

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Equal Societies, Autonomous Lives: Reconciling social equality and relational autonomy

Hugo Cossette-Lefebvre

Department of Political Science, Center for the Experimental-Philosophical Study of Discrimination, Aarhus University, Aarhus C, Denmark

Correspondence

Hugo Cossette-Lefebvre, Department of Political Science, Center for the Experimental-Philosophical Study of Discrimination, Aarhus University, Bartolins Allé 7, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

Email: hugo.cossette-lefebvre@mail.mcgill.ca

Funding information

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; Fonds de recherche du Québec - Société et Culture (FRQSC); Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF144)

KEYWORDS: agency, relational autonomy, relational equality, social philosophy, theories of equality

1 | INTRODUCTION

Relational egalitarians flesh out the idea of what it means to treat persons as equals in society. On many influential accounts, relating as equals requires, among other things, to respect others as equal, autonomous agents (Hojlund, 2021; Scheffler, 2015; Schemmel 2021a; Schuppert, 2015). However, the attempt to subsume respect for personal autonomy under social equality is *prima facie* suspect: people can presumably endorse social inequalities. We can ask two sets of questions when confronted with situations such as these: first, are these truly autonomous choices? For instance, following substantivist approaches to autonomy, some may question whether choosing subservience or a subordinate status can be an autonomous choice because one would thereby fail to be self-respecting, to see what is effectively in their own interest, or because this choice is often made against a social background that diminishes their available options or controls over their life (Babbitt 1993; Hill, 1991; Oshana, 2006). And, second, these types of cases raise a challenge for relational egalitarians in that it is unclear what it means to treat presumably autonomous agents as equals here. On one hand, respecting their autonomy requires that one should respect their decisions to endorse social inequalities. On the other

The author confirms that the paper has not been published previously in any form and that it is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.
© 2024 The Author(s). *Journal of Social Philosophy* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

hand, relational egalitarians should be capable of criticizing social hierarchies and should aim to equalize them. How, then, can we resolve this apparent tension?

In this article, I show how debates between relational autonomy theorists hold important lessons for relational egalitarians. The connections between the two theoretical families have not been extensively studied (for recent exceptions, see Stoljar & Voigt, 2021a). Relational autonomy theorists argue that personal autonomy is deeply connected to the social relations we engage in our lives and our socio-political position in society (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000a, 2000b; Meyers, 2002, 2005; Westlund, 2009). Similarly, relational egalitarians argue that egalitarians should be concerned first and foremost with how people are treated and regarded in society (Anderson, 1999; Fourie et al., 2015; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; Schemmel, 2021a). I argue that by connecting social equality and relational autonomy, it is possible to resolve this apparent tension between respect for autonomy and the protection of social equality. More precisely, I argue that relational egalitarians should adopt a constitutivist, externalist understanding of autonomy. I point out that a constitutivist, externalist understanding of autonomy is not designed to evaluate particular individual decisions, but rather to identify the required external conditions to guarantee a substantive level of personal autonomy. The externalist approach consequently allows to say both that some non-egalitarian choices can be deserving of respect and that egalitarians should adopt a structural perspective to promote personal autonomy globally.

Below, I first briefly introduce relational egalitarianism and relational autonomy. Second, I distinguish between three ways of conceptualizing the connection between social equality and autonomy: the instrumental approach, the deontic approach, and the constitutivist position. I argue that both the instrumental and deontic approaches fail to provide convincing answers to the tension between autonomy and (social) equality. Consequently, I show that if relational egalitarians want to argue that social equality requires, among other things, to treat autonomous agents as equals *qua* autonomous agents, they should adopt a constitutive, externalist conception of autonomy.

2 | TWO RELATIONAL FAMILIES

Relational egalitarianism and relational autonomy share many aspects. As Stoljar and Voigt (2021b) points out, first, they both consider that theories of justice “should take the fact of people’s social embeddedness as their starting point” (2021b, 1). Second, for both relational egalitarianism and relational autonomy, they do not refer to single theories but are “umbrella terms that encompass different conceptions of the way in which social conditions should be included in an analysis of autonomy and equality” (2021b, 1). However, both theoretical families have fundamentally different aims. Relational autonomy theorists identify the conditions under which an agent is autonomous. In contrast, relational egalitarians identify the conditions ensuring that people are treated as equals in society. Nonetheless, given their family resemblance, their connection is fruitful especially since many relational egalitarians presume that social equality requires, among other things, that autonomous agents should be treated as equals in society. Moreover, beyond this family resemblance, the move toward relational autonomy provides relational egalitarians with precious resources to think through what it means to respect and foster personal autonomy in society. This, in turn, enables us to clarify what it means to treat persons as equals.

There are two things to note here, however. First, this is not to say that autonomy is the only reason explaining why social equality is required or valuable. The claim here is simply that since many relational egalitarians aim to respect autonomous agents equally, it is relevant to explore what adopting a relational conception of autonomy would mean for our conception of social equality. Second, it does not follow that we should treat nonautonomous or nonagential persons as unequals in society (see Bengtson & Lippert-Rasmussen, 2023; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2022).¹

2.1 | Social equality: The importance of the institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels

Relational egalitarianism emerged in reaction to the perceived dominance of distributive egalitarianism in political philosophy (for general overviews, see Fourie et al., 2015; Nath, 2020; Voigt, 2020). Broadly, relational egalitarians argue that equality is not reducible to distributive concerns. For them, equality is about how social, political, and interpersonal relationships are structured. Relational egalitarianism comes under negative and positive forms. Negatively, it states that certain types of relations are incompatible with the equal social status of all. More positively, it highlights that certain background conditions must be met to ensure that persons are treated as equals and relate to one another as such.

There are debates concerning which inequalitarian relationships ought to be criticized and, conversely, which relationships should be equalized. However, relational egalitarians are typically concerned with self-regarding attitudes, interpersonal relations, and institutional structures. Self-respect and the ability to regard oneself as an equal is often presented as deeply connected to relational egalitarianism (Schemmel, 2011, 2019; Stoljar & Voigt, 2021c; Wolff, 2015). For instance, Stoljar and Voigt argue that to be able to stand as an equal, it is necessary to see oneself as an equal: a requirement which has both institutional and interpersonal, affective dimensions (Stoljar & Voigt, 2021c).

Moreover, relational egalitarians are also concerned with what can be called the state or the basic structure of society. State actions and the behavior of socio-political institutions can be evaluated in at least three ways from a relational egalitarian perspective (Voigt, 2020, pp. 17–21). First, institutions are instrumentally useful to create and maintain egalitarian social relations or to avoid oppression, exploitation, or other objectionable social hierarchies (Anderson, 1999, pp. 316–318; Schemmel, 2011; Viehoff, 2014). Second, political institutions are themselves required to follow some relational requirements both because the actions of a democratic state reflect how citizens consider one another (Anderson, 1999, p. 314), and because the state is an agent to whom relational requirements apply directly (Schemmel, 2012). This may require, for instance, that states be equally responsive to the interests of all their citizens, that they be accountable to them, and that they be in a position to justify their decisions adequately. Third, and finally, political institutions may also be evaluated based on the attitudes they express *vis-à-vis* citizens (Anderson & Pildes, 2000; Dworkin, 1977; Schemmel, 2012; Schemmel, 2021a; Voigt, 2018).

Therefore, relational egalitarianism points toward a very broad understanding of equality that includes three different levels: how persons relate to themselves, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to socio-political institutions. However, as will be discussed throughout, it is then unclear how relational egalitarians can effectively reconcile these different levels. Ensuring that states treat all as equals seems to require respecting that individuals may endorse interpersonal social hierarchies and consider themselves as unequals.

2.2 | Relational autonomy and its conditions

In a manner akin to the debate between relational and distributive egalitarians, relational autonomy was developed in response to the perceived dominance of an overly rationalistic and atomist models of autonomy such as the ones associated with Kant (1948 [1785]); Rawls (1999 [1971]); or Hobbes (1966 [1642]) (for overviews, see Lee, 2023; Stoljar, 2018b). A recurring argument shared by relational autonomy theorists is that this move is inherently problematic: we cannot abstract away from the social embeddedness of the self and presuppose that agents are isolated, self-sufficient beings. Rationalist and atomist approaches fail to capture how our projects and ambitions are informed by our social context; how social norms can impact our capacity to be autonomous and our available choices; and, more deeply, how some relationships may be constitutive of personal autonomy (Stoljar, 2018b).²

Broadly speaking, theories of relational autonomy are relational due to three shared assumptions. As Mackenzie (2014, pp. 21–22) points out, relational autonomy theorists reject the view that persons are purely rational contractors, self-sufficient, or independent, but rather accept as a given that individuals are socially embedded, dependent on one another, and thus vulnerable. Second, this social, cultural, and historical embeddedness means that a person's identity does not develop in the abstract, but is affected and even perhaps constituted by the relations they engage in. Third, these considerations support the general conclusion that “social conditions restricting the exercise of self-determination are unjust” (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 22).³ In other words, by giving a greater weight to human vulnerability and our embedded social identity, Mackenzie underlines that relational autonomy theorists develop analyzes that are responsive to the negative effects of unjust social relations such as unjust social hierarchies of standing, authority, and esteem that track people in different spheres of life (within the family, in the workplace, in civil society, etc.). In that sense, for Mackenzie, relational autonomy theories play the role of diagnostic tools that highlight how “social domination, oppression, stigmatization, and injustice can thwart individual autonomy” as well as to propose solutions on how social relations could be reformed to protect and foster personal autonomy (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 23).⁴

Therefore, at first sight, relational egalitarianism and relational autonomy should be mutually supportive. Both theoretical families tend to be deeply concerned with intrapersonal attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and socio-political relations. There is, of course, a debate between internalist and externalist theories of autonomy—that is, on the question of whether autonomy can be captured by considering the internal structure of a person's will or psychology only, or if we should also consider external social and political structures (for a recent overview, see Mackenzie, 2021, pp. 33–39). However, some elements of self-authorization, self-respect, and the presence of interpersonal relationships that foster our individual capacities for agency are typically central to relational autonomy. However, as discussed in Section 2 below, despite this initial resonance between the two theoretical families, some tensions remain between equality and autonomy on many accounts of relational autonomy.

2.3 | Relational equality, agency, and autonomy

Many relational egalitarians explicitly appeal to autonomy or agency to explain what it means to treat others as equals. Schemmel appeals to personal autonomy—understood as a capacity for a sense of justice, and the capacity to develop, pursue, and revise a conception of the good—

when he argues that liberals should be relational egalitarians (2021a, pp. 9–10). For him, ensuring that all can equally pursue their own conception of the good:

is the bridge between liberal insistence on respect for personal autonomy and egalitarian conceptions of social justice in much of contemporary liberal egalitarianism: it is the former that ultimately underpins the latter, (...) [by] continuously ensuring (roughly) equal substantive liberty to live one's life as one sees fit.

(Schemmel 2021a, p. 9)

In a similar manner, Hojlund highlights that the state should treat the agency of citizens as equally weighty (Hojlund, 2021, pp. 522–523). Anderson (1999) also explicitly refers to agency when she presents the positive claim of relational equality: “Positively, the claim asserts that all competent adults are equally moral agents: everyone equally has the power to develop and exercise moral responsibility, to cooperate with others according to principles of justice, to shape and fulfill a conception of their good” (Anderson, 1999, p. 312). Finally, Schuppert (2015, 108) contends that: “social egalitarians are mainly concerned with the protection of every person's free and responsible agency and how people relate to each other.” He builds on the work of Scheffler (2010, 2015) and O'Neil (2008) to argue that to treat another as an equal is to treat them as a “legitimate source of claims and reasons” (Schuppert, 2015, p. 110).

However, it is somewhat unclear how we should understand this appeal to agency rather than personal autonomy in the work of Anderson and Schuppert.⁵ Agency is typically understood as the capacities to plan, weigh competing options, be rational and be capable of self-control (Stoljar, 2014, pp. 246–249; Stoljar 2018a; Mackenzie, 2015). However, autonomy requires more. What autonomy requires depends on the theory of (relational) autonomy one prefers. Roughly, proceduralists add authenticity conditions to agential capacities—such as reflexive endorsement (Friedman, 2003). Weakly substantive approaches maintain that autonomy also includes some weak normative content, like self-regarding attitudes such as self-respect (Benson, 2005a; Benson, 2011; Meyers, 1989). And externalist conceptions maintain that autonomy should moreover include an adequate range of external options and conditions (Mackenzie, 2021; Oshana, 2006; Stoljar, 2018a). Stoljar takes the example of Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in concentration camp in Nazi Germany to illustrate the importance of external options. Many imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses continued to live according to their religious convictions despite imprisonment (Stoljar, 2018a p. 231; see also Bettelheim 1960, pp. 122–123). In this case, the Jehovah's Witnesses remained agents, and were even autonomous in some sense; they continued to live an authentic moral life. Nonetheless, to say that they were fully autonomous would miss how one essential aspect of their autonomy was infringed on: as political prisoners, they lacked access to a set of adequate external options (Stoljar 2018a, p. 244ff; see also Raz 1986, pp. 373–374). Accordingly, for externalists, authenticity and weak normative content is insufficient to consider that an agent is substantively autonomous.

Interestingly, both Anderson and Schuppert nonetheless are interested with at least some aspects of personal autonomy upon close reading. Although this point is not fully worked out in “What is the Point of Equality,” Anderson waves at personal autonomy and its conditions when she describes what it means to stand as an equal:

to be capable of functioning as an equal citizen involves not just the ability to effectively exercise specifically political rights, but also to participate in the various activities of civil society more broadly, including participation in the economy. And

functioning in these ways presupposes functioning as a human being. (...) To be capable of functioning as a human being requires effective access to the means of sustaining one biological existence (...) and access to the basic conditions of human agency—knowledge of one's circumstances and options, the ability to deliberate about means and ends, *the psychological conditions of autonomy, including the self-confidence to think and judge for oneself*, freedom of thought and movement.

(Anderson, 1999, pp. 317–318)

Hence, a reasonable way to read Anderson here, is to highlight that her position at least resonates with the concerns of autonomy theorists. Anderson seems to be concerned not just with agency, minimally understood, but also with autonomy conditions including self-regarding attitudes, which are shaped socially.

Similarly, Schuppert discusses gender hierarchies to illustrate what it means to stand as an equal (Schuppert, 2015, p. 123). He writes that social equality is violated by gendered hierarchies because: “repeated instances of gendered misrecognition can both undermine a person's self-respect and lead her to adopting ‘conforming’ behavior in line with existing biases” (Schuppert, 2015, p. 123). He goes on to argue that subscribing to a gendered hierarchy can lead to “self-respect undermining adaptive behaviour.” Of course, I cannot here delve into the debate on adaptive preferences, since this would take me too far from the main question at hand. However, notice that standing as an equal seems to come with substantive constraints on what can be considered to be an autonomous, authentic behavior for Schuppert.

The typical relational egalitarian concern to capture not only socio-political relations, but also private relations between individuals and intrapersonal attitudes should bring them closer to a concern with personal autonomy than with agency. The main question here is not whether persons have the sufficient capacities to make agential decisions—which are fully consistent with endorsing social inequalities—but rather what should be considered to be authentic, autonomous choices, and behaviors that a self-respecting agent would pursue. Given that for Schemmel, Anderson, and Schuppert, social equality comes with a commitment to foster or respect (at least some aspects of) personal autonomy, it seems that they try to uphold two commitments:

1. *Social Equality Commitment (SEC)*: Relational egalitarianism requires that all be treated as equals in society.
2. *Autonomy Commitment (AC)*: (1) requires, among other things, to respect the personal autonomy of individuals in society equally.

However, this attempt to subsume (2) under (1) can lead to puzzlement. People can presumably choose to live non-egalitarian and hierarchical lives autonomously. Respecting personal autonomy would then require accepting that certain social hierarchies may be legitimate if they are autonomously chosen, which sits uneasily with the idea that equality requires that all be treated as equals. Indeed, as shown above, the position of Schuppert supports the conclusion that some social hierarchies are incompatible with personal autonomy and social equality. However, this may be too hasty: after all many have shown that social relations are deeply connected to personal autonomy. Accordingly, it is fruitful to consider the different ways in which it is possible to connect social equality and relational autonomy to see whether it is possible to resolve the apparent tension between *SEC* and *AC*.

3 | THREE WAYS OF CONNECTING EQUALITY AND AUTONOMY

There are at least three ways to connect social equality and relational autonomy. In this section, I consider each in turn. I start with the instrumental approach. Second, I consider procedural and weakly substantive approaches. Third, I evaluate constitutivist positions. I argue that only the latter are promising to resolve the tension between *SEC* and *AC*.

3.1 | The instrumental approach

A first way to connect both social equality and relational autonomy would be to say that social equality is instrumentally valuable at least in part because it promotes autonomy. Stated negatively, this claim holds that social inequalities are wrong at least in part because they negatively affect personal autonomy by, for instance, damaging self-regarding attitudes or one's ability to reflect critically. Some claims by relational autonomy theorists support this point (Johnston, 2021, p. 139; Mackenzie, 2014, p. 18). Consider, for example, the work of Govier (1993) and Benson (1994). They highlight that for a decision to truly count as one's own, it has to be grounded in certain positive attitudes toward one's capacity to reflect critically (Govier, 1993, p. 101; see also Cudd, 2006, pp. 176–178). This supports the idea that social relationships that damage some self-regarding attitudes could be objectionable given that they undermine or prevent autonomy.

Although he focuses on agency rather than personal autonomy, the position of Litalien (2021) is helpful to consider how this argument could play out when it is extended to personal autonomy. He argues that social inequalities are wrong at least in part because they affect individual agency negatively. He defines agency as a two-pronged capacity for intentional action: “(1) a capacity for forming intentions (and other intentional states) and (2) a capacity to carry out those intentions, to have an effect in the world” (Litalien 2021, p. 89). Although he is open to the possibility that the wrongness of relational inequalities may be overdetermined (Litalien 2021, p. 87), he maintains that the instrumental account is the best account to explain why social inequalities are wrongful.

Of course, a purely instrumental account of the wrongness of social inequalities would entail that some social inequalities are not wrongful if they have no effect on individual agency—as in cases of pure expressive wrongs. Moreover, this would lead to the idea that certain social hierarchies may be good—or even required—if they were shown to promote individual agency. To respond to these problems, Litalien is open to the possibility that other accounts of the wrong-making feature may be eventually developed to explain these cases satisfactorily. However, in the meantime, he argues that an instrumental argument at least gives us an indirect reason to aim for relational equality:

we can hypothesize that, *globally*, relational equality promotes agency, *even if* it might be true that, *locally*, certain inegalitarian relations might promote agency better than relational equality would in the same context. This implies that it would be a mistake, as a matter of political philosophy, to assess each relation individually. (...) We should (...) favor the policy (or policy package) that promotes agency *globally*. What I suggest here is that it is a policy (or policy package) that aims at relational equality that will best further that goal. (2021, pp. 92–93).

Unfortunately, Litalien does not specify what he means by global and local. I take him to say that when we are interested in agency globally understood, then we should be less interested in evaluating particular decisions to see whether a person did form intentional states and did manage to carry out these intentions to focus more on ensuring that individuals have the capacity to form intentions and have an effect in the world as much as possible throughout their lives.

However, Litalien moves a bit too hastily here. If we should aim for the policy package that promotes (global) agency instrumentally, then it seems possible to include some inegalitarian relationships if this inclusion promotes individual agency more than a purely egalitarian package. Consider the three following policy packages:

1. Social hierarchy: the basic structure of society X is structured around strict social hierarchies such that all persons are either positioned in an inferior or a superior social class.
2. Strict social equality: the basic structure of society X follows the tenets of relational egalitarianism such that all are treated as equals.
3. Partial social equality: the basic structure of society X generally follows the tenets of relational egalitarianism such that all are generally treated and regarded as equals. However, exceptions are established when they are shown to promote global individual agency more than (2).

To illustrate (3), one could think of a society of benevolent masters where society is divided into two groups such that one group, the “carers,” are entrusted with the care of the members of the second groups, the “carees,” unbeknownst to the carees. The carers are respectful, they consider the strong interests of the carees, and the carers act to promote the well-being of the carees when they can. To do so, the carers can paternalistically intervene in their carees choice without their carees’ knowledge when they judge that it would be better for the carees to pursue some options compared to others to ensure that they will be better able to carry out their intentions in the future. If it turns out that by carefully separating the carers and the carees such that the position of the carees is, in fact, improved in the sense that they are better able to have an effect in the world than they would without the carers, the situation arguably remains objectionable from a relational egalitarian perspective (and, in fact, from the perspective of many autonomy theorists such as externalists). It remains that the carers that are imposed on the carees can dominate them. However, from an instrumental perspective, we should prefer policy package (3). If we accept the claims that social inequalities are wrong to the extent that they negatively affect individual agency and that we only have an indirect reason to aim for social equality because egalitarian relations generally promote individual agency, then we have no principled reason to prefer (2) over (3).

However, as mentioned, Litalien is more interested in agency rather than autonomy. Could someone object that once we move from agency to autonomy, then we would have to prefer (2) over (3)? This of course would depend on the particular conception of personal autonomy that one adopts. However, from this detour through an agency, the instrumental approach seems like an unpromising avenue to try and reconcile social equality and personal autonomy. From a purely instrumental perspective, as argued, nothing prevents us from preferring a policy package that is partially egalitarian, but which also bends the rules when we have good reasons to believe that putting the demands of social equality aside will foster personal autonomy. At best, it only provides us with a contingent defense of relational equality; from an instrumental perspective, aiming to protect and foster agency and aiming for social equality are simply two distinct goals, which can come apart and conflict with one another,

although they may happen to coincide in practice. Accordingly, we have good reasons to look beyond instrumentalism to consider how social equality and personal autonomy can work in tandem. A good way to go about is to consider the different ways in which autonomy theorists have conceived of the importance of social relations for personal autonomy. A topic to which I now turn.

3.2 | Procedural and (weakly) substantive accounts of autonomy to the rescue?

Consequently, it is warranted to consider other ways of connecting social equality (and social relationships generally) and personal autonomy. Two options are accessible: one may contend that the connection is noninstrumental in nature, or that some socio-political relations are constitutive of it. Starting with the first option, procedural and weakly substantive accounts (Friedman, 2003; Meyers 1989; Meyers, 2002, 2005; see also Christman, 2009) point toward the idea that the relation between equality and autonomy is not only instrumental. Briefly, procedural approaches are content-neutral—they do not put “direct normative constraints” (Benson, 2005b, p. 133) on the content of an agent’s preferences—and they insist on how preferences are formed, adopted or reflexively endorsed. Autonomous agents are agents who reflect critically about their preferences, motives, and desires in such a way that they can consider them to be their own. Weakly substantivist approaches, on their end, also do not put “direct normative constraints” on the content of an agent’s preferences, but add some normative content to their conception of autonomy, such as requiring that autonomous agents have some moral attitudes like self-respect (Govier, 1993; McLeod 2002; Benson 2005b; Richardson 2001; for an overview, see Stoljar, 2018).

Following these procedural and weakly substantive approaches to autonomy, one could move beyond instrumentalism to highlight that the connection between equality and autonomy is a deontic constraint where some norms simply delineate how we ought to treat autonomous agents in society. As Miklosi puts it, from a deontic perspective, the significance of egalitarian relations is not situated in “their contribution to personal or impersonal value, but in their being the fitting response to the equal moral status of each person as a being with a certain kind of moral authority. On this view, equality in relationships is significant not (or not only) as something to be promoted, but as a *constraint*, something that is to be respected” (Miklosi, 2018, p. 131).⁶ Of course, here Miklosi is interested in the equal moral status of all rather than autonomy. Nonetheless, a deontic approach could be used to underline that respect is owed to autonomous agents and to their autonomous choices (pro tanto). Following this deontic approach, social equality would not (only) be instrumentally useful to promote social equality, but it dictates how we should treat autonomous agents and autonomous choices. In a word, it requires respecting the choices of autonomous individuals, even if they are substantively non-egalitarian. Below, I consider procedural and weakly substantive views in turn to show how they resonate with this deontic requirement. To respect autonomous agents and their autonomous choices would simply be the fitting way to treat others as equals, even if their choices are not substantively egalitarian.

Starting with procedural views of autonomy, when Friedman presents the advantages of a content-neutral view, she hints at this type of deontic understanding of equality, understood in terms of respect toward autonomous choices:

Autonomy has something to do with the respect owed to persons as persons. Many philosophers agree that respect is owed to persons simply by virtue of their potential for being autonomous, whether or not this potential is ever actualized. Nevertheless, someone's actual manifestation of autonomy may warrant yet another form of respect, also connected to sheer personhood. (...) On a content-neutral view, [showing respect to people's actual choices is] (...) owed generally to the choices made by anyone with the competency to choose and act self-reflectively; what she chose would not matter.

(Friedman, 2003, p. 22)

One can see how this largely content-neutral view may be a promising conception of autonomy for relational egalitarians. This approach echoes the liberal, deontic conception of relational equality. Following this view, we should not impose an egalitarian lifestyle on people because they should be allowed to develop their own conception of the good life, which may not be egalitarian. This is Schemmel's position, briefly mentioned above (Schemmel, 2015, p. 153; Schemmel, 2021a, pp. 8–10). However, this deontic position leads to internal tensions for relational egalitarians.

Friedman's position is a procedural approach to relational autonomy. In an illustrative passage, she writes:

the notion of self-determination has been elaborated in terms of a certain sort of self-reflection that involves, one might say, self-monitoring and self-regulation. According to a generic version of this view, to realize autonomy a person must first somehow reflect on her wants, desires, and so on and take up an evaluative stance with respect to them. She can endorse or identify with them in some way or be wholeheartedly committed to them, or she can reject or repudiate them or be only halfheartedly committed to them. (...) When she chooses or acts in accord with wants or desires that she has self-reflectively endorsed, and her endorsement is somehow a part cause of her behavior, then, (...) she is behaving autonomously.

(Friedman, 2003, pp. 4–5)

Here, autonomy is a process where an agent self-reflectively identifies with her preferences, motives, or desires. This approach encourages agents and individuals to reflect critically about oppressive institutions and other social practices that influence them to ensure that they express their own deep “wants and commitments” (Friedman, 2003; p. 8, 78). However, procedural accounts of autonomy are content-neutral. Agents are autonomous on this view when they reach the threshold sufficient to be capable of engaging in this self-reflective process. For Friedman, autonomy is a matter of degree: someone who chooses to be subservient may not be substantively autonomous—in the sense of those who adopt a substantive conception of autonomy (discussed below)—yet, that person may still reach the sufficient threshold to be an autonomous agent from a procedural perspective (Friedman, 2003, pp. 19–20).⁷

To clarify, although the agent choosing to be subservient is, in a sense, less autonomous than others, we can still say that they are autonomous if they have the sufficient autonomy competencies, a concept introduced by Meyers (1987, p. 619; 1989, p. 208; Meyers, 2005, p. 49).⁸ Even if some can be “more” autonomous, by having more available options, for instance, individuals are still autonomous agents when they meet the specified threshold. What they choose

to be or do does not change the fact that they could be autonomous agents (depending, of course, on the details of the case).

Consequently, from a content-neutral, procedural position such as the one defended by Friedman, people can autonomously choose situations where their future autonomy and social standing is compromised. An agent can reflexively endorse other values than autonomy or social equality to pursue in their life (Friedman, 2003, p. 246; Stoljar, 2018b). For instance, one can think of the deferential wife who decides to defer to her husband in all things. In this case:

She buys the clothes *he* prefers, invites the guests *he* wants to entertain, and makes love whenever *he* is in the mood. She willingly moves to a new city in order for him to have a more attractive job, counting her own friendships and geographical preferences insignificant by comparison... She does not simply defer to her husband in certain spheres as a trade-off for his deference in other spheres. On the contrary, she tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals, and when she does, she counts them as less important than her husband's.

(Hill, 1991, p. 5; see also Westlund, 2003, pp. 485–486; Friedman 1985)

In principle, this can be an autonomous choice for Friedman if the woman prioritizes religious or moral norms stating that she should adopt a subservient role in her marriage.⁹

This procedural account resonates strongly with the liberal approach to social equality. This approach is most clearly developed by Schemmel (2021a). He subscribes to a liberal view of justice explaining why certain socio-political relations are unjust but abstains from telling individuals how they should live their lives (Schemmel, 2021a, p. 5). Hence, Schemmel subscribes to the idea that relational egalitarianism, when it is understood as a theory of justice, does not require to equalize any and all relationships: some interpersonal relations that depart from the (social) egalitarian ideal are not unjust on this view (Schemmel, 2015, p. 153). From a liberal standpoint, since justice is concerned with how to organize the “institutional set-up of society,” then it is not unjust for people to enter unequal relationships, which lie outside the basic structure. Following this deontic understanding of social equality, it means that relational egalitarians should promote the relations necessary to ensure that all have the opportunity to develop the relevant autonomy competencies—by, for instance, providing free, public education—and should otherwise protect the rights and freedoms of all equally without promoting certain ways of life. Here to treat others as social equals is reduced to equally respecting the autonomous choices of all (pro tanto): we should respect the individual choice to endorse and act on a plan of life, but should otherwise remain largely neutral concerning the content of these plans of life.

However, this position would render relational egalitarians vulnerable to a charge often raised against proceduralist accounts of relational autonomy: this content-neutral approach is too limited to fully capture the ways in which different oppressive social norms can be problematic (see notably Benson, 1991; Mackenzie, 2021; Stoljar, 2018b). This deontic position creates an internal tension for relational egalitarians tempted by this position: respecting autonomous choices equally may require respecting individual choices to endorse hierarchical lives and, yet, we would still have relational egalitarian reasons to oppose the social inequalities created, reproduced, or compounded by these choices. This tension is clearly visible in Schemmel's, 2021a work. He understands the institutional set-up of society very broadly to include not only formal, legal, political, or economic institutions, but also informal social norms (Schemmel, 2021a, pp. 98–100). For him, we should equalize social norms that enable

domination, affect individual self-esteem, or affect individual opportunities by conveying the idea that some are inferior to others (Schemmel 2021a, pp. 185–193; Schemmel, 2021b).

However, this introduction of social norms leads to two problems. First, it reintroduces the conflict between personal autonomy and equality. Consider again the case of the deferential wife who endorses her lifestyle. If this is against the background of a sexist, gendered society, then relational egalitarians should bite the bullet and say that this social norm is unjust and that the state should aim to change sexist social norms or at least diminish their pervasiveness, in different more or less direct ways. Consequently, the tension between *SEC* and *AC* remains. On one hand, following a procedural approach to autonomy, one could say that it requires respecting the autonomous choices of individual agents, even if they choose hierarchical lives. On the other hand, relational egalitarians typically support the idea that unjust social norms ought to be criticized.

A second problem for relational egalitarians tempted by this deontic route is that if one accepts that relational egalitarians should be able to deal with social norms, then it seems like they should abandon their commitment to content-neutrality. Aiming to change hierarchical social norms may require promoting a certain ethos that can conflict with individual decisions in certain circumstances. Promoting an ethos that people treat and regard each other as equals may be required to ensure that all live in a social and political environment that does not support inequalitarian social norms and prevent their emergence.¹⁰ This, however, brings us away from content-neutrality regarding individual autonomous choices, since this substantive understanding of equality relies on the idea that some ways of treating and regarding others in society are preferable to others.¹¹

One possible response here could be to try and move away from a procedural account of autonomy to adopt a weakly substantive position. As mentioned, for weakly substantive accounts autonomy includes some normative content. We can see such a position in the work of Meyers (1989) (see also Benson, 2005a; 2011). Although she remains largely content-neutral, her account contains a “weak normative substance” (Benson, 2005b) in that she contends that self-respect is central to autonomy:

Self-respecting people have due regard for their dignity as agents. Not obsequious, not imperious, they neither belittle nor overrate the importance of their own inclinations. They take their own desires to be worthy of consideration, but they give these desires only their proper weight in deliberations.

(Meyers 1989, p. 214)

Applied to the question at hand, it follows that treating others as equal autonomous agents requires promoting certain goods, including, at least, self-respect. This is seen as necessary to ensure that all can develop the proper self-regarding attitudes, which are themselves essential to be autonomous. This also strongly resonates with a broadly liberal, deontic conception of relational equality; Schemmel, for instance, is very sensitive to the question of self-respect and its importance. He argues that protecting self-respect requires some relationships—such as parental love or a certain type of upbringing—and some formal rights—such as rights to free speech and association (Schemmel, 2019, 2021a, p. 184, 2021b).

However, it is unlikely that a weakly substantive position can resolve the tension between *SEC* and *AC* all the while preserving the commitment to content-neutrality. On one hand, if Meyers’ quote is read weakly, then one could still consider the case of the deferential wife as an autonomous choice. As Warriner (2014) has pointed out, this scenario can be compatible with a

weakly substantive approach to autonomy because the subordinate partner can still see herself as an agent who willingly accepts the subordinate status (Warriner 2014, p. 37). The deferential wife still asserts her desires, in a sense, even if her desires are to subordinate her will to her husband's. On the other hand, one could be tempted to read this reference to self-respect more strongly as stating that certain types of hierarchical relationships are incompatible with personal autonomy. However, this reading then demands to abandon content-neutrality and it pushes us toward a constitutive understanding of autonomy according to which some types of external conditions must be met to say that a person is autonomous. Therefore, both the procedural accounts and the weak substantivist accounts of autonomy fail to resolve the tension between *SEC* and *AC*.

3.3 | Socio-political relations as constitutive of autonomy

Taking stock of the argument so far, relational egalitarians have good reasons not to rely simply on an instrumental approach or a procedural/weakly substantive conception of autonomy because they cannot escape certain conflicts between autonomy and equality. Following these approaches, individuals can autonomously choose to live non-egalitarian lives, which may create, reproduce, or compound hierarchical social norms. To respond to this conflict, however, a third way of conceptualizing the relation between social relations and autonomy may be considered: social-relational accounts of autonomy. Such an account can be seen particularly clearly in the work of Oshana (2006) and Mackenzie (2021) (see also Hill, 1991; Superson, 2005).

Oshana adopts a broad conception of relational autonomy that includes internal and external elements. For her, it is not only that human agents evolve and are influenced by a socio-historical context, but autonomy itself is constituted by certain social relations. Autonomy is incompatible with unequal relations like domination and this approach presupposes that agents have a certain status in their interactions with others. This constitutivist approach is designed to capture cases where an agent reaches the threshold of internal capacities to be autonomous on the procedural and weakly substantive accounts, but nonetheless cannot be said to be autonomous because others have significant control over their lives. Consequently, Oshana argues that to consider if an agent is autonomous, we need to look beyond internal capacities to consider the agent's context and status: social-relational properties are an inherent, constitutive part of autonomy for her (Oshana, 2006, pp. 86–90). These include a certain social standing ensuring that all persons can protect themselves from arbitrary interference in their choices. Oshana also argues that individuals must not be required to take responsibility for someone else's needs. Finally, persons must be capable of enjoying a certain level of financial self-sufficiency.

From a relational egalitarian perspective, this constitutive account of equality may be appealed to avoid the tension between *SEC* and *AC*. From this perspective, the case of the deferential wife who chooses to live a subservient life is problematic, in a sense, both from the perspective of relational autonomy and social equality. From the perspective of relational autonomy, her choice is problematic because she becomes less autonomous since someone else will have significant, arbitrary control over her life. In parallel, from the perspective of relational equality, choosing subservience is problematic because one will have an unequal social standing and this choice contributes to a hierarchical social structure which reliably renders some more socially vulnerable to others when it is made against the background of a gender hierarchy.¹² This idea that some socio-political relations are necessary for autonomy can also

presumably be appealed to explain why socio-political institutions have good reasons to foster an egalitarian social ethos. Following the constitutive reading, this is not only the best way to ensure that people effectively relate as social equals, but also that individuals treat and regard one another as equal autonomous agents. In other words, it would not only ensure that the right relations exist between agents, but more profoundly it provides a further rationale explaining why the egalitarian ethos is desirable: it would support and foster individual autonomy globally.

Mackenzie (2021) concurs on the idea that there exists a deep connection between a constitutivist conception of relational autonomy and relational egalitarianism. Although she has a different project than the one pursued in this article—since she considers more what role the concept of relational equality should play in a theory of relational autonomy rather than explore the possible tensions and incompatibilities between the two theoretical families and to consider the inverse relation (that is, what conception of autonomy is most promising for relational egalitarians)—for her, both approaches share a fundamental intuition concerning the injustice of social hierarchies and social inequalities. As she writes: “Externalist theories seem to be motivated by the intuition that structural and status inequalities are inconsistent with autonomy. This intuition, I suggest, reflects relational egalitarian intuitions about the meaning and importance of social equality” (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 38). Although she agrees with Oshana’s intuitions, Mackenzie proposes her own, multidimensional analysis of autonomy to show how relational egalitarianism can be of use for relational autonomy theorists. Briefly, Mackenzie develops a tripartite definition of autonomy which includes: (1) self-determination (the freedoms and opportunities to make choices about “what to value, who to be, and what to do”); (2) self-governance (the skills and capacities to make choices and enact decisions aligned with one’s practical identity); and (3) self-authorization (the importance of regarding oneself as an agent with the normative authority to be self-determining and self-governing) (Mackenzie, 2014, pp. 17–19).

From there, Mackenzie adopts a nonideal understanding of social equality. For her, this theory is less about articulating an ideal where social equality would be fully respected, and more about criticizing social inequalities and denouncing the injustices and harms unequal social relations produce (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 42). For her, this critical dimension of relational egalitarianism resonates strongly with the constitutivist conception of relational autonomy. For instance, criticizing disrespectful social hierarchies undermining self-respect—denounced by relational egalitarians—resonates with the importance of protecting and fostering self-authorization for relational autonomy theorists. In sum, Mackenzie considers that relational egalitarianism has two main uses for relational autonomy theorists (2021, p. 46). First, at least abolishing “manifest forms of social inequalities and unjust hierarchies” is a necessary condition for autonomy. Second, she highlights that both relational egalitarians and relational autonomy theorists insist on the importance of fostering both mutual respect and self-respect.

Before I turn to the implications of this externalist understanding of autonomy for relational egalitarians, however, it is worth highlighting that if one starts from autonomy to then consider the necessary socio-political relations for it to obtain, then it is unclear if social equality is required. This point is shown forcefully by Lippert-Rasmussen (2021a). In a word, he argues that if one assumes that relational autonomy is an important value, it does not require to relate as equals, even if one adopts an externalist understanding of relational autonomy. For him, relational equality is not required because relational sufficiency may be enough:

On this view, justice requires that people relate to one another as people with sufficient standing, be that social, moral, or other forms of standing, where sufficient standing sometimes is less than equal standing but definitely a higher standing than that of slaves, self-effacing spouses, etc. (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2021a, p. 67)¹³

To illustrate, Lippert-Rasmussen points out that in the case of the deferential wife, her case of self-abnegation is extreme and does not even reach the level of having sufficient standing in her relationship. However, the case changes significantly if the wife is only somewhat deferential to her husband in such a way that her husband relates to her as a sufficient. Is she then autonomous? Lippert-Rasmussen contends that she could be. This result is, in itself, unsurprising. After all, as mentioned, autonomy is often seen as a matter of degree—an idea that both Oshana and Mackenzie endorse—and, consequently, it is plausible to argue that to reach the sufficient threshold to be autonomous, it may be enough to relate as sufficient.¹⁴

Nonetheless, two things are worth underlining here. First, Lippert-Rasmussen's argument has a distinct starting point from the one adopted in this article. He considers whether a commitment to relational autonomy leads to a commitment to relational equality. However, his position does not speak to the other direction which is the topic of this article: assuming that people ought to relate as equals, what does it mean for our conception of autonomy? Second, of course, the claim defended here is not that relational equality is only valuable to the extent that it is constitutive of autonomy, but rather that respecting personal autonomy is a part of what relating as equals means. It remains that social equality can be required for other, distinct reasons, as mentioned above.

Consequently, even if endorsing an externalist conception of relational autonomy does not require a commitment to relational equality, following the argument in the previous sections, an account of relational autonomy, which includes external elements in our conception of autonomy nonetheless, appears to be the most promising way to reconcile *SEC* and *AC*.

3.4 | Externalism and social equality: A contradictory alliance?

Externalist or constitutivist approaches to autonomy hold important lessons for relational egalitarians concerning what it means to relate to others as equals. However, this may seem surprising since these approaches are often criticized for their tendency to support paternalist or even oppressive interventions (Christman, 2004; Holroyd, 2009; Khader 2020; Khader and McGill 2022; for responses, see Mackenzie, 2008, 2021; Stoljar, 2017). For instance, Khader (2020) argues that labelling someone as nonautonomous risks leading to the conclusion that oppressed individuals should have less entitlements to make decisions about their own lives, because their preferences should be given less weight. She also contends that these externalist theories struggle to explain why paternalist coercion is wrong if many oppressed people are seen as non-autonomous due to external considerations. More deeply, Khader writes:

Removal of the presumption against paternalistic coercion of oppressed agents also makes it possible for [socially constitutive conceptions of autonomy (SCA)] to promote such coercion (...). If autonomy is constituted partly by options provided by social conditions—as SCA state it is—autonomy can actually be enhanced, or provided for the first time, through coercion.

(Khader 2020, p. 18)

From a relational egalitarian perspective, it seems a priori incoherent to aim to treat all as equals, and yet support the conclusion that we can intervene coercively to render some autonomous.

Oshana's and Mackenzie's responses to these criticisms are illuminating to see how adopting an externalist position is not necessarily incoherent for relational egalitarians. Oshana explicitly acknowledges that some forms of hard paternalism may be defensible in some situations.¹⁵ She mentions that some paternalistic measures may be taken to preserve a person's autonomy over time. If a person acts in a way that threatens the preservation of her autonomy, it may be legitimate to intervene. Mackenzie, in contrast, argues that externalist theories do not necessarily lead to the justification of hard paternalism (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 50). She points out that we need to distinguish between different types of collective interventions to separate hard paternalism and other types of protections, legislations, regulations, and interventions. For instance, Mackenzie mentions that a policy aimed at equalizing the opportunities of citizens that is adopted through an egalitarian democratic process and which enjoys wide support among the target group such that it can be considered to be self-imposed, may be used to promote individual autonomy. These measures would arguably not be objectionably paternalistic.¹⁶

To further specify these intuitions, some distinctions introduced by Oshana can be helpful to have a clearer picture of what it means to treat others as equal autonomous agents. First, Oshana distinguishes between *de jure* autonomy and *de facto* autonomy; between recognizing the moral right of persons to be respected and the question of whether they effectively enjoy high levels of socio-relational autonomy. Moreover, Oshana distinguishes between global and local autonomy. Local autonomy pertains to how a person conducts herself in a particular situation. It is a property of single individual acts, desires, or choices. Global autonomy, in contrast, pertains to the status a person has among other persons (Oshana, 2006, p. 92). Global autonomy is concerned with whether a person manages matters that are of "fundamental importance to her life within a framework of rules (or values, principles, beliefs, pro-attitudes) that she has set for herself" (Oshana, 2006, p. 2). In other words, to be globally autonomous, a person should have "de facto power and authority over choices and actions significant to the direction of her life" (Oshana, 2006, p. 2).¹⁷

These distinctions allow us to make sense of the idea that we may have to respect particular individual decisions, although it may also be legitimate to act on a structural level to foster social norms compatible with and conducive of autonomy and social equality. Following these distinctions, it is possible to state that a constitutivist, externalist position is not designed to diagnose particular decisions individuals take, but rather to identify the external conditions that should exist in society to guarantee a substantive level of *de facto* personal autonomy. The juxtaposition of the *de jure/de facto* distinction with the local/global understanding of autonomy allows us to make sense of the idea that we should respect the decisions of particular individuals to enter hierarchical relationships and yet we may still have good reasons to ensure that a society's institutions and social norms support and foster the recognition of the equal standing of all.

For example, even if the state should refrain from forcing particular individuals to make localized autonomous decisions, since it may be taken to express the idea that some are inferior to others, we may still have good reasons to promote an egalitarian ethos in society. If we accept that (at least some) socio-political relations are constitutive of autonomy, from a global perspective, we have strong *pro tanto* reasons to ensure that people evolve in a social and political environment that is conducive of this autonomy. This means that we should notably oppose relations of domination and social norms that disadvantage some by expressing the idea that they are socially inferior to others (Johnston, 2017), since such situations are incompatible with

the standing of persons as equal autonomous agents under the constitutive, externalist view (Warriner 2014).

More positively, this global approach captures the idea that a set of policies aimed at modifying hierarchical social norms does not necessarily express the idea that some are unequals. Rather, it can express the fact that modifying structural norms requires policies coordinating the actions of many connected individuals because individuals, by themselves, have little hope of modifying pervasive social norms (Young, 2011). The constitutive understanding of autonomy supports at least two main conclusions. First, particular non-egalitarian choices may be deserving of respect even if they are not autonomous¹⁸; relational egalitarians should nonetheless ensure that they are made against an egalitarian background including sufficient protections. In the case of the deferential wife, for instance, her individual choice may not be autonomous in the externalist sense. However, the best way to respond may be to ensure that all have access to a good set of public policies ensuring that everyone can exit interpersonal relationships without unreasonable costs to themselves (by, for instance, guaranteeing social welfare for all), among other things. Second, different indirect measures aiming to equalize social norms and informal relations between persons can be implemented to foster self-respect and egalitarian interpersonal relations. Educational policies promoting respectful attitudes, generous parental leaves for fathers, or districting rules promoting diversity and inclusion may be part of a larger project aiming to promote egalitarian social norms. The point is that relational egalitarians aiming to respect personal autonomy should adopt a global, structural perspective aiming to ensure that individuals have the capacity to see themselves as equals, to have the skills and capacities to endorse an individual plan of life, and be in a position to have control over fundamental matters concerning their lives.

Accordingly, a constitutive approach allows us to reconcile *SEC* and *AC* by tracing a deeper connection between the two: by showing that some socio-political relations are constitutive of one's global autonomy, then it becomes possible to highlight how relational equality and relational autonomy can work in tandem.

4 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, since many relational egalitarians consider that social equality requires, among other things, that we respect autonomous agents equally *qua* autonomous agents, then they should be pulled toward a constitutive, externalist conception of relational autonomy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the Fonds de Recherche du Québec en Société et Culture; and by the Danish National Research Foundation (DNR144).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ENDNOTES

¹ As Bengtson and Lippert-Rasmussen point out, other considerations should be taken into account. For instance, from a telic perspective stating that (in)egalitarian relationships are non-instrumentally, intrinsically

(dis)valuable, one could argue that egalitarian relationships are to be sought when we relate with non-autonomous or non-agential persons.

- ² Of course, it would be false to say that all traditional theories of autonomy fail to take relationships into account. For instance, Gerald Dworkin explicitly highlights that humans are social beings who are not self-sufficient. He takes the example of “commitments” to underline that our actions and desires are influenced by the needs and desires of others (Dworkin, 1988, 23). Moreover, he explicitly resists the thought that being independent amounts to creating our own moral principles. On the contrary, for him, we ought to recognize the social character of moral principles (Dworkin, 1988, 36). Similarly, Frankfurt’s procedural account insists on a person’s second-order desires and his position is content-neutral; he does not presuppose that autonomy is only about competence since it also includes “wholehearted identification” with a preference, which need not be individualistic (Frankfurt, 1988). For a more in-depth critical review of the—sometimes—overstated differences between relational and traditionalist accounts of autonomy, see Friedman 2018 [1997]. For the purpose of this essay, the main contributions relational autonomy theories bring to relational egalitarianism, I believe, are the questions of whether our conception of autonomy should remain content-neutral or not regarding a person’s preferences, and whether autonomy includes internalist dimensions only or also includes externalist elements.
- ³ Note that, as Mackenzie points out, this premise tends to be more implicit than explicit for many relational autonomy theorists.
- ⁴ Interestingly, Mackenzie expressly refers to the work of Anderson and relational egalitarianism to flesh out this third premise (2014, 22n20).
- ⁵ I put the work of Hojlund aside since she explicitly refers to Anderson to ground her own approach. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to distinguish more clearly between agency and autonomy.
- ⁶ Note that this does not prevent social equality from also being instrumentally valuable.
- ⁷ Friedman is not alone in insisting that autonomy is a matter of degree. See, for instance, Meyers (1989), Oshana (2006), and Mackenzie (2014).
- ⁸ For Friedman, to be autonomous, and agent needs access to an adequate array of available options; stable and enduring concerns that give her a specific, relatively continuous individual perspective over time; coherent wants and desires that are reflectively reaffirmed by the agent; and a stable and enduring perspective across different situations and time—although she recognizes that it can undergo certain changes (Friedman, 2003, 12).
- ⁹ Of course, Friedman still defends a *relational* conception of autonomy. Social dimensions are essential to evaluate the array of options one has access to and to ensure that individuals develop the sufficient competencies for autonomy. She insists on three social dimensions. First, individuals are “products of socialization by other selves into communities of interacting selves within which they are differentiated as distinct particular persons” (Friedman, 2003, 15). Second, the individual capacities for autonomy can only be learned and acquired from other persons. Third: “Autonomous self-reflection requires meaningful options that can be weighed in light of wants, values, or other points of reference.” These options are at least partly matters of the social condition facing someone, and what those conditions permit and prevent. Also, options are comprehensible to persons in virtue of shared cultural practices of representation and interpretation. (Friedman, 2003, 15). Consequently, Friedman is drawn to the conclusion that at least some relationships are instrumentally connected to the development of autonomy competencies (Friedman, 2003, 96–7). These relationships promote autonomy by, for instance, ensuring that agents develop their capacity for self-reflection and can maintain a relatively stable individual perspective. Although some relationships are instrumental to ensure that individuals are socialized to develop these capacities, notice that the connection with social equality remains more deontic here: the point is not that equality is only instrumentally connected to autonomy, but rather that autonomous agents ought to be respected in their choices (*pro tanto*), even if they choose to endorse substantively non-egalitarian ways of living.
- ¹⁰ Interestingly, Schemmel explicitly mentions the relevance of promoting an egalitarian ethos in society (Schemmel, 2021a, 116–22).

- ¹¹ This is true even if, in practice, we should refrain from intervening in individual choices directly. I come back to this question in more details below.
- ¹² I come back to the importance of a structural outlook below to specify this claim. A full presentation of what are social structures would take me too far from the main topic at hand. However, briefly, I consider that a social structure is a collection of different social practices combining culturally shared concepts, beliefs, attitudes, etc., and resources—either material (food, land, built environment, capital, etc.) or immaterial (social positions, opportunities, time, knowledge, etc.)—that reliably produce certain outcomes, whether intended or not (see Haslanger, 2016, 2023; Young, 2011). Social structures enable and constrain individual choices and actions, and are reproduced through them. From a relational egalitarian perspective, a given social structure is unjust when it reliably positions some as socially inferior to others.
- ¹³ For more detailed accounts of what relational sufficiency is, see Bengtson and Nielsen (2023) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2021b).
- ¹⁴ Lippert-Rasmussen's position in that paper strongly echoes the instrumental position discussed above. However, it is worth pointing out that he adopts a constitutivist approach. That is, he considers whether some relationships are "a constitutive part of being autonomous" (Lippert-Rasmussen 2021a, 60). Consequently, he argues that relating as sufficient may be necessary to be autonomous, at least on some readings of what relational autonomy is. Hence, despite this stronger relationship between (sufficient) social relationships and relational autonomy, his position fails to reconcile SEC and AC, as he himself recognizes, in a manner akin to instrumentalism. As he writes, his argument: "does not support the claim that autonomy does not presuppose the realization of any kind of relational ideal, only that this ideal is not egalitarian, but sufficientarian" (Lippert-Rasmussen 2021a, 73).
- ¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing that out. Hard paternalism here is "the view that an acceptable reason for paternalistic behavior is the necessity of protecting competent adults, against their will, from the harmful consequences of even their fully voluntary undertakings" (Oshana, 2006, 109).
- ¹⁶ Although a full study of paternalism and its justification lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to flag that many argue that some paternalistic policies could be required by relational egalitarianism (see Hojlund, 2021; Midtgaard 2023; Pedersen 2021). Moreover, different tempering factors can be considered to evaluate whether a policy is legitimate or objectionably paternalistic. For instance, the scope of the policy, its rationale, the means it employs, and the risk that it will contribute to the marginalization of some should be considered (Hojlund, 2021; Kolodny, 2023, 97–101).
- ¹⁷ Oshana's distinction between local and global autonomy seems to be different from the one Litalien has in mind since, as mentioned, Litalien is concerned with agency, not autonomy. To specify Oshana's definition further, to have power, an autonomous persons should be "in *actual* control of their own choices, actions, and goals" (Oshana, 2006, 3). This implicitly comes with the idea of self-control. To have authority, an autonomous persons should have a kind of "*authoritative* control of their own choices, actions, and goals" (Oshana, 2006, 4). Since she is interested with *de facto* and not only *de jure* control, then having *de facto* authoritative control presupposes that one has a certain social standing *vis-à-vis* others.
- ¹⁸ Some may appeal to the position of Khader (2020) and Khader and McGill (2022) to argue that the statement "particular non-egalitarian choices may be deserving of respect even if they are not autonomous" misses the mark because denial of autonomy is itself disrespectful (see also Christman, 2009). Unfortunately, I do not have the space to fully address this legitimate worry here. Briefly, Khader and McGill (2022) could underline that this denial of autonomy stigmatizes lives that are lived according to values other than autonomy—such as "traditionally feminine values (like self-sacrifice, for example)" (Khader and McGill 2022, 249)—or leads to the suggestion that "oppressed agents are not competent to make their own decisions" (Khader and McGill 2022, 247), among other potential problems. I do believe that these are legitimate worry. However, I doubt that they are intrinsically tied to an externalist position. It is of course of fundamental importance that collective interventions are made in ways that are not stigmatizing and that they respect the *de jure* right of all to decide for themselves. Yet, this does not rule out the relevance and uses of an externalist position. What a policy expresses or whether it is stigmatizing is a judgment that will be made on a case-by-case basis. Although it is a difficult balancing exercise, I do believe it is possible to underline that some structural norms ought to be changed, and that this evades individual control, all the while being respectful toward agents and their

decisions. The above-mentioned indirect measures could, arguably, be taken to support social equality and socio-relational autonomy without necessarily being disrespectful. For discussion of this issue, see Lee (2023), Mackenzie (2008, 2015), and Stoljar (2017).

REFERENCES

- Anderson, E. 1999. "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109(2): 287–337.
- Anderson, E., and R. Pildes. 2000. "Expressive Theories of Law: A General Restatement." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 148(5): 1503–75.
- Babbitt, S. E. 1993. "Feminism and Objective Interests: The Role of Transformation Experiences in Rational Deliberation." In *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by L. Alcoff and E. Potter, 245–264. New York: Routledge.
- Bengtson, A., and K. Lippert-Rasmussen. 2023. "Relational Egalitarianism and Moral Unequals." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 31(4): 387–410.
- Bengtson, B., and L. Nielsen. 2023. "Relational Justice: Egalitarian and Sufficiency." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 40(5): 900–918.
- Benson, P. 2011. "Narrative Self-Understanding and Relational Autonomy. Comments on Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera, 'Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves, and Autonomy' and Andrea C. Westlund, 'Rethinking Relational Autonomy,'." *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy* 7(1): 1–5.
- Benson, P. 1991. "Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization." *Social Theory and Practice* 17: 385–408.
- Benson, P. 1994. "Free Agency and Self-Worth." *Journal of Philosophy* 91: 650–668.
- Benson, P. 2005a. "Taking Ownership: Authority and Voice in Autonomous Agency." In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, edited by J. Christman and J. Anderson, 101–126. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benson, P. 2005b. "Feminist Intuitions and the Normative Substance of Autonomy." In *Personal Autonomy: New Essay Son Personal Autonomy and its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, edited by J. S. Taylor, 124–142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bettelheim, B. 1960. *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*. New York: The Free Press.
- Christman, J. 2004. "Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom." *Ethics* 101: 343–359.
- Christman, J. 2009. *The Politics of Persons. Individual Autonomy and Socio-Historical Selves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cudd, A. 2006. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dworkin, G. 1988. *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dworkin, R. 1977. *Taking Rights Seriously*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fourie, C., F. Schuppert, and I. Wallimann-Helmer. 2015. "The Nature and Distinctiveness of Social Equality." In *Social Equality: On What It Means to Be Equals*, edited by C. Fourie, F. Schuppert, and I. Wallimann-Helmer, 1–20. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frankfurt, H. 1988. *The Importance of What We Care About*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, M. 2003. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Friedman, M. 2018 [1997]. "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique." In *Feminist Rethink the Self*, edited by D. T. Meyers, 40–61. New York: Routledge.
- Friedman, M. 1985. "Moral Integrity and the Deferential Wife." *Philosophical Studies* 47: 141–150.
- Govier, T. 1993. "Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem." *Hypatia* 8: 99–120.
- Haslanger, S. 2016. "What is a (Social) Structural Explanation?" *Philosophical Studies* 173: 113–130.
- Haslanger, S. 2023. "Systemic and Structural Injustice: Is There a Difference?" *Philosophy* 98(1): 1–27.
- Hill, T. 1991. *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobbes, T. 1966 [1642]. "Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society." In *The English Work of Thomas Hobbes*, edited by W. Molesworth. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Hojlund, A. S. G. 2021. "What Should Egalitarian Policies Express? The Case of Paternalism." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 29: 519–538.
- Holroyd, J. 2009. "Relational Autonomy and Paternalistic Interventions." *Res Publica* 15: 321–336.
- Johnston, R. 2017. "Personal Autonomy, Social Identity, and Oppressive Social Contexts." *Hypatia* 32(2): 312–328.

- Johnston, R. 2021. "Autonomy, Relational Egalitarianism, and Indignation." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt, 145–168. New York: Routledge.
- Kant, I. 1948 [1785]. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Khader, S. J. 2020. "The Feminist Case Against Relational Autonomy." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 17(5): 499–526.
- Khader, S. J., and E. McGill. 2022. "Autonomy, Oppression, and feminist Philosophical Methods." In *The Routledge Handbook of Autonomy*, edited by B. Colburn, 245–256. New York: Routledge.
- Kolodny, N. 2023. *The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem*. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press.
- Lee, J. Y. 2023. "Relational Approaches to Personal Autonomy." *Philos Compass*, 18(5), 1–14.
- Lippert-Rasmussen, K. 2018. *Relational Egalitarianism: Living as Equals*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lippert-Rasmussen, K. 2021a. "Could Friends of Relational Autonomy Be Relational Sufficientarians Rather Than Relational Egalitarians?" In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt, 57–79. New York: Routledge.
- Lippert-Rasmussen, K. 2021b. "Relational Sufficientarianism and Frankfurt's Objections to Equality." *The Journal of Ethics* 25(1): 81–106.
- Lippert-Rasmussen, K. 2022. "What is it for us to Be Moral Equals? And Does it Matter Much if We're Not?" *The Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues* 23: 307–330.
- Litalien, É. 2021. "The Wrongs of Relational Inequalities." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt. New York: Routledge.
- Mackenzie, C. 2008. "Relational Autonomy, Normative Authority and Perfectionism." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39: 512–533.
- Mackenzie, C. 2014. "Three Dimensions of Autonomy. A Relational Analysis." In *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, edited by A. Veltman and M. Piper, 15–42. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mackenzie, C. 2015. "Responding to the Agency Dilemma: Autonomy, Adaptive Preferences, and Internalized Oppression." In *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression*, edited by M. Oshana, 48–67. New York: Routledge.
- Mackenzie, C. 2021. "Relational Equality and the Debate Between Externalist and Internalist Theories of Relational Autonomy." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt, 32–56. New York: Routledge.
- Mackenzie, C., and N. Stoljar. 2000b. "Introduction: Refiguring Autonomy." In *Relational Autonomy Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, edited by C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar, 3–34. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mackenzie, C., and N. Stoljar, eds. 2000a. *Relational Autonomy Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McLeod, C. 2002. *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Meyers, D. T. 1989. *Self, Society and Personal Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Meyers, D. T. 2002. *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meyers, D. T. 2005. "Decentralizing Autonomy. Five Faces of Selfhood." In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, edited by J. Anderson and J. Christman, 27–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Midtgaard, S. F. 2023. "Self-Respect Paternalism." *Utilitas* 35: 40–53.
- Miklosi, Z. 2018. "Varieties of Relational Egalitarianism." In *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, edited by P. Vallentyne, D. Sobel, and S. Wall, 110–138. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nath, R. 2020. "Relational Egalitarianism. Philosophy." *Compass* 15: 1–12.
- O'Neil, M. 2008. "What Should Egalitarians Believe." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36: 119–156.
- Oshana, M. 2006. *Personal Autonomy in Society*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pedersen, V. M. L. 2021. "Respectful Paternalism." *Law and Philosophy* 40: 419–442.
- Rawls, J. 1999. *A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Raz, J. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Richardson, H. 2001. "Autonomy's Many Normative Presuppositions." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38: 287–303.
- Scheffler, S. 2010. *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scheffler, S. 2015. "The Practice of Equality." In *Social Equality: On What it Means to Be Equals*, edited by C. Fourie, F. Schuppert, and I. Wallimann-Helmer, 21–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schemmel, C. 2011. "Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care about Distributions." *Social Theory and Practice* 37: 365–390.
- Schemmel, C. 2012. "Distributive and Relational Equality." *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 11: 123–148.
- Schemmel, C. 2015. "Social Equality-or Just Justice?" In *Social Equality: On What it Means to Be Equals*, edited by C. Fourie, F. Schuppert, and I. Wallimann-Helmer, 146–166. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schemmel, C. 2019. "Real Self-Respect and its Social Bases." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49: 628–651.
- Schemmel, C. 2021a. *Justice and Egalitarian Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schemmel, C. 2021b. "Relational Autonomy, Equality, and Self-Respect." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt, 103–124. New York: Routledge.
- Schuppert, F. 2015. "Being Equals: Analyzing the Nature of Social Egalitarian Relationships." In *Social Equality: On What it Means to Be Equals*, edited by C. Fourie, F. Schuppert, and I. Wallimann-Helmer, 107–128. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stoljar, N. 2014. "Autonomy and Adaptive Preference Formation." In *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, edited by A. Veltman and M. Piper, 227–252. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stoljar, N. 2017. "Relational Autonomy and Perfectionism." *Moral Philosophy and Politics* 4: 27–41.
- Stoljar, N. 2018a. "Answerability: A Condition of Autonomy or Moral Responsibility (or Both)?" In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by K. Hutchison, C. Mackenzie, and M. Oshana, 231–252. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stoljar, N., and Kristin Voigt. 2021b. "Introduction: A Relational Turn in Political Philosophy." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt, 1–31. New York: Routledge.
- Stoljar, N., and Kristin Voigt. 2021c. "Regarding Oneself as an Equal." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*, edited by N. Stoljar and K. Voigt, 145–168. New York: Routledge.
- Stoljar, N.. 2018b. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy. In Zalta, EN (ed), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-autonomy/>
- Stoljar, N., and Kristin Voigt, eds. 2021a. *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Superson, A. 2005. "Deformed Desires and Informed Desire Tests." *Hypatia* 20: 109–126.
- Viehoff, D. 2014. "Democratic Equality and Political Authority." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42: 337–375.
- Voigt, K. 2018. "Relational Equality and the Expressive Dimension of State Action." *Social Theory and Practice* 44: 437–467.
- Voigt, K. 2020. *Relational Egalitarianism*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1387>
- Warriner, J. 2014. "Gender Oppression and Weak Substantive Theories of Autonomy." In *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression*, edited by M. Oshana, 25–47. New York: Routledge.
- Westlund, A. 2003. "Selflessness and Responsibility for the Self. Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy." *Philosophical Review* 112: 37–77.
- Westlund, A. 2009. "Rethinking Relational Autonomy." *Hypatia* 24: 26–49.
- Wolff, J. 2015. "Social Equality, Relative Poverty and Marginalised Groups." In *The Equal Society: Essay on Equality in Theory and Practice*, edited by G. Hull, 21–41. Hull, London: Lexington Books.
- Young, I. M. 2011. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Hugo Cossette-Lefebvre is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for the Experimental-Philosophical Study of Discrimination at Aarhus University. In his research, Hugo concentrates on political philosophy, philosophy of law, and applied ethics. His research has appeared in journals such as *Bioethics*, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *AI & Ethics*, and *Public Affairs Quarterly*.

How to cite this article: Cossette-Lefebvre, Hugo. 2024. "Equal Societies, Autonomous Lives: Reconciling Social Equality and Relational Autonomy." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12579>