that these patterns of ignorance take – whether it be false belief (e.g. falsely believing that Black American families earn \$85 for every \$100 that white American families earn), suspension of judgment (e.g. suspending judgment on whether racism is still a live problem for people of colour in the United States),<sup>12</sup> or lack of belief (e.g. lacking any sort of belief about redlining, because one has never even heard of it.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, if there are interesting patterns in the *contents* of the ignorance – for instance, people are arriving at false beliefs with the same contents – the view should be able to account for this.
- 1d) White ignorance is often taken to be a paradigmatic instance of ignorance that is *active*, or resilient and difficult to eradicate.<sup>14</sup> An account of white ignorance should be able to make sense of this resilience.

**(2) Help account for the persistence of white racial domination.** Again, the point of theorizing about white ignorance is to help elucidate how patterns of ignorance help sustain white racial domination. In particular:

- 2a) The view should provide *extensional coverage*. That is, if there is a case that helps to explain the persistence of white racial domination (as indicated by empirical analysis), then the view should identify this as a case of white ignorance.
- 2b) One notable feature of white racial domination is its stability and resistance to change. A view of white ignorance will do better if it is better able to help account for this persistence and stability.

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<sup>12</sup> (Friedman 2013)

<sup>13</sup> Redlining refers to discriminatory lending practices. (Coates 2014; Rothstein 2017).

<sup>14</sup> (Alcoff 2007; Medina 2013; Mills 2007: 13; Woomer 2019: 1-2).

**(3) Accommodate the ways in which social practices give rise to patterns of domination-sustaining ignorance.** If empirical analysis suggests that there is an important way in which social practices give rise to patterns of domination-sustaining ignorance, then this should be captured by the view of white ignorance – I refer to this as providing *explanatory coverage*. Explanatory coverage is important because we should not fail to attend to, and thereby risk failing to intervene on, practices that play an important role in sustaining white racial domination. This is connected to the need to ensure that the result of our normative analysis does not paint an overly narrow or simplified picture of white racial domination.

In addition to these desiderata, views may have additional practical or theoretical costs and benefits. For instance, some views might offer additional explanatory power, provide greater suggestions for intervention, or suggest a means of motivating individuals to take action. Insofar as these advance the broader aims of the project, I will take them to count in favour of the view, and vice versa.

Lastly, I want to emphasize a separate point about the scope of the project. Like Mills (2015), I take it that, given the history of European colonialism, white ignorance will be found across national and inter-national contexts. Similarly, “white ignorance” should not be taken to assume a Black-white racial binary; rather, I expect white ignorance to be found across contexts in which non-white racial groups are oppressed.

## 2. The Wilful Ignorance View

The first view I will consider is the Wilful Ignorance View. On this view, an individual is white ignorant just in case they are wilfully ignorant about matters pertaining to race and racial inequality as a result of implicitly or explicitly trying to protect their psychological interest in seeing themselves as a good person in a mostly just world, while simultaneously trying to protect the material benefits they receive as a result of white racial domination (e.g. income, wealth, access to resources, social power, credibility).<sup>15</sup> The particular processes by which individuals maintain this wilful

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<sup>15</sup> This view is most clearly articulated in (Bailey 2017; Medina 2013; Spelman 2007;

ignorance may vary (e.g. avoiding relevant evidence,<sup>16</sup> failing to acquire interpretive resources,<sup>17</sup> or refusing to considering relevant issues<sup>18</sup>). But importantly, on the Wilful Ignorance View, white ignorance is the result of moves that white individuals make to avoid inconvenient truths about race and racial inequality.

## **Assessment of the Wilful Ignorance View**

### *Benefits of the Wilful Ignorance View*

First, the Wilful Ignorance View can account for why ignorance about racial matters is so widespread (1a), and in particular why it is so widespread among whites (1b): white individuals have a psychological and material interest in not knowing about the realities of white racial domination. Knowing the truth would make it more psychologically difficult to continue participating and benefitting from the processes that uphold their dominant status. As a result, they resist coming to know about these things, resulting in the observed patterns of ignorance.

Second, the Wilful Ignorance View also helps to make sense of the activeness of white ignorance (1d) and the persistence and stability of white racial domination (2). In general, ignorance about the realities of white racial domination would be expected to help preserve white racial domination by making it far less likely that the status quo will be challenged. But further, the wilfulness of white ignorance both accounts for its resilience – because they do not want to know, people continue to be wilfully ignorant even in the face of evidence and argumentation – and helps to account for the stability of white racial domination. It is not just that people do not recognize that there is a problem – and therefore do nothing to change it – but they *refuse* to recognize that there is a problem, and therefore implicitly refuse to do anything about it. Thus, the Wilful Ignorance View can help account for the stability of white racial domination.

### *Costs of the Wilful Ignorance View*

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Woomer 2019). This line of thought is also found in (Mills 1999; Moody-Adams 1994; Pohlhaus Jr 2012).

<sup>16</sup> (Woomer 2019).

<sup>17</sup> (Pohlhaus Jr 2012; Woomer 2019).

<sup>18</sup> (Moody-Adams 1994; Spelman 2007).



But despite these virtues, the Wilful Ignorance View has considerable shortcomings. The Wilful Ignorance View struggles to make sense of why non-white individuals are also white ignorant (1b), as well as why the form and contents of individuals' ignorance have tended to match over time (1c). Further, the Wilful Ignorance View fails to provide explanatory coverage, making it overly narrow (3).

First, the Wilful Ignorance view would seem to exclude non-white white ignorance: for one, it is white individuals who experience the tension between wanting to retain their sense of being good people and continuing to reap the benefits of white racial domination, and further, the focus on the literature is explicitly on dominant agents.<sup>19</sup> Yet it is not just white individuals who participate in these epistemic patterns – for instance, 30% of Black Americans think that being Black either helps or doesn't hurt people's ability to get ahead in the U.S. these days.<sup>20</sup> The Wilful Ignorance view, as represented in the literature, does not account for this. Still, one could depart from the literature and more broadly consider how psychological and material interests could, to some extent, incentivize non-white individuals to be white ignorant. After all, it is psychologically difficult to reckon with being a victim of systemic injustice, and non-white individuals may be materially rewarded by dominant agents for ignoring the realities of white racial domination. Broadening the view in this way might enable it to account for the demographic patterns we observe.

Second, it is not clear that the Wilful Ignorance View can account for the ways in which so many individuals, both white and non-white, have tended to converge on the same forms of ignorance over time (e.g. from widespread false beliefs that Black people are naturally servile to widespread false beliefs that Black culture is to blame for racial disparities). The general worry is that there are many ways of being ignorant about some matter: one could ignore the matter altogether, insist that the evidence is inconclusive and suspend judgment, or take on any of a large number of false beliefs. As such, merely appealing to an individual's interest in being ignorant about some matter cannot

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<sup>19</sup> (Bailey 2017; Medina 2013; Mills 1999; Pohlhaus Jr 2012; Spelman 2007; Woomer 2019).

<sup>20</sup> (J. M. Horowitz and Livingston 2016).

explain why they are ignorant in the particular way they are.

Still, one may suggest an expansion of the Wilful Ignorance View that says that in addition to a general interest in avoiding the truth about white racial domination, there also more particular social practices that incentivize certain forms of ignorance over others. For example, it could be said that biologically-racist views have fallen out of favour, such that one faces social costs for espousing these views. With enough practices like this, individuals could be incentivized to be ignorant in particular ways.

From a purely theoretical perspective, appealing to these more fine-grained practices could account for convergence, albeit by further expanding the view beyond what is seen in the literature. Nonetheless, it is dubious that the account in fact accounts for convergence across the board. For instance, consider various widespread, false, limiting stereotypes about non-white social groups – for example, that Black women are angry and aggressive, and that Latinas are feisty. While it is plausible that individuals will have an interest in believing *some* limiting characterization of non-white agents (so as to rationalize existing material inequalities without recognizing that there is some form of systemic injustice at play), it is not clear that individuals have an interest in believing *these* limiting characterizations – why angry instead of timid? Why feisty instead of lazy? There do not seem to be social practices that explain this convergence by incentivizing individuals to have these false beliefs over others (although, as we will see in the next section, there are practices that would explain this convergence in other ways). This suggests that there is a failure of explanatory coverage here – there are important patterns of ignorance whose explanation is not covered by the Wilful Ignorance View.

For another example indicating that the Wilful Ignorance View fails to provide explanatory coverage (3), consider the following case:<sup>21</sup>

**[Racial Exclusion]** Like many Americans, Rebecca believes the popular patriotic narrative that America is a land of opportunity that has historically welcomed all people, regardless of race or creed. However, she does not know that it was not

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<sup>21</sup> There are similar cases in other contexts. King Leopold II, for example, saw to it that records of Belgian atrocities in the Congo were destroyed or kept closed even to state officials for nearly a century (Ewans 2003: 170).

until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 that it became possible for non-white residents to become naturalized citizens, or that this same act reinforced a system of racial immigration quotas, capping the immigration of persons descended from the “Asia-Pacific triangle” to only 2,000 per year.<sup>22</sup>

*Racial Exclusion* reflects a paradigmatic instance of white ignorance and so, to satisfy 3b, an account of white ignorance should be able to adequately cover its explanation.

However, merely attributing Rebecca’s ignorance to motivated reasoning or individual avoidance misses a significant part of the story: faulty educational practices. Depending on how old Rebecca is, we can grant that there is a wilful component here. But this is insufficient. Adequately explaining Rebecca’s ignorance also requires appealing to social practices that propagate the patriotic narrative and obscure the history that goes against the narrative. Thus, even if we were to grant that the Wilful Ignorance View could identify this as a case of white ignorance, the account is too limited to adequately cover the explanation of cases like *Racial Exclusion*, and so fails to satisfy 3b.

### 3. The Cognitivist View

The second view I will consider is the Cognitivist View. The Cognitivist View is my reconstruction of what I take to be the most dominant view (and, in particular, Mills’ view.)<sup>23</sup>

On the Cognitivist View, white ignorance is ignorance that results from faulty reasoning, where, importantly, the faulty reasoning is explained by social practices that affect agents’ reasoning about racial matters.<sup>24</sup> As such, on the Cognitivist View, white ignorance is the result of some cognitive error that results from having one’s mental processes shaped by epistemically defective social practices.

There are various ways in which social practices can set individuals up for epistemic failure in accordance with the Cognitivist View. Social practices may:

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<sup>22</sup> See ('Public Law 82-414' 1952).

<sup>23</sup> Mills characterizes white ignorance as a ‘structural group-based miscognition,’ (Mills 2007: 13) a ‘group-based cognitive handicap,’ (Mills 2007: 15) ‘a cognitive tendency,’ (Mills 2007: 23) and ‘a cognitive orientation to the world’ (Mills 2015: 218). All but one of his examples involve social practices that directly affect agents’ cognitive processes.

<sup>24</sup> Some may prefer to call this the “Ideological View.” I avoid this because it raises substantive questions about, e.g., how ideology is best understood.

promote faulty norms of reasoning that individuals mistakenly take to be valid;<sup>25</sup> cast false premises (e.g. “natives are savages”) as “common knowledge;”<sup>26</sup> leave agents hermeneutically impoverished for recognizing the injustice at play;<sup>27</sup> set agents up for prejudiced testimonial sensibilities, so that they take marginalized knowers with insights about their oppression to be less credible than they actually are; or incentivize individuals to engage in motivated reasoning and avoidance. What unifies these is the idea that there are a variety of social practices that affect how individuals think and reason about matters of racial injustice in a way that makes it more likely that agents will get things wrong. On the Cognitivist View, white ignorance is ignorance that results from just such cognition-affecting practices.

## **Assessment of the Cognitivist View**

### *Benefits of the Cognitivist View*

First, the Cognitivist View is better able to explain convergence with respect to the form and contents that white ignorance takes (1c). The view can explain why individuals tend to go wrong in the same ways by noting that social practices will tend to supply individuals with roughly the same faulty cognitive resources. Moreover, as those social practices evolve, so do the contents of the false beliefs that people tend to hold, thereby explaining inter-personal convergence over time.

Similarly, the appeal to social practices helps explain demographic patterns (1b). The Cognitivist View can explain non-white white ignorance by noting that marginalized individuals can be socialized into practices that are contrary to their interests, while also noting that marginalized knowers will tend to have better access to contravening evidence, and thereby be better positioned (and so more likely) to escape the grip of these epistemically-defective social practices.<sup>28</sup>

Further, the Cognitivist View offers a richer explanation of the resilience of white

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<sup>25</sup> (Alcoff 2007)

<sup>26</sup> (Mills 2015: 218).

<sup>27</sup> (Medina 2013; Mills 2007: 27)

<sup>28</sup> (Toole 2019).

ignorance (1d) because it can point to particular ideological resources that help white ignorant agents dismiss arguments and explain away evidence.<sup>29</sup> This not only adds an important layer to the challenges one must face when attempting to eradicate white ignorance – and so better helps account for the stability of white racial domination (2b) – but also suggests ideas for practical intervention (e.g. engaging in conceptual engineering,<sup>30</sup> casting doubt on “common sense” background assumptions, and critiquing defective “norms.”)

Finally, the Cognitivist View is more explanatorily complete (3). Again, part of what explains Rebecca’s ignorance in *Racial Exclusion* is repeated exposure to the patriotic narrative that America is a land that welcomes all. The Cognitivist View, but not the Wilful Ignorance View, is able to capture this.

### *Costs of the Cognitivist View*

Although the Cognitivist View has significant advantages over the Wilful Ignorance View, the view also has significant shortcomings.

First and most foremost, it is still too explanatorily narrow (3b), because it overlooks social practices that promote domination-sustaining patterns of ignorance without directly affecting agents’ cognitive processes.

Recall *Racial Exclusion*. To adequately cover what is going on in the case, we must not only capture the fact that social practices supply Rebecca with false premises, but also the fact that she is affected by upstream processes of historic erasure. Specifically, she is affected by institutional policies that have curated the contents of her curriculum so as to exclude lessons about institutional racism. These practices promote Rebecca’s ignorance, not by supplying her with faulty premises or norms of reasoning, but by keeping important information away from her and her peers – or at least, making it more difficult to access. These practices don’t work by intervening on Rebecca’s reasoning. Rather, these practices intervene upstream of her cognitive processes by shaping what information is available for her to reason about to begin with. The

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<sup>29</sup> (Begby 2013; Dotson 2018).

<sup>30</sup> (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b, 2013a; Cappelen 2018; Haslanger 2000)

Cognitivist View cannot capture this second, significant explanatory dimension.

While I take the failure of explanatory coverage to be the most decisive critique of the Cognitivist View, there are two more minor criticisms that are worth mentioning. First, note that the Cognitivist View falls short when explaining the form that individuals' ignorance takes. While it can explain why it is that individuals have certain false beliefs, and plausibly also why they suspend judgment in particular cases, the account has a harder time explaining why individuals lack beliefs about certain subjects altogether. Consider not Rebecca's *false belief* about her country's historical attitude toward non-white immigrants, but her *lack of belief* about the racist immigration policies. The Cognitivist View cannot explain why she lacks beliefs about these matters, because this is not the result of faulty cognitive resources.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. The Structuralist View

We have seen that a major failing of both the Wilful Ignorance View and the Cognitivist View is a failure to account for the variety of ways in which social practices can promote ignorance – not just by creating conditions that incentivize wilful ignorance, nor influencing what goes on in agents' minds, but also, for instance, by creating external barriers to knowledge. To address these failures of explanatory coverage, I propose the Structuralist View.

On the Structuralist View, white ignorance refers to ignorance that, first, systematically arises as part of some social structural process(es) that systematically gives rise to racial injustice. This is similar to the Cognitivist and Wilful Ignorance Views insofar as each identifies one such class of social structural processes. But the Structuralist View is more general: it is not limited to social practices that give rise to ignorance and social injustice by way of cognition-affecting social practices, nor to social practices that give rise to ignorance and social injustice by way of incentivizing individuals to ignore these injustices; rather, it is open to *any kind* of social structural process.

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<sup>31</sup> The Cognitivist View can however explain a lack of belief if it is due to norms or concepts that direct agents' attention.

Second, the Structuralist View also requires that the ignorance that arises through these processes is not an incidental by-product of these processes, but is rather an active player in them. That is, it must be, at least in part, through their systematic epistemic effects that these social structural processes systematically contribute to and help sustain white racial domination. To illustrate these ideas, consider the following case:

**[Overburdened]** By virtue of unfair gender norms, Dr. Grey is constantly overburdened by service work. Although she knows that she ought to keep up with the latest medical research, she decides to forego reading the most recent issue of the journal she usually reads. As it happens, this issue revealed an important new treatment for sickle cell anaemia (a condition that predominantly affects patients of African and Afro-Caribbean descent in the U.K.).

Dr. Grey's ignorance is a result of a social structural process (i.e. the enforcement of gender norms) and results in a racial disparity: she is able to offer her white patients, but not her Black patients, the best treatment available for their ailments. But, although this disparity is significant, unfortunate, and plausibly unjust, Dr. Grey's ignorance does not amount to white ignorance on the Structuralist View: the gender norms at play do not systematically give rise to racial injustice, and it is only incidentally that they give rise to ignorance that contributes to racial injustice in this case. Contrast this with a version in which she neglected to read this particular issue because of norms that de-prioritize the wellness of patients of colour. In this version, Dr. Grey's ignorance and the resulting disparities are not coincidental, but result from a norm that systematically makes people of colour worse off, in part by systematically incentivizing people like Dr. Grey to remain ignorant about how to best treat their patients of colour.

This characterization of the Structuralist View clearly relies on intuitive notions like "systematically arising" and "incidental by-product." Although I am happy to import whatever the best account of these intuitive notions might be, one way to flesh these out is to anchor them to Cummins' conception of functional analysis. (Cummins 1975) rejects two standard assumptions about functional analysis and explanation:

- (a) The point of functional analysis is to explain the presence or existence of F (e.g. why do mammals have hearts?)
- (b) What it is for F to perform function f is for F to have certain effects on a

containing system that contribute to some feature or activity of the containing system. (E.g. what it is for the heart to perform the function of pumping blood is for it to have certain effects (viz. blood-pumping) that contribute to the survival of the body)

Instead, Cummins' idea is that what functional analysis helps us do is to break down a complex system into the product of several, simpler processes:

- (a') the point of functional analysis is to explain the capacities of containing systems
- (b') F's function in a containing system is to  $\phi$  iff F has the capacity to  $\phi$  and F's  $\phi$ -ing is part of an adequate account of how the containing system is able to  $\psi$

To return to white ignorance, then, the proposal is, first, to consider white racial domination as a global property of a social system (the containing system) that arises through the joint activity of a variety of social structures (and social structural processes) that, together, help us to better understand how it is that white racial domination persists. Although I do not have the space to present or defend my preferred account of social structure in detail, I am operating with a picture of social structure that includes both institutions – networks made up of roles (filled by individuals) and relations between roles that are governed by rules (e.g. governments, universities, and banks) –<sup>32</sup> and culture, or networks of cultural schemas (e.g. beliefs, concepts, attitudes) that are widely internalized through processes of socialization and coordinate us in resource management, as well as the social norms and practices that emerge from widespread internalization of these schemas.<sup>33</sup> As such, the practices and processes that the Cognitivist and Wilful Ignorance Views appeal to are social structural processes on this view, as are practices like historic erasure and housing segregation. Then, within this framework, the Structuralist View proposes that we take the ignorance that plays a role in any variety of these social structural processes – that is, whatever ignorance is part of the explanation of how one or more social structural processes play/s its/their role in explaining how the social system is able to sustain a

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<sup>32</sup> (Davidson and Kelly 2018; Haslanger 2016; Shelby 2016).

<sup>33</sup> (Haslanger 2007, 2011, 2017a, 2017b)



state of white racial domination – to be white ignorance.

More formally, for some social system  $S$ , denote the social structures that make up  $S$  by  $s_i$  (for some  $i$ ) and denote the activities that each  $s_i$  engages in by  $\phi_{i,j}$  (for some  $j$ ).<sup>34</sup> Then

**(Structuralist View)**  $A$ 's ignorance of  $\psi$  will be an instance of white ignorance iff  $A$ 's ignorance is (in part) the result of at least one process  $\phi_{i,j}$  such that:

(1)  $\phi_{i,j}$  systematically helps give rise to white racial domination in  $S$  AND

(2)  $\phi_{i,j}$  does so (at least in part) by (systematically) promoting ignorance of  $\psi$

where  $\phi_{i,j}$  "systematically helps give rise to white racial domination" if  $\phi_{i,j}$  regularly has certain effects and its having those effects is part of an adequate explanation of the existence or persistence of white racial domination. Condition (2), in turn, will be satisfied when causing or probabilifying ignorance of  $\psi$  is part of these "regular effects" of  $\phi_{i,j}$ . In this way, the intuitive notions of "systematically giving rise to" and being an "incidental by-product" are understood in terms of regularity and explanatory power.

### Core Benefits of the Structuralist View

First, note that, because the Structuralist View encompasses the structural processes appealed to by both the Cognitivist and Wilful Ignorance Views, the Structuralist View inherits their benefits when it comes to satisfying the core desiderata. But it can also do better: it can also appeal to, e.g., social practices that make key evidence difficult to obtain in order to help account for white ignorance being widespread (1a); it can appeal to social processes like housing segregation that systematically distance dominantly situated knowers, but not marginalized knowers, from evidence about racial injustice to better account for demographic patterns (1b); and it can appeal to a variety of practices to better account for the different forms that widespread ignorance takes – e.g. it can appeal to social practices that distribute faulty cognitive resources to account for convergence around certain false beliefs, and it can also appeal to cognitively upstream, evidence-distancing practices to better account for

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<sup>34</sup> The  $i$  and  $j$  indices are to accommodate the fact that there may be multiple social structures, each of which may be involved in multiple processes that help give rise to white racial domination.

a widespread lack of belief about certain matters (1c).

But the Structuralist View's greatest advantage is explanatory coverage (3). As previously discussed, there are key elements of *Racial Exclusion* that neither the Cognitivist View nor the Wilful Ignorance View is able to capture. Although these views might be able to identify *Racial Exclusion* as an instance of white ignorance, and so get the verdict right, they do not make room for crucial parts of the explanation—specifically, practices of historic erasure. The Structuralist View, in contrast, does: historical erasure is a social structural process that (a) systematically give rise to racial injustice, and (b) does so in part by systematically giving rise to ignorance of the sort that Rebecca experiences.

The point is even clearer in the following case, where the explanatory limitations of the Cognitivist and Wilful Ignorance Views lead to (what I argue is) an extensional inadequacy (2a):

**[Precision Medicine]** Dr. Mejilla knows that genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have shown that the safety and effectiveness of the drug *tamoxifen* depends on a patient's genetic profile. However, because GWAS have been conducted primarily on European populations, Dr. Mejilla does not know whether her Indigenous Latina patient, Yusimí, will be able to safely metabolize the drug.

First, note that Dr. Mejilla's ignorance about the likely effects of *tamoxifen* on patients like Yusimí forms part of a larger pattern of ignorance among medical professionals. Note also that Dr. Mejilla's ignorance is not attributable to faulty cognitive practices, nor is it wilful ignorance on her part. Rather, the problem is that GWAS have been conducted primarily on European populations. According to a 2009 analysis, 96% of participants in GWAS were of European descent, and as of 2016, fewer than 5% of GWAS participants are like Yusimí— that is, of African, Indigenous, or mixed ancestry.<sup>35</sup> Researchers point to three key factors to explain the European bias in GWAS.<sup>36</sup> First, it is preferable to build on existing data sets and patient cohorts for studies of this kind, so that historical biases are perpetuated by methodological norms.

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<sup>35</sup> (Need and Goldstein 2009; Popejoy and Fullerton 2016).

<sup>36</sup> (Popejoy and Fullerton 2016).

Second, people of colour face disproportionate barriers in access to medical care and medical centres, which limit their ability to participate in studies. Third, communities of colour have historically been subject to abuse by the medical community, generating distrust and an unwillingness to participate when the option is available.<sup>37</sup>

To show that the Structuralist View can accommodate the case, I will focus on the second factor: the barriers to medical access. These barriers have obvious concrete consequences that help constitute white racial domination – they help create a medical system in which people of colour systematically receive worse medical treatment than their white counterparts. But, importantly, these barriers also systematically contribute to white racial domination through the kinds of epistemic upshots that we see in *Precision Medicine*. Insofar as these barriers give rise to patterns of ignorance of this kind, they make it such that even when people of colour are able to access medical care, they still fail to receive fair treatment. This creates systematic disparities between white and non-white patients that help constitute a system of white racial domination. Thus (a) the ignorance results as part of a process that systematically gives rise to racial injustice and ignorance of this kind, and (b) the ignorance is an active, systematic player in this process.

Further, I argue, it is important to include cases like this in our account of white ignorance, even if it is likely not what first come to mind when one hears “white ignorance.” It is crucial to realize that we systematically fail people of colour, not just in terms of medical access and treatment, but, even more fundamentally, in terms of medical knowledge. Recognizing the epistemic and practical effects of these processes is important to understanding the epistemic dimension of white racial domination, as well as the way in which white racial domination sustains itself – and this is just what an account of white ignorance is meant to shed light on.

Finally, the Structuralist View’s advantage with respect to explanatory coverage (3) translates into further advantages when it comes to explaining the resilience of white ignorance (1d) and the persistence of white racial domination (2b). To see this, compare

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<sup>37</sup> Consider the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the case of Henrietta Lacks. See (Gray 1998; Skloot 2013).

the pictures of active ignorance that fall out of each view. On the Cognitivist View, active ignorance is characterized primarily in agential terms: the actively ignorant agent is one who avoids changing their beliefs even when directly faced with evidence that contradicts their views by, e.g., explaining away evidence or derailing conversations.<sup>38</sup> They may be shaped by their social environment as suggested by the Wilful Ignorance View, and they may draw on tools provided by their social milieu as suggested by the Cognitivist View, but ultimately, active ignorance is a matter of the actively ignorant agent performing certain actions such as to preserve their ignorance. Active ignorance is thus primarily agential on the traditional view.

On my picture, the activeness of white ignorance is not understood agentially, but rather as a matter of there being barriers, or defence mechanisms, that “protect” it. The analogy to a castle under siege is helpful here. On one level, individual inhabitants can wield personal weapons to defend themselves in close combat. On another level, there are soldiers that enact coordinated manoeuvres that help prevent situations in which individual inhabitants need to draw their swords. On yet another level, the inhabitants are protected by key structural features of the castle, such as the moat, the drawbridge, and the thick castle walls; even the geography of the land plays a role in defending the castle. Each of these levels acts as a significant layer of protection for the inhabitants, and these layers often operate simultaneously. Similarly, on the Structuralist View, there are multiple kinds of defence mechanisms for active ignorance, some of which involve action on behalf of the white ignorant agent, and others which act upstream of the individual.

To fully understand how it is that these patterns of domination-sustaining ignorance are protected, it is important to recognize the variety of structural factors that play a role in promoting and sustaining both white ignorance and white racial domination, often simultaneously. The Structuralist View, but not the Cognitivist or Wilful Ignorance views, makes room for the necessary nuance and complexity. As such, the Structuralist View better accounts for both the resilience of white ignorance (1d) and

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<sup>38</sup> (Bailey 2017; Medina 2013: 57-58; Woomer 2019: 2).

the persistence of white racial domination (2b).

### **Additional Benefits of the Structuralist View**

I have argued that the appeal to general social structural processes gives the Structuralist View the power to account for patterns of ignorance that are supported by multiple, diverse social practices. This gives rise to a characterization of the activeness of white ignorance that better accounts for the robustness of white ignorance and white racial domination: it is not merely a matter of individual agents wilfully resisting knowledge and progress; rather there is a complex, layered system that promotes ignorance and, partly in so doing, generates and stabilizes white racial domination.

What gives the view the power needed to secure these core benefits, while also providing needed flexibility, is its generality. The Structuralist View is not a simple disjunctive view – it does not merely add to the Cognitivist and Wilful Ignorance Views the specification that white ignorance is ignorance that either arises from the kinds of practices that the Wilful Ignorance View identifies, *or* from the kinds of practices that the Cognitivist View identifies, *or* from practices that systematically limit evidential access. Instead, the Structuralist View makes a general appeal to social structural processes that includes, but is not limited to, ignorance-incentivizing, cognition-affecting, and evidence-obscuring practices.

With some important caveats, I take the generality to be a significant advantage of the view. For one, it provides the explanatory power described above – it is able to capture the various layered social structural processes involved in bringing about domination-sustaining ignorance. At the same time, the general appeal to social structures gives the view important *flexibility*: it allows the view to not only capture current nuances and complexities, but also the possible evolution of those nuances and complexities. For instance, we have already observed a shift from explicitly racist ideology and *de jure* racist policies, to colour-blind ideology and *de facto* racist policies. The power and flexibility that come with the generality of the view allow us to track these changes. This also allows the view to avoid the worry that normative analyses will tend to oversimplify the problems they seek to address – the view makes room for the

complexity of white racial domination over time.

Importantly – and this brings me to the caveats – the generality of the view should not be treated as an end point, but should rather be viewed as a starting point for inquiring into the details of white ignorance and white racial domination at any given time. We must inquire into the operations of particular structural processes, such as the cognition-affecting practices that we have considered, to develop an understanding that can guide our political projects. Moreover, the general reference to social structural processes should prompt us to consider not only which of the processes that we are already familiar with might be playing a role in white ignorance, but also whether processes that we have not yet have considered might be involved. Thus, so long as it is accompanied by inquiry into the concrete details, the generality of the structuralist view allows us not only to better understand what is happening now, but also keeps us alert to new, or previously unconsidered, possibilities. In so doing, it is a valuable tool for conceptualizing the epistemic dimensions of white racial domination.

### **Costs of the Structuralist View**

I have spent considerable time articulating what I take to be the main benefits of the structuralist view. But the fact that the view has considerable benefits does not mean it is altogether costless.

I have already alluded to one cost of the Structuralist View: because of its generality, the structuralist view of white ignorance shifts much of the burden of filling out a precise picture of white ignorance to the user. Although I have done some work to show how we might fill in some of these details in the current context through my discussion, gains in explanatory coverage (3b) come at the cost of loss of detail when explaining how exactly social practices give rise to white ignorance. This is in contrast to the Wilful Ignorance View and Cognitivist Views, which reference more specific mechanisms of motivated reasoning, distorted reasoning, and avoidance in order to flesh out a more concrete picture of white ignorance. There is a necessary trade-off here. The more specific and concrete the view, the better it reflects the pressing problems of here and now – but also the more likely it is to exclude important but as-yet-

unconsidered factors, and to struggle to capture the problems of tomorrow. Because I take it that figuring out the details of white ignorance and white racial domination is anyhow going to be a matter of continual inquiry, I take this cost to be well worth the benefit of providing a powerful and flexible template for this inquiry.

Another cost is that, in shifting the focus away from individual agents, it (like the Cognitivist View) makes ascriptions of blame less straightforward, and dulls the blow of calling someone white ignorant. However, it should be noted that the view does not rule out individual responsibility. There can still be cases where agents are culpably ignorant, because (for example) they have engaged in motivated reasoning or failed to pursue inquiries they should have pursued. Further, there are conceptual tools one can draw on to regain rhetorical force – for instance, by claiming that someone is *wilfully* (or *culpably*) white ignorant.

Moreover, I think that there are associated benefits that help offset these costs. Pragmatically, the shift away from individual intention and agency helps prevent discussions of white ignorance from becoming bogged down in debates about the motivations of individual agents. By shifting attention to the ways in which individuals' ignorance contributes to these structural problems, the view allows for a more forward-looking approach that can sidestep questions about individual's characters when it is more important to focus on the fact that there is a problem that needs correcting.<sup>39</sup>

More theoretically, the structuralist view calls for a shift from thinking solely in terms of individual responsibility, to also considering collective and shared responsibility.<sup>40</sup> Thinking about wilful ignorance is helpful here. While wilful ignorance (much like active ignorance) is traditionally spelled out in terms of an individual agent who, in some sense, chooses to be ignorant, our discussion of white ignorance suggests that this picture can and should be complicated in various ways.<sup>41</sup> First, the structuralist view reveals ways in which social structural processes can facilitate an individual's wilful ignorance by making information (e.g. information about redlining or police

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<sup>39</sup> (Young 2006; Zheng 2018b, 2018a)

<sup>40</sup> (Medina 2013; Young 2006)

<sup>41</sup> (Lynch 2016; Wieland 2017)

brutality) more difficult to obtain (e.g. through historic erasure or housing segregation). For example, while Rebecca from *Racial Exclusion* may avoid doing research in order to avoid knowing the truth about racial oppression, it is significant that our social practices make it easy for her to avoid becoming acquainted with the relevant information. Our practices should make wilful ignorance about racial oppression *difficult* to maintain, when instead they make such ignorance easy to cultivate and sustain. Insofar as we contribute to processes that facilitate individuals' wilful ignorance, it would seem that we share a responsibility to transform our practices. Relatedly, insofar as we, collectively, approve and implement the social practices that underpin white ignorance, it is plausible that we, collectively, are wilfully ignorant as a result (and so have a collective responsibility to change our practices). This is both practically and theoretically significant. It is practically significant insofar as recognition of shared and collection responsibility should help to spur action to address these problems. But it is also theoretically significant insofar as it forces us to rethink and expand traditional conceptions of wilful ignorance in order to make room for these nuances. Thus, because it helps to bring the importance of shared and collective responsibility into greater relief, the shift in focus away from individual agency comes with practical and theoretical benefits that help offset the cost of complicating ascriptions of individual responsibility.

Ultimately, there is a question of what one takes to be of greater importance. As I have indicated, I take the central aim of providing an account of white ignorance to be to help us better understand the mechanisms that sustain white racial domination, so that we may strategically intervene to remedy racial injustice. As such, I take explanatory power to be more important than ascribing blame in this context. This is not to deny that we will need an account of responsibility. As part of our theory-building around (racial) oppression, we will need a forward-looking account of responsibility that tells us what parts we, as individuals occupying particular social locations, and we, as a collective(s), are to play in remedying structural injustice. But I take this to be a separate and more general part of the overarching project— one that should be informed, in part, by an account of white ignorance that best helps us to



understand what it is that needs to be remedied. At this stage, what we need is an account of white ignorance that helps us to best diagnose the epistemic dimensions of the problem of racial oppression, and I have argued that the Structuralist View is the best account on offer to do that.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have completed three main tasks for the purpose of determining how we should develop the notion of white ignorance. First, I have identified four core desiderata for an account of white ignorance that consider what such an account would have to accomplish in order to satisfy the theoretical and political aims of a critical, liberatory project focused on the epistemic dimensions of racial oppression. Second, I have mapped out three views of white ignorance, two of which are reconstructed from the literature (viz. the Wilful Ignorance and Cognitivist views), and the third of which is my own novel contribution. Third, I have considered the strengths and weaknesses of each of these views, in order to determine which we should use to develop our understanding of ‘white ignorance.’

Ultimately, I have argued that the Structuralist View is to be preferred. This is because the Structuralist View best helps us to explain the patterns of ignorance that we observe, the persistence of racial inequality, and the connections between white ignorance and white racial domination. The benefits of the Structuralist View arise from its power and flexibility. The view is powerful because it allows that many, diverse kinds of social structures can play a role in giving rise to white ignorance and white racial domination. This, in turn, allows it to better account for both the patterns of ignorance that we observe today, and the persistence of racial inequality. The Structuralist View is flexible because it does not restrict the kinds of structural processes that can play a role in white ignorance, but instead refers to social structures in general. This, in turn, allows the view to capture the ways in which the structures that support white ignorance and white racial domination have shifted, and may continue to shift, over time, while also ensuring that the view is neither overly narrow nor paints an overly rosy picture of the problem to be resolved. Together, this power and flexibility

mean that the Structuralist View performs better than the alternatives when it comes to fulfilling the explanatory roles of white ignorance, and provides a valuable tool for conceptualizing and practically reasoning about white ignorance and white racial domination. As such, I conclude that our notion of white ignorance should be a Structuralist one.

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*University of Illinois at Chicago, USA*