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Toward a relational theory of harm: on the ethical implications of childhood psychological abuse

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ABSTRACT

My aim in this paper is to move toward a relational moral theory of harm through examination of a common yet underexplored form of child maltreatment: childhood psychological abuse. I draw on relational theory to consider agential, intrapersonal, and interpersonal ways in which relational harms develop and evolve both in intimate relationships and in conditions of oppression. I set forth three distinctive yet interconnected forms of relational harm that childhood psychological abuse causes: harm to the relational agency of individuals, harm to the relationships individuals hold with themselves, especially with regard to how they respect, know, and trust themselves, and harm to interpersonal relationships of both a direct and indirect nature in present and future timeframes. I close by noting that while relationships can be the site of human brutality that destroys the relational self, paradoxically and promisingly, they also can be a primary means of the relational reconstitution of the self. Ultimately, relational analyses of the harms of childhood psychological abuse reveal several key elements of a relational theory of harm and demonstrate the significance of relational harms for moral philosophy.

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Introduction

Harm is a normative cornerstone of both moral and political philosophy in the Western tradition. Be it the distinction between doing versus allowing harm, Mill's harm principle, or, in more recent years, Feinberg's considerations of harms to self (1984) and others (1987), harm often figures prominently as a lens of analysis for ethical and political claims. The focus in such approaches time and again has been on harms to individuals: the harms we suffer and the harms that others suffer (Bradley 2012; Harman 2009; Rabenberg 2015; Shiffrin 2012; Kamm 2006). Different theories have demonstrated how individuals can sustain harm in a variety of ways, including to their agency, autonomy, well-being, interests, or dignity. A smaller cluster of philosophical accounts moves beyond the individual to address group harm (Simon 1995; Friedman and May 1985), which occurs when the form of harm that an individual member sustains results in suffering

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that the group as a whole experiences (Simon 1995, 123) or when collective harms directly affect the group as a whole (Friedman and May 1985, 207).

What both individual and group-based approaches fail to consider are the forms of harm that are inflicted neither on individuals nor groups. While recognition of the harms that individuals and groups suffer is important, moral theories that only recognize harm to individuals or members of groups as such evidence a glaring omission. What's missing, I argue, is another distinctive form of harm: relational harm. Relational harms include both harms to our relational agential abilities and harms to relationships themselves. Feminist relational theory can rectify this oversight. Relational theory enhances our moral perception by helping us to perceive things we would not otherwise recognize, gaining a more complex feel for the texture of moral life in the process. More specifically, relational ethics serves as a critical moral framework from which to identify and analyze the normative significance of relational harms. It is only through such an approach that distinctly relational forms of harm can be fully seen, appreciated, and theorized. Relational theory provides the backdrop necessary for articulating and conceptualizing heretofore overlooked forms of harm.

Relational theory functions as a kind of 'umbrella term' used 'to refer to any approach to ethical questions explicitly attentive to the relational nature of selves' (Sherwin and Stockdale 2017, 9). In addition, relational theory begins from 'the fact that human beings exist in relationships and do not come into the world as the independent, fully autonomous, and self-sufficient agents assumed by many traditional liberal theories', as Christine Koggel has observed (2012, 70). Thus, a hallmark of relational theory is an emphasis on and exploration of the moral importance of an understanding of the self as relational in these ways. Relational theory develops from critical awareness of the limitations of extant moral philosophical theories and their non-relational conceptions of the self. In doing so, relational theory has established itself as a crucial alternative to dominant theories.

While relational theory's underscoring of the relational nature of the self is undoubtedly an essential place to begin when reconsidering what moral philosophy might accomplish, one aim of this article is to examine other relational aspects of ethical life to set forth additional contributions relational theory might make to moral theory. Just as other feminist scholars have worked to establish the relational dimensions of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000), in this article I read the concept of harm through a relational approach, thereby generating a series of new insights.¹ When we begin from a relational concept of the self, we generate new conceptions of harm. Developing a relational notion of harm will also mean reconsidering the notion of agency, which takes center stage later in the article, and which I take to be grounded in, yet distinctive from, the concept of a relational self and of relational autonomy.

The task of reconsidering the nature of harm in ways that reconceptualize and surpass the limits of the individual is a quintessential one for relational theory. Just as dominant philosophical accounts of harm begin with particular conceptions of the self that then influence how harm is theorized, the origin point of relational theory is an understanding of the self that is relational in at least two senses. The self is constitutively relational, which is to say that how we come to be selves in the first place happens in and through the relationships in which we stand to others. How we maintain our existence as selves occurs relationally, too: for relational theorists, the self exists in a social ontological

context that is thoroughly relational. With this relational understanding of the self in hand, relational analysis reveals three hitherto overlooked forms of harm: (1) harms to the relational capacities of individuals, which are central to moral agency, (2) harms to intrapersonal relationships, that is, the ways in which we relate to ourselves, and (3) harms to our relationships with others. Each of these harms are instances of what I am calling ‘relational harm’.

In this article, I concentrate on a common and brutal human experience that readily demonstrates the relational nature of harm, as well as revealing the shortcomings of standard philosophical theories of harm in ignoring relational harm.² Relational theorists emphasize the developmental and moral significance of the relationships into which we are born and through which we develop into fully formed selves. Yet, the relationships into which we are born are sometimes inconsistently nurturing, actively unstable, or downright cruel. As Jennifer Nedelsky reminds us:

Part of the point of a relational approach is to understand what kinds of relationships foster – and which undermine – core values, such as autonomy, dignity, or security ... One of the contributions of feminism to relational theory is that it is particularly unlikely to make the mistake of romanticizing community or relationship. Feminists know all too well the destructive power of bad structures of relationship. (2011, 32)

The relationship perhaps most likely to be romanticized – that between parent and child – can also be the site of immense trauma. It is this insight that fuels the present investigation. If the self is formed and maintained through our relationships with others, what happens when those relationships themselves are harmful and when we stand in close relation with those who are injurious? To ask this question another way, what happens when the immense power relationality has to make us who we are and who we understand ourselves to be is unleashed abusively?

I seek answers to these questions by examining the phenomenon of childhood psychological abuse (hereafter, ‘CPA’),³ which takes place when caretakers, most often parents, repeatedly subject children to forms of psychological abuse, violence, and neglect. Psychological abuse refers to behaviors that generate mental and emotional distress in their recipients, especially through patterned instances of behavior, which can take place on interpersonal levels (i.e. between individuals in the context of personal relationships) and structural levels (e.g. certain forms of oppression that play out institutionally) (cf., Galtung 1969). CPA, I will argue, has ethical implications that, while most obvious on interpersonal levels, also ultimately play out on social and structural levels.

Let me note upfront that there are surely exceptions to my assertions regarding CPA and relational harms. To some extent, my account of the relational harms of CPA arises from a specific frame of reference: middle class North America in the twenty-first century. As such, my focus often rests with the parent–child relationship, which I take to be a primary but not exclusive site of CPA. While I do not believe that the claims I make regarding the relational harms of CPA are only applicable to this limited environment, caution is always warranted when making broader assertions. Children, of course, live and grow in many kinds of settings: extended, multigenerational family settings with multiple caregivers, and sometimes across multiple households.

While the harms of physical abuse and violence have received a fair amount of attention from philosophers and those in related fields, the moral significance of psychological

abuse and violence is vastly underexplored and has gone largely ignored.⁴ Instead, it is physical forms of abuse and violence that have tended to garner attention. Yet, the destruction that psychological abuse leaves in its wake can be just as debilitating and devastating as physical abuse.⁵ Importantly for our purposes here, psychological abuse can also be differently harmful. Providing a thorough examination of psychological abuse that occurs in childhood, as a specific subtype of psychological abuse as a whole, is crucial both because of the general underestimation of the harms that children who experience psychological abuse suffer and because of the specific absence of attention to the moral harms of CPA in philosophy in particular.

We will see that relational harm analysis is a notably effective tool for properly perceiving the breadth and depth of the harms of CPA, especially the significant relational harms CPA leaves in its wake. Absent a relational harm analysis, some of the key negative outcomes of CPA go unacknowledged. While CPA reliably results in individual and possibly also group forms of harm, its most pernicious results are arguably relational. Thus, exploration of the relational harms of CPA demonstrates the distinctive contributions that relational theory can make to complex understandings of the complicated textures of moral existence.

In the pages that follow, I first consider the individual, non-relational harms of CPA in order to provide a sense of the established psychological and philosophical significance of such harms. I ask after both what CPA is and what its negative outcomes are. I next delve into the relational harms of CPA by first appreciating the importance of understanding not only the intimate implications of such abuse but also how they reverberate through social patterns of oppression. I then devote equal time to each of what I am arguing are the three relational harms of CPA. I examine harms to relational capacity, explaining why we need to pay greater attention to the relational aspects of agency. Next, I investigate harms to intrapersonal relationships, considering how CPA can undermine self-respect, self-knowledge, and self-trust. Finally, I analyze the harms to interpersonal relationships, beginning with direct harms to the parent–child relationship in which the CPA occurs and moving into consideration of the indirect relational harms of CPA as a form of intergenerational injustice. I close by noting that while relationships can be the site of human brutality that damage the relational self, paradoxically and promisingly, they also can be a site of the relational reconstitution of the self.

The individual harms of childhood psychological abuse

I begin my examination of the harms of CPA with a brief discussion of what it is and what its negative outcomes are from the vantage point of the discipline of psychology, the field that has perhaps most comprehensively analyzed this form of childhood maltreatment in the North American context. After exploring the forms CPA takes, I articulate the individual harms it inflicts from a philosophical perspective. Both steps are necessary precursors to being able to fully grasp the ethical significance of the relational harms of CPA.

Until very recently, the depth and breadth of the individual harms of CPA went largely unacknowledged, meaning more often than not they remained invisible and underestimated. CPA was thought to be not that bad, not to mention not that prevalent, especially in comparison with physical and sexual abuse, the two other forms of child maltreatment long known to be very damaging. The magnitude of the harms of childhood

psychological abuse supposedly paled in comparison to the magnitude of harms of both childhood physical and sexual abuse.

Recognition that the harms of child psychological abuse are at least equal to and in some instances exceed those of both physical and sexual abuse arose only in the last two decades in the North American context. For example, in 2002 the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a technical report in which they noted that

[u]ntil recently, there has been controversy regarding the definition and consequences of psychological maltreatment. Sufficient research and consensus now exist about the incidence, definition, risk factors, and consequences of psychological maltreatment to bring this form of child maltreatment to the attention of pediatricians. (Kairys, Johnson, and the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect 2002, 1)

The AAP then issued a clinical report in 2012 in which they declared that ‘[p]sychological or emotional maltreatment of children and adolescents may be the most challenging and prevalent form of child abuse and neglect, but until recently, it has received relatively little attention’ (Hibbard et al. 2012, 372). What promoted the shift in approach appears to have been a growing awareness that first, child victims of psychological maltreatment fared as bad or worse than those who were sexually or physically abused and second, that only paltry resources were being devoted both to preventing childhood psychological maltreatment and to treating victims (American Psychological Association 2014).

According to psychologists, what exactly is CPA and what are the individual harms it causes? CPA is a series of behaviors exhibited by caregivers toward children, most frequently in the context of the parent–child relationship. CPA ‘represents a breach in the attachment relationship between caregiver and child through (a) a lack emotional nurturance, attunement, and responsiveness (emotional neglect) and/or (b) overt acts of verbal and emotional abuse’ (Spinazzola et al. 2014, S19). It includes acts of omission in the form of neglect, as well as acts of commission in the form of abuse. ‘Psychological maltreatment of children occurs when a person conveys to a child that he or she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another’s needs’ (Kairys, Johnson, and the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect 2002, 1). The list of specific behaviors exhibited in psychological maltreatment is long and distressing: spurning, terrorizing, exploiting or corrupting, refusing emotional responsiveness, rejecting, isolating, parenting inconsistently, neglecting mental and physical health needs or educational needs, and subjecting to the witnessing of domestic violence (1).

The results of such behaviors can be devastating. Psychological maltreatment of children renders a wide variety of individual harms on the children who are subjected to it. A landmark study in 2014 (Spinazzola et al. 2014) found it to be predictive of multiple types of negative outcomes, including depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and substance abuse disorder. CPA is also associated with ‘relational insecurity and negative self-perceptions’ (Spinazzola et al. 2014, S25) and can result in ‘harm to the child, disruptions of psychological safety, and impediments to the normative development of essential capacities such as emotion regulation, self-acceptance and -esteem, autonomy, and self-sufficiency’ (S19).

There are two organizing principles that are especially useful for conceptualizing the nature and scope of individual harms that the psychological maltreatment of children inflicts. The negative outcomes of CPA can be subdivided into internalizing and

externalizing behaviors and present and future symptoms. Psychological abuse experienced in childhood results in negative behaviors that can either be directed internally towards the self or externally towards other persons and the world. Resultant internalized behaviors include a multitude of adverse mental health outcomes, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidality. Externalized behavioral issues include 'inattention, aggression, noncompliance, hyperactivity, conduct problems and delinquency' (American Psychological Association 2014). The harms that CPA visit upon victims are also temporally diverse: some negative outcomes are immediately apparent, while others come to light later in life, as the developmental damage inflicted early on plays out in adult life. Their futures often involve emotional and behavioral challenges rooted in a negative and distorted self-conception.

While all forms of child maltreatment are debilitating, there is emerging evidence that some harms of psychological maltreatment exceed those of physical and sexual abuse in childhood. For example, Spinazzola et al. (2014), in a discussion of the existing literature on childhood psychological maltreatment, note that 'compared with sexual and physical abuse, parental verbal abuse was associated with the largest predictive effects on measures of dissociation, depression and anger/hostility in young adults' (S20). This means that in certain regards, psychological abuse suffered in childhood is distinctively damaging, lending credence to the notion that it is a serious matter that generates serious forms of harm. Of course, forms of childhood abuse often occur in tandem with one another, resulting in compounding effects and harms of being subjected to multiple, simultaneous forms of child maltreatment.

The above discussion draws on the psychological literature to define and present the individual harms of CPA. Switching to a philosophical register, we can articulate forms of individual harms to agency and well-being that psychological abuse causes. Beginning with internalized outcomes, the various forms of mental illness that victims experience (e.g. anxiety and depression) represent a serious kind of internally directed limitation to well-being and can compromise individual agential capacities in a wide variety of ways. Individuals facing depression sustain generally reduced well-being, as well as being hindered in their abilities to set and achieve goals in the world. The distortions of self-perception that victims of CPA exhibit – in which low self-esteem leaves them feeling that they are of little value and limited worth – deal a similar dual blow of compromising their felt sense of well-being and leave them with insufficient confidence necessary for consistently functioning with full agency. And we might consider the higher rates of suicide associated with childhood psychological abuse to be the ultimate impingement upon well-being and agency.

Similar observations can be made regarding the ethical implications of the externalized behaviors that accompany CPA. The inability to regulate emotions properly serves as a serious impediment to multiple skills of moral agency that feature rationality, such as moral deliberation and judgment. A pattern of exhibiting aggression towards others will negatively influence one's well-being, for example, in being unable to attain and maintain employment. Further, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, also associated with CPA, will have a life-long impact on learning.

Ultimately, the process of outlining the individual ethical harms of CPA shows us a panoply of damage – the contemporaneous damage dealt to children when their parents or guardians abuse them and potential future damage resulting from the

myriad ways in which CPA disrupts and corrupts a child's developmental trajectory. While the observations available to us through individual harm frameworks are valuable, they are also limited. Conceptualizing CPA primarily or solely as an instance of individual psychological or ethical harm reveals only part of the overall story. To understand that full story, we must turn to relational theory.

The relational harms of childhood psychological abuse

Examining the relational harms of CPA brings to the fore three distinct kinds of relational harm. First, harms to our relational agential capacities, which, I will argue, are crucial for exercising a robust form of moral agency. Second, harms to the relationships we have with ourselves – our intrapersonal relationships – understood as the ways in which we come to value, trust, and care for ourselves, or not. And third, harms to the relationships we hold with others – harms that take place both in the moment of abuse and, potentially, for years to come. These three kinds of relational harm fall into two broad categories: (1) relational harms as injuries to agential capacities of individuals that are essential to existing relationally, that is, to building, maintaining, and participating in relationships, and (2) relational harms as those that harm relationships themselves, with relationships being understood as entities to which we ascribe moral significance (in addition to the moral significance we ascribe to the individuals involved in those relationships). Thus, two main tasks lie ahead: to render a relational reading of individual harms and to analyze relational harms as irreducible to individual harms.

In articulating these forms of relational harm, the material in this section exhibits a shift deserving of comment. For the remainder of this article, I incorporate observations that, while rooted in the interpersonal relationship between parent and child – which serves as the primary site of abuse in accounts of CPA – also intentionally bring into view structural concerns that move beyond a singular focus on intimate relationships. Doing so is very much in the spirit of relational theory. While tending to the realm of intimate relationships, relational theorists also consistently assess the ways in which those relationships are 'shaped by the wider societal, cultural relations of which they are a part' (Nedelsky 2011, 20). Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer Llewellyn note (in a passage where they are discussing Susan Sherwin's work (1998, 19)) that in relational theory, 'the focus of metaphysical and moral attention should not be solely on interpersonal relationships but also on the full range of influential relationships, personal and public, in which we exist and are constituted as human selves' (Downie and Llewellyn 2012, 6). Relational theorists have thus consistently urged scholars to think beyond the realm of intimate relations.

Koggel extends this pivotal contribution from relational theory by underscoring the importance of oppression: 'A central feature of the relational approach', as it has developed over the years, has been to expand the network of relationships beyond those of dependency on which feminists, and early care ethicists in particular, have tended to focus. As I noted in earlier work on relational theory, 'relations of power, oppression, dominance, exploitation, authority, and justice form identities and self-concepts just as much as relations of dependency, benevolence, care, self-sacrifice, and friendship do' (Koggel 2012, 71). The dependency relation between primary caregiver and child undoubtedly has a particular form of significance for CPA, as infants can be literally brought into being in the midst of it. Even so, that primary relationship is always situated within

broader relational patterns, many of which are themselves established and maintained under conditions of oppression. As Susan Sherwin observes:

Oppression permeates both personal and public relationships; hence, I prefer to politicize the understanding of the term *relational* as a way of emphasizing the political dimensions of the multiple relationships that structure an individual's selfhood, rather than to reserve the term to protect a sphere of purely private relationships that may appear to be free of political influence. (Sherwin 1998, 19–20)

Keeping these insights in mind helps us to take a more expansive perspective on the phenomenon of CPA – in how it arises, what its impact is, and what might be done to curtail and respond to it. When thinking through CPA, there can be a form of epistemic narrowing to the specific milieu of the primary caregiver-child relationship, abstracted from broader networks of relationships. Relational theory is valuable for how it challenges any premature perspectival narrowing, reminding us to take a wider vista by understanding that even the most primary of relationships that form our selves are 'nested relations', to use Jennifer Nedelsky's term. And that those selves are 'constituted, yet not determined, by the web of nested relationships within which we live' (2011, 45). Relational theory's attention to the permutations and effects of injustice, dominance, and oppression in this regard is all the more important when juxtaposed with the relative inattention to such factors found in the philosophical literature on individual harm. These insights will also bolster my argument that while relationships can be the site of serious abuse and violence that shatter the relational self, turning to the wider systems of relationships in which the caregiver-child relationship is situated and shaped holds promise for being an essential means of the relational reconstitution of the self.

Relational harms to the agency of individuals

An observation central to any discussion of the relational harms of CPA is that the very site of CPA is the relationship itself. And not just any relationship – CPA most frequently occurs in the relationship of greatest significance: between primary caregiver and child. This relationship is consequential for many reasons: it is the site of the development of language, reasoning abilities, learning, and, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, it is the site of development of our sense of self. Relational theorists have long argued that the self is relationally constituted and maintained (Code 1991; Downie and Llewellyn 2012; Koggel 1998; Nedelsky 2011). Just as selves are relationally constituted, the specifically relational capacities of individuals – a key series of agential abilities needed to continue interpersonal relationships, function as a moral agent, and live life well – are similarly relationally constituted and sustained. Psychological abuse harms its recipients by damaging these agential abilities (or, in the case of children, the development of such abilities) to relate to others in ways protective of shared well-being and productive for joint interests. Part of fully understanding the power of the relational constitution of the self is to appreciate the myriad ways in which this power can be warped. Psychological abuse in interpersonal relationships disrupts how 'uniqueness, creativity, and moral accountability grow out of interdependence and continually turn back to it for affirmation and continuation' (Code 1991, 82). In our shared moral lives, psychological abuse destabilizes the interdependence that is the bedrock of moral responsiveness and responsibility.

The potential warping of the power of the relational constitution of the self is perhaps most dangerous in the situation of radical dependency that childhood represents. While the nature of this dependency is far from static throughout childhood – an infant in the ‘fourth trimester’ of their first three months is dependent on their parents in a way that a burgeoning teenager is not – the power that parents hold over their children during childhood is undeniable. Inherent in the parent–child relationship is a certain form of power-over, one based as much in need as it is in authority. The implications of this power-over relationship and how it amplifies and intertwines with the radical dependency of the child on their parents results in their extreme vulnerability to parental acts of negligence and abuse. It is the twisting of the dependency of childhood and its resulting vulnerability that can make CPA so uniquely devastating. Being subjected to abuse by the person who controls your life and on whom you must rely quite literally to be sustained as a human being qualifies as an exceptional form of suffering.

Along with being the site where our burgeoning sense of self emerges, the parent–child relationship is also where agency comes into being. When thought about relationally, what matters is not only that relationships are constitutive of our agency, but also, of equal consequence, that there are certain agential abilities necessary for living richly relational lives. As Downie and Llewellyn note, relational theory ‘affirms the significance of the fact of relationships and signals the importance of attending to their nature and to what is required of them to ensure well-being and flourishing’ (Downie and Llewellyn 2012, 6). We must tend not only to what is required of our relationships to ensure well-being and flourishing but also, and equally importantly, to what is required for such relationships to be able to happen in the first place. In short, we need to focus on the cultivation of agential abilities of relationality. Understanding the importance of this point involves necessarily moving beyond a more standard account of agency that prioritizes rational agential abilities. Without a doubt, such abilities are central to a life well lived. But they are not the full picture. Absent the agential abilities that help us to build and maintain relationships, our lives would be much diminished. One major focus of an alternative relational account of harm, therefore, are the harms to agential capacities central for engaging relationally with the world. This means that I will initially focus on harms to individual agential capacities, even though my ultimate goal is to develop an account of relational harm beyond the level of the individual. I do so to highlight that there are individual harms with deeply relational ramifications – ramifications that have gone largely unseen by standard accounts of harms to agency.

CPA delivers a whole basket of assorted agential harms. Some of them make the articulation and accomplishment of self-determined ends difficult. Some of them complicate clear thinking around attribution of moral responsibility. And some of those harms target an undervalued set of agential abilities: those that help us to seek, establish, and preserve relationships with others. Many such relational agential skills feature the emotions. It is not a coincidence that the philosophical accounts of agency that have tended to ignore relational capacities are the same ones that have failed to take seriously the significance of the emotions for agency. The skills necessary for well-functioning personal relationships are often emotional skills. This subset of relational agential abilities includes abilities to perceive how another is feeling, to consider those emotions with equanimity, and to respond in ways that are empathic and caring. These agential skills are, among other things, prerequisites for maintaining secure and stable attachments,

a good both for those in relationships and for the relationship itself (its continued existence). Further, such relational agential abilities include what we might think of as a distinctive moral power – the moral power of care – which enables us to understand, adopt, and advance another’s self-determined ends as our own (Miller 2012).

Bearing in mind these aspects of individual agency that are specifically relational, we can see how CPA deals a direct blow to the development of relational agency and begin to grapple with the moral significance of this damage. The site of CPA – primary relationships – is a constitutive and necessary form of engagement through which we develop agential abilities. In a context in which psychological abuse is prevalent, the very soil in which one grows is poisoned. Development of some sort proceeds, but often in ways that are tangled and gnarled.

Harms to relational agency manifest in many different ways. For example, CPA can compromise emotional regulation. Absent emotional regulation, the relational skill of managing one’s own emotional state so as to remain steady in relation can be hard won. Moreover, when CPA has induced post-traumatic stress disorder, it can be impossible to engage the vulnerability and openness necessary to establish relational intimacy in the first place. As discussed above, psychological abuse experienced in childhood can induce depression and anxiety, which compromise well-being in general. Depression and anxiety also dampen abilities to connect with other human beings. The distortion mirrors of depression and anxiety simultaneously warp self-image and one’s perceptions of others’ internal states. These forms of emotional misperception make it difficult to develop the skills of empathy needed to connect with others. Overall, what emerges is a picture in which CPA releases a series of relational harms on individual agency that impede abilities to relate well to others and to build and maintain relationships of meaning across the course of one’s life.

We can articulate the compounding factors of relational harm and oppression by considering a concept that is closely related to agency, namely, autonomy. Early and ongoing work in relational theory on the idea of autonomy fundamentally reoriented centuries-long discourse on the concept, revealing both constitutive and social aspects of relational autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Koggel offers a very helpful way of articulating the significance of autonomy to relational theory, in which she views ‘autonomy as a capacity to shape one’s life that cannot but emerge through an engagement with particular others in a network of relationships. Moreover, those relationships and the possibilities for changing or expanding them are in turn shaped by social practices and political contexts’ (Koggel 2012, 71). When connecting these comments on autonomy to a broader notion of relational agency, we can further articulate how oppressive social practices and unjust political milieus have a multilevel influence on the relational agential impact of CPA. A person’s initial relational agential capacities emerge in the context of the parent–child relationship. But the primary caregivers who visit psychological abuse upon their children were once also children, many of whom existed in oppressive relational, social, and political environments that distorted their own burgeoning relational agential abilities. Not only is that intimate relationship situated with a broader network of relationships at present, it is also situated in a chain-linked history of relationality. With this realization it becomes clear how psychological and other forms of childhood maltreatment can reverberate through generations, dealing different damaging blows to the relational agency of many people along the way. The relational agential wholeness

of any one individual emerges through a particular relationship that is nested within a broader network of personal relationships, that is, in turn, nested in a wider social and political setting. Oppressive forces can act on any part of that structure, serving to amplify past harms to relational agency, as well as present relational agential harms. The relational agential harms of the past enact current relational harms on present individuals, and likely on future ones, as well. Moreover, those who have been damaged in the past enact harms not only on present and potentially future *individuals* but also on present and future *relationships*, a matter to which I now turn my attention.

Relational harms to intrapersonal relationships

A significant shift in thinking with respect to what it is that can be harmed is required in order to approach the next two kinds of relational harms. In existing philosophical theories of harm, harm is something that befalls human beings – both individual humans and groups thereof. An important intervention of relational theory into philosophical accounts of harm is to question whether individuals are the only morally relevant entities that can suffer harm. What a relational theory perspective helps us to realize is that in addition to humans counting as morally considerable entities that can suffer harm, relationships that humans form can and should also count as morally significant entities that experience harm. While mounting a full-blown normative and metaethical defense of this claim is well beyond the scope of this article, the underlying idea that relationships hold moral value and warrant moral consideration apart from a reduction to the individuals who comprise them is something that the following example hopefully demonstrates. Consider a case of parental alienation: Parent A trashes and lies to their child about Parent B for the purposes of poisoning and destroying the relationship the child has with Parent B. To understand the wrongs of such a scenario as arising only from the harms the individuals involved sustain – the reputational damage Parent B suffers or the subjection of a child to lies and deception – fails to capture the full moral wrongdoing of the scenario. That which is of moral value that is lost isn't simply Parent B's reputational integrity or the child's regard for Parent B. The moral wrongdoing consists in substantial part in the wrecking of the relationship itself. The child and Parent B are undoubtedly harmed. But so, too, is their relationship. Arguably, that which is of greatest moral significance that is lost is the relationship itself.

The most obvious relationships that CPA directly harms are those between abusive parent and child. While this is the most immediate relationship to receive damage, it is far from the only one. The path of relationship destruction that CPA wreaks is wide and long. Those who are not directly a part of the abusive relationship can sustain damage to their relationships – a kind of collateral damage. And child victims, because of the impaired forms of relational agency that develop within them, are likely to enact – often unwillingly – destructive patterns in their future relationships, too.

There is a second, less obvious, and infrequently considered relationship that CPA can ruin. It is what is likely the most intimate relationship: the intrapersonal relationship, or the relationship individuals have with themselves. Psychological abuse harms not only how we relate to others but also, and of equal importance, how we relate to ourselves. Relational theory is valuable as a philosophical approach for how it steadies our gaze on the metaphysical and moral significance of our relationships with others, both intimate and

not. What has been less thoroughly considered are the relationships we hold with ourselves, which are arguably ripe for relational analysis, too.⁶

The intrapersonal relational harm that childhood psychological damage deals can be found in how it corrupts the relationships we hold with ourselves. There are, at least three major ways in which psychological maltreatment warps intrapersonal relationships: by affecting self-respect, self-knowledge, and self-trust. The first subvariety of intrapersonal relational harm of CPA, damage to self-respect, is also the most foundational in a moral sense. The key to how CPA wrecks intrapersonal relationships can be found in the forms of self-conception that experiences of psychological abuse establish. In moral terms, the seed that CPA plants in its victims is the belief that they are lesser or that they are not morally equal to others and are, therefore, not deserving of others' decent treatment and respect. It is with ease that such a belief contorts further and occupies how they regard themselves, which is to say, comes to inform the extent to which they believe they are deserving of their own positive moral regard, as well as the extent to which they believe themselves to have equal moral standing and worth. If not challenged early on, this belief will take root and disrupt multiple aspects of one's intrapersonal relationship – most fundamentally, the ability to know and trust oneself.

Abusers who enact psychological abuse on children embed in them a false sense of self based on a series of constraining and erroneous beliefs. In the place of the development of genuine self-knowledge and a robust understanding of oneself, one finds instead a self-conception plagued with varying degrees of another's toxic, injurious convictions – that one is not worthy of consistent loving attention, that one exists only in a derivative state to serve others' needs, etc. The ability to know oneself operates as a cornerstone of future positive relationality with others. As such, the embedding of distorting self-knowledge constitutes a serious and often enduring moral harm.

CPA also warps self-trust, a relation we hold with ourselves of both a moral and epistemic nature. If we are unable to trust that what we believe to be true about ourselves is actually true (such as our judgments of our own strengths and weaknesses), and if instead another's authoritative opinion regarding our worth remains the ultimate arbiter of our value, rather than our own judgment, then how we relate to ourselves can remain shot through with toxicity and trauma. A child's self-trust can also be warped derivatively, as when they are told that the psychological, physical, or sexual violence they witness their parent commit against another family member – be it another parent or sibling – has not happened. In such a case, they are told they do not see what they actually have seen, undermining the sense that their modes of witnessing and their understanding of their world is sound. In seriously dysfunctional family systems, the requirement that children do not acknowledge what they witness – in service, for example, of maintaining external perceptions of supposed family normalcy – can continue on for years, leading to a deep-set sense of distrust of oneself. This initial undermining of self-trust gives rise to an intrapersonal aftermath that complicates a main mechanism through which one may avoid future abuse: the ability to trust one's judgments about others.

That initial relationship of psychological abuse is set in a much wider network of social relations that can reinforce the sense that there is nothing terribly wrong with forms of maltreatment sustained, as well as the negative self-judgment they engender (e.g. that one has limited moral worth). If nobody thinks it was seriously problematic that you were repeatedly told you were worthless as a child and if you are situated in an entire

network of relationships that reinforce the sense that such treatment wasn't *that* bad, the process of reorienting around a different view of the self will be very difficult, to say the least. Yet, one's presence in a network of relationships can work the other way around, as well: a web of caregiving relations, such as can be experienced in extended families, multi-generational family settings, multiple households, or whole communities, can challenge messages regarding limited self-worth that emerge from primary caregiver or parent-child relationships. (I return to a discussion of how relationships can serve as a primary means of the relational reconstitution of the self in the next section.)

There are perhaps two overarching malignant legacies of childhood psychological abuse. Each represents a way in which the relational harms experienced in childhood can go on to wreak future havoc. The first malignant legacy of childhood psychological abuse arises from the intrapersonal harms we have just explored. Through the undermining of self-respect, self-knowledge, and self-trust that CPA accomplishes, victims can take the forms of abuse and violence that their caregivers originally enacted on them and continue to enact them upon themselves endlessly. In this way, the seeds of limited self-worth their parents planted in them grow into forms of largely non-willful self-infliction of harm. The lie of limited self-worth instilled in them in their youth is one that they come to embody repeatedly throughout adulthood. In this sense, this first malignant legacy of CPA is also very much a legacy of unwitting self-betrayal. The second malignant legacy of CPA turns our attention towards interpersonal relational harms, the focus of the next section. Victims of CPA often create relationships that approximate the relational abuse of their youth, a phenomenon known as repetition compulsion. The residue of CPA gives rise to fresh interpersonal harm when adults (again, often largely unwittingly) seek relational circumstances – be they friendships or romantic relationships – bound to recreate the relational trauma of their childhood. Such moments represent how intrapersonal and interpersonal relational harms dovetail when the tendency to enter into psychologically abusive relationships functions as a mechanism to echo and amplify the negative beliefs about themselves instilled in childhood. In this way, both malignant legacies of CPA evidence a corruption of the will such that it can prove difficult for childhood victims not to seek and reenact the abuse they once suffered on themselves and in relation to others, thereby opening the door to the continuation of relational harm.

Relational harms to interpersonal relationships

Thus far, I have delineated relational harms of two varieties: harms to the relational agential capacities of individuals and harms to intrapersonal relationships. The third and final form of relational harm I wish to set forth is harm to interpersonal relationships. In addition to harming the relational capacities that individuals possess and harming intrapersonal relationships, CPA also harms interpersonal relationships themselves – where relationships are understood as their own units of moral significance distinctive from the moral concern that attaches to the individuals who comprise any given relationship. The forms of harm that CPA delivers on interpersonal relationships are of two varieties: direct and indirect. Psychological abuse brings about a morally significant form of direct harm to relationships when it wrecks previously well-functioning relationships. In relationships that develop in the absence of psychological abuse, its appearance can cause the deterioration and sometimes the complete destruction of that relationship.

In contrast, parent–child relationships forged through a parent’s psychological abuse of their child will be relationships that fail to function appropriately from the start. While such relationships may continue to exist, the formation through and continuation in the face of psychological abuse limits any possibility of healthy relationality that might otherwise exist through such a connection.

CPA can also generate indirect harm to relationships that occurs as a result of the aforementioned diminishment of the relational capacities of individuals. Individuals who were raised in psychologically abusive environments emerge with diminished relational capacities and can, in turn, initiate dysfunctional relationships riddled with hazards in their adult lives. In such contexts, relationships, as distinctive entities of moral significance, sustain morally meaningful forms of harm when shaped through damaged relational capacities. This form of indirect relational harm has noteworthy temporal and structural dimensions. The impairment individuals sustain to their individual relational agential capacities in the present can give rise to future harm not only to individuals, but to relationships, as well. This signals an often overlooked form of intergenerational injustice, as well as a structural level of relational harm, that widespread psychological abuse and violence fueled and sustained by oppression can create.

The general societal framing of CPA tends to zero in on the individual relationships in which it happens: this particular parent abuses this particular child. While this level of focus undoubtably makes sense for clinical settings, moral analysis permits of and benefits from a broader purview. From this different vantage point, the chain reaction of relational harm that can arise from CPA experienced in one specific relationship snaps into view. While far from a foregone conclusion, the psychological damage that one parent does to one child may result later in life in a now-grown person who lives in and through additional patterns of extensive psychological abuse in their relationships. Moreover, when you multiply instances of CPA in individual relationships by its incidence rate in a particular society and add the injustices of societal oppression, what emerges is an expansive lattice of structural relational harms. Here the focus shifts from direct abuse and violence that one particular individual renders to other specific individuals and relationships, to forms of structural violence. What first seemed to be a matter of the most intimate of personal relationships – that of CPA in the parent–child relationship – ultimately has significant structural reverberations and ramifications.

Conclusion: towards relational reconstitution of the self

My aim in this article has been to contribute to a relational theory of harm through exploration of a common yet overlooked form of childhood maltreatment: childhood psychological abuse. In doing so, I explored agential, intrapersonal, and interpersonal ways in which such harms develop and evolve both in intimate relationships and in conditions of oppression. Drawing on the resources of relational theory, I set forth three distinctive yet interconnected forms of relational harm that CPA causes: harm to the relational agency of individuals, harm to the relationships we hold with ourselves, especially with regard to how we respect, know, and trust ourselves, and harm to interpersonal relationships of both a direct and indirect nature in both present and future timeframes.

While the task of the paper has been to enumerate the features of relational harm, of equal concern is the matter of how one heals from such harms, as well as how others respond to those who have been so harmed. Here, an interesting paradox reveals itself: that which has been broken in relation must often be repaired in relation. Certain forms of transformation of relational harms are arguably only possible in and through relation. The relational milieu – once a site of horror – becomes one of healing.

Psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Lewis Herman recognized the significance of this insight in her pioneering work, *Trauma and Recovery*:

In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationships with other people, they must be reformed in such relationships. (Herman 1992, 133)

With the relational destruction of the self comes the possibility of its relational reconstitution. Just as psychologically abusive relationships of childhood can compromise relational agential abilities, through other, non-abusive relationships later in life we can learn to embody new forms of relational agency. Just as psychological abuse can plant in children seeds of negative self-conception that wreck their intrapersonal relationship, better relationships can help those who have been abused to form a more accurate and positive self-conception. And just as CPA can set children on a pathway of a lifetime of difficult interpersonal relationships, the development of ameliorative relationships can open the door to learning new, improved ways of living and thriving in relation.

Notes

1. While not the focus of this article, further research could consider the undoubtedly fruitful connections between the idea of relational harm and the literature on restorative justice as a relational theory of justice, including Llewellyn (2012) and Harbin and Llewellyn (2016).
2. In limiting the focus of this paper to relational harms that occur between humans, I do not intend to indicate that it is only in the human realm that relationships of moral significance can occur. For example, relationships between human and non-human animals can carry deep moral importance and, unfortunately, can also be the setting of relational harms of abuse and violence.
3. In this article, I generally refer to this phenomenon with the terms ‘psychological’ and ‘abuse’ rather than ‘emotional’ and ‘violence’. Use of these designators is not intended, however, to render all such experiences undifferentiated and equal.
4. Some exceptions to this claim include the philosophical examination of the uses of psychological abuse and violence in war, for example, through practices of torture. See Shue (2016), Sussman (2005), and Luban and Newell (2019).
5. One might object that the distinction I am drawing here between that which is physical and that which is psychological is too tidy and cleaves too firmly to mind–body dualism. While I am largely following a convention of distinguishing the two as found in the psychological literature (in terms of physical vs. psychological abuse) and in the philosophical literature (in terms of physical vs. psychological violence), it is important to acknowledge that forms of so called ‘psychological’ abuse can have physical ramifications (e.g. negative health outcomes such as increased incidence of cardiovascular and autoimmune disease) and vice versa.
6. Less thoroughly considered, of course, does not mean utterly unexplored. The feminist philosophical literature on self-trust and self-respect provides one such example of exploration

of multiple dimensions of the ethical relation with the self. See Govier (1993), McLeod (2002), Dillon (1992), and Dillon (1997).

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