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What is emotional injustice, really? distinguishing emotional injustice from emotional harms and oppression

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ABSTRACT

Recent work on emotional injustice has highlighted the ways in which emotions are regulated, devalued or imposed, especially for members of marginalized groups. However, the relations among emotional injustice, emotional harm and emotional oppression remain undertheorized. We offer a conceptual framework that disentangles these notions and clarifies what makes emotional injustice unjust rather than merely harmful or oppressive.

We argue that emotional injustice occurs when individuals' emotions are treated or used in ways that impose arbitrary relational disadvantage-disadvantages that arise from treatment, regard or social structures and position people differently relative to one another for normatively extraneous reasons. By contrast, emotional harms involve suffering without relational disadvantage, while emotional oppression is systemic and group-directed and targets members of marginalized groups.

Building on relational theories of equality, we argue that emotional injustice is inherently relational and operates across a continuum of social positions. Privileged individuals may be constrained by emotion norms, such as prohibitions against vulnerability or dependence, that paradoxically reinforce their social position. Marginalized individuals, by contrast, may face emotional injustices that directly reinforce subordination, as when emotion norms delegitimize their anger or constrain their emotional expression.

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1. Introduction

Emotions can factor into many types of mistreatment: someone can hurt your feelings, violate your trust, belittle you, or dash your hopes. Depending on the details, such mistreatment may constitute an emotional harm, a case of emotional injustice, or emotional oppression. These categories are often run together, but they come apart in important ways. This paper asks how

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emotional injustice should be distinguished from emotional harms and from emotional oppression, and what is at stake in drawing these distinctions.

The literature on emotional or affective injustice has emphasized structural and systemic dimensions, focusing on the ways in which emotions are delegitimized or imposed on individuals based on their social identities or positions. Emotional or affective injustice has been defined as a deprivation of affective goods to which individuals or groups are entitled (Gallegos 2021) or as a failure of emotional uptake (Whitney 2018). However, little attention has been paid to the distinction between injustice and mere harm. In addition, emotional injustice is often conflated with oppression, even though, as Stockdale (2024) has recently argued, the two can come apart. Stockdale shows that people who are not oppressed can nevertheless experience emotional injustice (see also Fourie 2022; Pismenny et al. 2024: 12).

Given these distinctions, it is important to clarify what makes emotional injustice unjust rather than oppressive or merely harmful. Toward this end, we situate our analysis of emotional injustice within broader debates in political and social philosophy about the nature of injustice, and introduce an arbitrary disadvantage account that we compare with approaches that emphasize oppression, dehumanization, fair distribution, autonomy, recognition, and respect. Drawing on relational approaches to equality, we argue that emotional injustice, too, is fundamentally relational.

On our view, one is treated unjustly when one is subject to arbitrary relational disadvantage – including in the domain of emotional expression, behavior, or experience. Emotional injustice thus involves arbitrary relational disadvantage, which we cash out in terms of different emotional functions, such as evaluative, epistemic, and communicative functions. The relational approach we introduce allows us to distinguish emotional injustice from both emotional harm and emotional oppression.

Emotional harm refers to suffering caused by specific actions or events and need not involve arbitrary relational disadvantage – for example, betrayal or emotional neglect. Such harms do not constitute injustice because they do not impose comparative emotional costs through relations, norms, treatment, recognition, or social structures for normatively extraneous reasons. Emotional injustice, by contrast, involves arbitrary relational disadvantage – instances in which one's emotional life is unfairly constrained, devalued, or burdened through social relations, norms, treatment, recognition, or social structures. Emotional oppression arises when such unjust treatment is systematic and group-based, i.e. targets members of marginalized groups.

Our relational approach addresses the question of whether individuals in privileged positions can experience emotional injustice despite their privilege. We conceive of emotional injustice as existing on a continuum, reflecting the full range of social locations. At one end are cases in which privileged individuals experience emotional injustice – paradoxically, through emotion

norms that reinforce their own social position. For instance, norms that discourage men from showing vulnerability or emotional dependence unjustly constrain their emotional lives, yet in doing so, they also uphold ideals of masculinity that sustain the privilege of white non-disabled cis men. At the other end are cases where marginalized individuals experience emotional injustice that directly reinforces their subordination, as when emotion norms delegitimize the anger of women or racialized groups. Across this continuum, emotional injustice operates through the regulation of feeling, expression, and recognition in ways that stabilize existing social hierarchies: for the privileged, by reproducing the affective norms that secure their overall dominance; and for the marginalized, by maintaining the norms that restrict their agency and recognition.

2. Reviewing prior work

2.1. *Prior work on affective and emotional injustice*

Researchers have long noted that emotions can be loci of mistreatment that might be regarded as unjust. For example, consider Erving Goffman's (1963) sociological research on stigma. He discusses the shaming of people with disabilities, addicts, people with mental illness, homosexuals, ex-convicts, sex workers, religious, racial, and ethnic minorities, and the unemployed. Other influential examples include Audre Lorde's (1984) anecdote of being asked by a white woman to express her ideas less emotionally, Marilyn Frye's (1983) observations about men who describe women as hysterical, Alison Jaggar's (1989) analysis of emotions prescribed in patriarchal societies ('outlaw emotions'), and Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on islamophobia and queerphobia. In recent years, several authors have offered theoretical constructs to characterize the kind of wrong operative in examples such as these. The terms 'affective injustice' and 'emotional injustice' have emerged to do that work.

'Affective injustice' has been defined in a variety of different ways. Drawing on James Baldwin's analysis of Langston Hughes, Amia Srinivasan (2018) defines affective injustice as a 'second-order injustice' (135). Members of oppressed groups experience anger about the way they are treated, but that anger is sometimes viewed as counterproductive. For Srinivasan, the injustice involves having to negotiate apt anger about mistreatment with conflicting demands to be constructive or reasonable. Srinivasan says this is psychologically costly; she calls it a 'psychic tax' (p. 135). Extending this analysis, Alfred Archer and Georgina Mills (2019) characterize these psychological costs in terms of emotional regulation. Members of oppressed groups are expected to carry out emotional labor regulating apt emotions. Archer and Matheson (2020) develop this approach further, emphasizing

the idea that emotion regulation comes from extrinsic sources in cases of affective injustice (see also Cherry 2019).

A different analysis is offered by Shiloh Whitney (2018). Her point of departure is the idea that emotions are embodied responses that contribute to sense-making. Emotions make things intelligible to both those who have them and to others who witness them. She then turns to cases where the emotional responses experienced by members of oppressed groups are not given adequate uptake. This disrupts individuals' ability to make sense of their situation and to convey that understanding to others. Whitney also considers cases in which members of privileged groups channel unwanted feelings, such as guilt, onto members of oppressed groups in destructive ways.

Another definition is put forward by Francisco Gallegos (2021). Gallegos argues that the foregoing accounts fail to identify the wrong involved in affective injustice. As a result, they risk over-extending the concept (perhaps some cases of emotion regulation are just, and failures to regulate can be unjust). Failure to articulate the wrongs risks obscuring the boundary between affective injustice and other kinds of affective harms. To address these worries, Gallegos asks what is unjust in affective injustice. His answer is that affective injustice arises when an individual is deprived of the 'affective goods' they are owed. Affective goods include both emotional well-being, and aptness – a correspondence between one's emotions and evaluative features of the world.

Stockdale (2024) concurs with Gallegos that we need a theory of what makes affective injustice unjust, but she rejects his concept of affective goods. In the context of justice, goods are usually regarded as finite resources that can be quantified and bestowed. Emotions, Stockdale argues, are not like that. They are not finite, countable, or bestowable. In place of Gallegos's distributive approach, Stockdale draws on Iris Marion Young's 'values of social justice' (see Young 1990). These principally include values of self-development (e.g. through learning, play, and communication) and self-determination (shaping one's own life). Affective injustice occurs when affective norms, practice, and relationships impede on these things that we value.

Our own work builds on these contributions. We aim for an ecumenical approach that accommodates the diverse examples of affective injustice that exist in the literature. We depart from our fellow travelers in a few ways. One difference is that we prefer the term 'emotional injustice' since the paradigm cases involve specific emotions, and not only 'affect' as such, which is sometimes defined as a more generic feeling of pleasure or pain (see Tappolet 2022, chapter 2). We also think some definitions are too narrow. Srinivasan, and by extension Archer and Mills, focus on cases where an emotion is suppressed in some way. Those are important cases, but there are other examples of emotional injustice, as when people are

shamed, or terrorized, or when emotions are exploited or ignored. Whitney's account is also narrow in that she focuses on failures of uptake. She discusses exploitation as well, but her analysis focuses on cases wherein members of privileged groups project unwanted affective states on others. This leaves out some cases of interest. Consider the phenomenon of using other people's misery for your own profit. For example, the white artist Dana Schutz was criticized for painting the brutalized body of lynching victim, Emmitt Till. Unlike the cases of exploitation that Whitney considers, there is no projection here, but instead an appropriation of pain. Appropriating pain is a way of profiting off others' emotions and emotional labor and, thus, may be considered an emotional injustice. This example also poses a challenge for Gallegos's affective goods account. When we appropriate others' emotions, we do not necessarily reduce their well-being or threaten the aptness of their feelings. Stockdale's emphasis on self-development and self-determination may help with this example. Emotion appropriation negatively impacts self-determination by co-opting someone else's narrative. But Stockdale may wrestle with other cases. Imagine a person who is routinely silenced when expressing joy at work because colleagues find their enthusiasm annoying. This doesn't hinder their autonomy or self-development, but this case still seems unjust because the person is treated with silencing. It's also not clear that any of these accounts can articulate what is wrong in cases of emotional intrusion, as when, e.g. people with marginalized sexualities and sexual identities are asked invasive and unsolicited questions about their feelings (cf. Zurn 2021).

In the following we will draw on work on emotional injustice by Pismenny, Eickers, and Prinz (2024). We sought a definition broad enough to encompass a wide range of cases, including cases where emotions are mistreated (as when anger is silenced) and cases where emotions are used to mistreat (as when ridicule is used to shame). We proposed the following:

Emotional injustice: Cases where an emotion is used or treated in a way that imposes an arbitrary disadvantage.

Failures of uptake, projection, exploitation, intrusion, and all the other cases they've mentioned can put an individual or group at a disadvantage. Sometimes placing another at a disadvantage is justified, as when hate speech is regulated. 'Arbitrary' in this context refers to normatively extraneous (see Moreau 2010, 156) forms of differentiation, that is, to features of a person or situation that are morally irrelevant or otherwise fail to justify the disadvantage imposed. By 'arbitrary,' we therefore do not mean random, accidental, or unsystematic. Emotional injustice and emotional oppression are often highly structured and socially reproduced. Rather, a disadvantage is arbitrary insofar as it rests on normatively extraneous forms of differentiation.

This analysis remains incomplete. Following Gallegos and Stockdale, it is recognized that it is important to say why emotional injustice qualifies as unjust. We must establish that the concept of arbitrary disadvantage can serve as a theory of injustice. To that end, we also need to ensure that this account distinguishes emotional injustice from other kinds of emotional harms. Gallegos opts for a distributive approach to injustice, and Stockdale follows Young's approach, which presents a disjunctive list of values. In so doing, they ground their theories in extant approaches to injustice in political philosophy. To motivate our approach, it will be helpful to review some prevailing options (2.2). After that, we will also argue for the conclusion that emotional injustice is fundamentally relational.

2.2. Prior work on injustice

There are many theories of injustice in philosophy. To avoid unwieldy polysy and restrictive narrowness, we aim to identify a conception of injustice that can subsume some of the existing definitions of emotional injustice. This will allow us to properly integrate it into the emotional injustice discourse. Here, we first briefly survey some extant theories of injustice.

The most influential account owes to John Rawls (1971). Rawls is most famous for defining justice rather than injustice, and he defines justice as fairness. More specifically, he adduces two principles: the Liberty Principle, which says, roughly, that each person should have as many basic liberties as are compatible with others having such liberties; and the Difference Principle, which addresses aims to minimize inequality by benefitting the least well off and distributing resources in a way that upholds equality of opportunity. Injustice, then, would be a violation of these principles. For our purposes, the crucial thing to note here is that Rawls's definition is distributive in nature. Some definitions of emotional injustice follow in kind (Gallegos, 2021), but our aim is to be more inclusive. Emotional injustice can involve unfair distributions, as some members of society are granted greater access to happiness, but we also want to allow for emotional injustice to include cases of emotional gaslighting or pathologizing, where a person's emotional testimony is dismissed as baseless or irrational.

Another definition can be derived from the work of Martha Nussbaum (2000). According to her capabilities approach, justice requires that all citizens be brought above a threshold of thriving along a range of dimensions such as health, affiliation, imagination, and environmental control. When social arrangements inhibit such human capabilities, a society can be described as unjust. Nussbaum includes emotions among her capabilities, and thus any impediment to normal emotional functioning would qualify as unjust. They could be used to cover cases such as gaslighting, but at the expense of more distributional cases. Consider a society in which everyone meets a

threshold of emotional functioning, but the emotions of one group are given greater weight in, e.g. contexts of public policy. The capabilities approach is not ideally suited for explaining why that would be emotionally unjust.

Other approaches emphasize recognition. Axel Honneth (1995), for example, identifies three spheres of recognition that are important to well-being: love, rights, and solidarity. Injustice is defined as misrecognition in one or more of these dimensions. Interesting for this context, Honneth sees misrecognition as having affective costs: loss of confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, respectively. Various kinds of emotional injustice can be slotted into this framework, but others may be harder to accommodate. Consider uncompensated emotional labor, for example, which may arise in service or care work (Hochschild, 1979; Kittay, 2020).

A different recognition-oriented account has been developed by Stephen Darwall (2006). He begins with the concept of ‘recognition respect’: an attitude by which we acknowledge other’s authority to make moral claims on us. Injustice, in this framework, can be understood as a failure to recognize or respond to such claims. Darwall’s account, like ours below, is relational, but in a very specific sense: it hinges on a second-person standpoint of mutual address. We think there are forms of emotional injustice that are difficult to define in this way. Consider cases of emotional injustice where the failure lies not in the regard of others, but in structural conditions that render some people’s emotions invisible. For example, the misery of those who make modern technology possible (e.g. miners or content moderators) remains largely invisible. This may be an unjust arrangement regardless of what attitudes people hold.

The concept of respect operative in Darwall’s account has an epistemic dimension: recognizing others’ claims. A very different notion of respect is operative in a theory of injustice developed by Mari Mikkola (2016). Her core concept is dehumanization, which can be characterized as a profound lack of respect. Injustice arises when people are actively stripped of personhood. Labor exploitation can be dehumanizing in this way, and the emotional costs incurred by exploited workers can qualify as cases of emotional injustice. On our approach, however, dehumanization is too specific to cover all cases of emotional injustice. Unpaid emotional labor in service or care work is not always dehumanizing, even when it is unjust. Likewise for some cases of emotional misperception, silencing, and policing. When we tell boys not to cry, we are not necessarily treating them as subhuman – we may even think tears are beneath a boy’s dignity, implying that they are humans deserving elevated esteem.

Another class of theories defines injustice in terms of oppression. Marilyn Frye (1983), for example, defines injustice in terms of interlocking structural forces that delimit freedom and well-being based on social identity. This might be taken to imply that injustice can arise only for members of

oppressed groups. We take issue with this. As we discuss further below, white middle-class men may be subject to emotional injustice when asked to suppress their emotions (see Stockdale 2024).

Young (1990) links injustice and oppression as well. She argues, first, that justice should not be understood solely in distributive terms – that is, in terms of who gets what resources, rights, or opportunities. On this point, we agree. For Young, justice must also be concerned with the institutional conditions that enable individuals to develop their capacities and participate in decisions that affect their lives. In this sense, injustice is marked not only by unequal distributions but by the presence of structural oppression and domination. Young insists that justice requires dismantling the institutional and cultural structures that perpetuate oppression and domination. This approach highlights how everyday institutional arrangements – often taken as neutral or inevitable – can systematically harm marginalized groups and hinder their flourishing. This is true and important, but applied to emotional injustice, it is too restrictive. A worry here is that people who do not belong to oppressed groups can be victims of emotional injustice, as we indicate above and as we will argue below.

A recurring theme here has been that extant accounts defining injustice in general are often too narrow to be applied to emotional injustice. One remedy would be to offer a more disjunctive definition, such as that by Nancy Fraser. Fraser (1997) distinguishes socioeconomic injustice (maldistribution) and cultural injustice (misrecognition) and argues that their solutions sometimes push in opposite directions: e.g. fighting against group differences to address racial pay inequity vs. accentuating group differences to redress disrespect or the invisibility of underrepresented groups. Fraser (2005) introduces a third dimension of injustice, which is political: misrepresentation. This includes cases where voters are disenfranchized or when global corporations cause disruption in territories where they are not answerable to claims of justice. This disjunctive approach adds explanatory breadth, but sacrifices unity, implicitly calling the utility of injustice as a concept into question.

It would be helpful to integrate concepts of injustice into a coherent formulation that can be applied to emotional injustice discourse. We don't aim to defend a fully fleshed-out theory of injustice here, but we want to identify a definition that can capture the variety found in emotional injustice (and beyond). We think that our arbitrary disadvantage account can serve as an umbrella for competing theories. When individuals or groups experience unfair distribution, diminished capabilities, oppression, dehumanization, misrecognition, exploitation, disrespect, disenfranchisement and so on, they are placed at a disadvantage. Each of these places people in a compromised position in relation to others. When such disadvantage is imposed in a morally arbitrary way (e.g. when it derives from bigotry, powerplays, or unfair initial

conditions rather than, say, punishment for legal violations) the disadvantage is unjust. The arbitrary disadvantage account is more inclusive than some other theories (avoiding narrowness) while also cohesive (avoiding polysemy).

Our aim is not to refute any of these alternatives, but rather to bring them together in order to understand what is unjust in emotional injustice. Doing so incurs the risk that our analysis is overly inclusive. We aim to deflect that concern by showing that we can distinguish emotional injustice from emotional harm and emotional oppression (which can be a special case of emotional injustice on our account). But we want to elaborate on our definition of emotional injustice by explicating its inherent relationality. Prior definitions use language drawn explicitly from political philosophy, and this helps motivate their use of the term ‘injustice’ (recall, for example, Gallegos’s use of distributive principles). We want to ground our definition in political philosophy as well, drawing specifically on relational approaches. This, we will see, is well-suited to the specific case of emotional injustice since emotions themselves are relational.

3. A relational approach to emotional injustice

A relational approach is needed to capture the fact that emotional injustice is neither reducible to emotional harms nor identical with emotional oppression. We are sympathetic with Stockdale’s (2024) insistence on two points that are often overlooked: that injustice should be distinguished from oppression, and that norms and practices governing the emotional lives of socially privileged groups can nonetheless be unjust. Norms that discourage emotional vulnerability, for example, may arbitrarily constrain men’s emotional lives relative to others, even while contributing to broader structures of privilege. Recognizing such cases requires a relational conception of injustice rather than an appeal to oppression. What is at stake in such cases is not oppression or harm, but the imposition of an arbitrary relational disadvantage.

3.1. Relationality

We define emotional injustice in terms of treatment and use of emotions that impose an arbitrary disadvantage. Expanding on this definition, we want to now make it more explicit that emotional injustice must be understood as *relational*. It is tempting to think about disadvantage in a distributive way: a person or group is disadvantaged if they have less than some other group. But one can quickly discover that this is inadequate, since, for example, the rich have less than the super-rich, but they are not thereby

disadvantaged. Rather, we think disadvantage is better understood building on ideas that have emerged in the literatures on relationality.

Relational approaches are contrasted with individualistic or atomistic models. 'Relational' signals that phenomena, experiences, and identities are not to be understood in isolation but as fundamentally constituted through and within their relationships (see Birhane, 2021; Kyselo, 2014). For our purposes, the key insight of relational approaches is that emotional standing, recognition, and disadvantage are constituted through social relations rather than merely possessed by isolated individuals.

At one level, relationality can be understood as an ontological thesis according to which individuals and social identities are constituted through relations rather than existing as fully independent entities. For example, being 'taller than' or 'a sibling of' are not properties that make sense in isolation; they are inherently relational (see Albertzart 2025, Vetter 2015). Barad's 'agential realism' (2007), for example, emphasizes that social actors are formed through ongoing material and discursive practices rather than merely entering into external relations with one another. Barad pushes this idea through the concept of *intra-action*: entities do not pre-exist their relations as the concept of interaction implies but are constituted through them. A scientist and a measuring device, for instance, do not exist as separate, self-contained units prior to an experiment; their identities and boundaries emerge through the act of measurement itself. On this view, language, social norms, and scientific practices are not external to reality but part of the material processes that bring reality into being. This is done through 'agential cuts', when we delineate what counts as a subject or an object, who is included or excluded, what matters and what does not (Barad 2007). These cuts are not innocent; they are acts of differentiation that can reinforce hierarchies, exclusions, and violence. Barad uses this ontology to motivate a relational approach to injustice. Achieving justice is not just changing one's social position, but changing one's relations, which can impact how we and others are constituted.

Relational approaches to justice in contemporary political philosophy similarly emphasize that injustice concerns how individuals stand in relation to one another. Relational egalitarianism, exemplified by Elizabeth Anderson's 'Democratic Equality,' argues that the point of equality is not to secure an equal distribution of some chosen currency – resources, welfare, or capabilities – but 'to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others' (Anderson 1999, p.288). On this account, equality is a fundamental feature of social relations, not of distributive patterns. Relational egalitarians understand equality primarily in terms of how individuals stand in relation to one another within shared social practices. For Anderson, the task of egalitarian justice is to ensure that individuals have the standing,

recognition, and material and social conditions necessary to participate as equals in a democratic society.

Similar themes emerge in work on relational autonomy. Catriona Mackenzie (2014) argues that autonomy comprises self-determination (external freedom), self-governance (internal competence), and self-authorization (sense of normative agency), each of which depends on others. For example, one's sense of agency can be compromised when viewed as inferior or subordinate.

Together, these approaches suggest that equality, autonomy, and social standing are not merely individual properties but relationally constituted conditions. Whether individuals are recognized as credible, worthy, autonomous, or equal depends on the social relations and practices through which they are positioned relative to others. This relational framework is particularly important for understanding emotional injustice, since emotional recognition, expression, and vulnerability are likewise mediated through social relations.

We can now ask what injustice amounts to on a relational view. On such a view, inequality and breaches of autonomy are unjust because persons are constituted and treated as inferior, subordinate, invisible, or less worthy through social relations, norms, and institutions. Our account of arbitrary disadvantage can therefore be recast in relational terms: disadvantage becomes unjust when it results from treatment, regard, social relations, or social structures that constitute a person or group as lesser, excluded, subordinate, or otherwise normatively devalued without warrant. Likewise, when autonomy is unjustly breached, affected individuals do not merely experience a contraction in the space of choices – an injury could do that – but are disadvantaged through attitudes and forms of treatment that arbitrarily deem them as incapable or unworthy. To be unequal and unfree, on this view, is to be relationally positioned at a disadvantage through the baseless attitudes, norms, treatment, or social practices of others. Social relations, treatment and regard, recognition, and social structures thus exert both a causal and a constitutive impact.

3.2. Relationality and emotional disadvantages

The relational approach to injustice is a good fit for emotional injustice, because emotions lend themselves to a relational analysis. In Birhane's (2021: 3) terminology, emotions are 'fundamentally co-existent in a web of relations.' The emotions we have depend both causally and constitutively on others, in terms of how they are learned, induced, and interpreted. This has been recognized by constructivists about emotion (see Leys 2017, Russell 2003, Averill 1980), emotional transaction theorists (see Griffiths & Scarantino 2009), and enactive, situated affectivity theorists (see Walter &

Stephan 2023, Slaby 2016, von Maur 2021, de Jaeger and Di Paolo 2007, Colombetti & Kruger 2015, Shargel & Prinz 2017). For example, anger is socially cultivated in gendered, raced, and culturally specific ways (Pismenny et al. 2024), and then, on an occasion, unfolds as a dynamic relational process in real-time that depends on – and reciprocally impacts – on-going social interactions (Dewey 1895; Griffiths & Scarantino 2009, Parkinson et al. 2004). Unlike models where emotions are triggered in a linear sequence (e.g. stimulus → appraisal → response), relational views see emotions as ongoing, recursive processes.

Your emotional state at one moment influences how you interpret and respond to the next moment, creating a feedback loop.

Emotions, on this view, are ways of doing and being in the world, i.e. emotional practices, not just internal mental representations. Emotions are not experienced in isolation; they emerge in interactions with others and within social systems that regulate feeling, expressing, and interpreting emotions in particular ways.

Norms around emotional expression – such as expectations that men suppress vulnerability or that marginalized groups temper anger – demonstrate how emotional realities are structured by relational differences and inequalities. These norms, thus, create asymmetries in emotional agency, where some individuals have greater freedom to express and experience specific emotions than others. This brings us back to emotional injustice. On a relational approach, emotional injustice is not simply a matter of distribution (e.g. having less than others) or impairment (e.g. not being able to flourish). Injustices emerge within patterns of interaction. Emotional disadvantages fit into this framework as relationally produced differences in how individuals are affected, regarded, or responded to within emotional practices. If a person silences another's emotions without warrant, or imposes emotional labor, or emotionally manipulates, or humiliates and shames, the recipient of this treatment is affectively shaped and constituted thereby. The emotions that person experiences are imposed arbitrarily and disadvantageously. In some cases, the disadvantages may be material. If someone is shamed for their appearance, they may experience diminished job opportunities. Disadvantages can also be epistemic, as when the silencing of anger prevents a person from informing others about their social conditions. Disadvantages can also include losses of agency, status, or recognition. In all these cases, there is also a disadvantage that issues directly from the emotional costs incurred. For example, Rebekah Johnston (2021) discusses the example of groups who are subjected to repeated slights in society, and, as a result, regularly experience indignation. Indignation secures self-respect, but it is an unjust burden. Thus, disadvantage is not simply a matter of having less than someone else. The indignant person is pressed into emotional labor

through social relations, treatment and regard, and broader social structures (e.g. inadequate street cleaning in ghettoized neighborhoods).

The concept of emotional disadvantage can be further explicated in terms of emotions' many functions. For example, emotions can have evaluative, epistemic, communicative functions (for discussion see Pismenny 2025). They can embody values, alert us to how we are faring, and convey our feelings to others. Emotions are also sites of autonomy, self-knowledge, and self-respect. The disadvantages that arise when emotions are treated unjustly include cases where these aspects of emotions are delimited. If a disabled person is told that they should not have sexual appetite, their opportunity to explore and understand their own tastes and desires may be compromised relative to others, leading to a comparatively impoverished affective life constituted through arbitrary forms of treatment and regard.

As these examples illustrate, disadvantage can take many forms. At a high level of abstraction, a disadvantage can be understood as a comparative cost. The relational approach suggests that costs can be comparative in two compatible senses. It may be a cost that others do not have to pay, and it is a cost that arises by means of explicit or implicit social comparison, as when a person or institution treats someone as deserving different treatment. The comparative and relational dimensions should not be sharply separated here: the disadvantage is comparative insofar as burdens are distributed asymmetrically, but relational insofar as those asymmetries are constituted and sustained through social relations, norms, treatment, regard, recognition, or social structures.

This perspective allows us to recognize emotional injustice as rooted in broader social structures, without falling into the simplistic assumption that emotions directly mirror social hierarchies. By focusing on the relational dimensions of emotion, we can assess the complex ways in which emotion norms and hierarchies actively shape and sustain patterns of emotional injustice. For instance, emotion norms do not simply regulate individual behavior; they shape who has access to hermeneutic resources on emotions. For example, restrictive norms around masculinity that discourage emotional openness do not only harm men individually but also reinforce broader social structures that regulate certain emotional expressions and thereby disadvantage men and masculine people more generally.

By viewing emotional injustice relationally, we can recognize that even those who occupy relatively privileged social positions in our society can experience emotional injustice when, for example, emotion norms arbitrarily disadvantage them in particular ways. Those in privileged social positions, e.g. white non-disabled middle – or upper-class cis men, may thus experience emotional injustice when they are subject to arbitrary relational disadvantage with respect to at least one of their emotional functions, such as evaluative, epistemic, communicative functioning. Think of vulnerability and 'soft

emotions', for example: being able to feel and express vulnerability is not possible in the same way for all people. Vulnerability is particularly restricted for men and masculine people, due to hegemonic masculinity norms (see Kimmel 2016). This disadvantages men in terms of the following emotional functions: a) epistemic: men are disadvantaged in their access to epistemic resources around vulnerability (e.g. knowing the concept and being able to act on it), b) evaluative: due to the restricted epistemic access, men are also subject to a restricted capacity to evaluate vulnerability in themselves or other people, c) communicative: men are not supposed to express vulnerability and even tasked with policing one another on doing so (see Curry 2017; Táíwò 2020); thus, their communicative emotional function is restricted. These considerations expand our understanding of emotional injustice beyond applying it only to traditionally marginalized groups while maintaining a structural and relational analysis.

Notice, too, emotional injustice does not depend on social identity. Consider a case where a person's emotional expressions are consistently dismissed or ridiculed by peers, not because of their group membership but because of interpersonal dynamics or idiosyncratic bias. If these dismissals deprive them of emotional standing or undermine their agency in expressing or experiencing their emotions, then an emotional injustice has occurred. The wrong lies not merely in the harm caused (such as pain, for example), but in the imposed relational disadvantage: their emotional experiences are granted less legitimacy, visibility, and recognition through social relations, norms, treatment or structures.

Contrasting with more individualistic approaches, which might emphasize personal traits or cognitive processes, a relational view, as mentioned, foregrounds social embeddedness and the complexity of social norms. It challenges the assumption of the self-contained individual and instead views human beings as fundamentally interconnected. This directly parallels both relational ontology and the relational approaches to equality and autonomy introduced by political philosophers. This, we think, is crucial to understanding emotional injustice.

Summarizing this, we can now augment our original definition in overtly relational terms:

Emotional injustice: Cases in which an emotion is used or treated in a way that imposes an arbitrary relational disadvantage on an individual or group.

Arbitrary relational disadvantage: A form of disadvantage that involves the imposition of comparative costs on an individual or group for normatively extraneous reasons, where those asymmetries are constituted and sustained through social relations, norms, treatment, regard, recognition, or social structures.

4. Emotional injustice vs. harm and oppression

Emotional injustice, in our view, is a distinct kind of injustice that arises when individuals or groups are subject to arbitrary relational disadvantage in their emotional lives. This injustice may be interpersonal, episodic, or localized, and it may or may not track social identity. This account is consistent with the continuum described in the introduction: at one end, emotional injustices may affect privileged individuals through norms that reinforce their social position, while at the other end, injustices may directly reinforce subordination for marginalized individuals. Across this continuum, the key feature in all cases is the imposition of comparative emotional costs through social relations, norms, treatment, regard, recognition, or social structures that arbitrarily disadvantage some individuals or groups, whether or not the injustice tracks social identity or systemic hierarchies.

We think emotional injustice is to be distinguished from emotional harm and emotional oppression so as to avoid reducing it to harm or conflating it with oppression. Conceptual distinction between these concepts is crucial as it takes seriously the relational nature of both emotions and injustice and helps clarify what is at stake in emotional injustice and related phenomena.

While *injustice* involves an arbitrary and relational disadvantage, *harm* refers to negative impact or suffering. It can be unintentional and non-systemic. Someone may be *emotionally harmed* by rejection or loss without being treated unjustly. *Oppression*, by contrast, is systematic, structural, and group-based. *Emotional oppression* occurs when the unjust treatment of emotions is directly tied to larger systems of hierarchy and power, targeting individuals because of their membership in marginalized groups.

Distinguishing these concepts is important for both theoretical clarity and political practice. Emotional injustice is not the same as emotional oppression, and so not every instance of emotional injustice is a case of oppression: for example, a privileged individual who grieves but doesn't have access to structures that provide 'grief leave', for example, i.e. who can't legally access 'grieving space', may suffer emotional injustice, but they are not necessarily emotionally oppressed. Conversely, when emotions are dismissed or denied uptake or expected to perform emotional labor for others as a direct consequence of someone's membership in a marginalized group, we are not dealing with isolated harms but with (systemic) emotional oppression. Recognizing this distinction allows us to avoid conceptual conflation while affirming the moral and socio-political urgency of addressing oppression and injustice in dealing with emotions. It highlights the importance of attending not only to individual emotional suffering, but to broader social structures that shape who is entitled to express which emotion, whose emotions are legible, and whose emotions are rendered pathological,

excessive, or invisible. It also allows us to take seriously the ways in which emotions are not just responses to oppression but sites through which oppression is enacted.

In what follows, we will dive deeper into applying our definition of emotional injustice so as to establish that we distinguish it from emotional harms and emotional oppression.

4.1. Emotional harms

Emotional harms encompass a wide range of affective injuries, including humiliation, betrayal, emotional neglect, and other forms of emotionally damaging treatment. They should, however, be distinguished from emotional suffering more broadly, which also includes painful affective experiences arising from ordinary human vulnerability and contingency, such as grief following bereavement or the pain of unreciprocated love. Similar distinctions are developed by Johnston (2025), who argues that constitutively relational emotions such as loneliness and bitterness may arise either from ordinary contingencies of social life or from unjust sociopolitical practices that structure relations asymmetrically. While emotional suffering is a pervasive feature of social life, emotional harms constitute a narrower category involving emotional mistreatment.

Unlike rights to free speech or bodily autonomy, there is no widely accepted principle that individuals are entitled to specific emotional experiences or to protection from particular emotional states. This observation invites reflection on the conceptual and normative status of emotional harms and their relation, if any, to emotional injustice.

The question at issue here is whether individuals have a right to feel certain emotions – or to be shielded from distressing ones – and, relatedly, whether all emotional harms can and should be understood as instances of emotional injustice. Recall that we define injustice in terms of arbitrary relational disadvantage. Emotional suffering occurs when individuals experience affective distress in response to events, actions, or omissions. Against this backdrop, emotional harms can be understood as forms of emotional suffering that involve mistreatment but do not necessarily involve arbitrary relational disadvantage. These harms may be deeply significant, yet they need not impose comparative costs through social relations, norms, treatment, recognition, or social structures for normatively extraneous reasons. They are often singular, context-specific occurrences, rather than manifestations of broader patterns of exclusion or emotion regulation that arbitrarily disadvantage individuals or groups.

The simplest example might be a person who experiences loss after the death of a loved one due to natural causes. Such a case involves profound emotional suffering, but not necessarily emotional harm or injustice.

Neither is the person emotionally ‘mistreated’ nor are they not arbitrarily disadvantaged in this experience of loss itself. There are also cases in which emotional suffering is blameworthy but still fails to qualify as unjust. Consider the case of a close friend forgetting one’s birthday. The emotional pain occasioned by such neglect is real; it may involve feelings of sadness, disappointment, or alienation. Nevertheless, unless the act reflects a patterned devaluation of one’s emotional needs that imposes arbitrary relational disadvantage, it does not constitute an injustice. Likewise, the pain of a romantic partner falling out of love, while potentially devastating, does not in itself constitute emotional harm or injustice. The suffering arises from ordinary human vulnerability rather than from arbitrary relational disadvantage constituted through social relations, norms, treatment, recognition, or social structures. Put differently, no normatively extraneous feature structures the emotional withdrawal in a way that imposes arbitrary relational disadvantage or renders the event unjust. Emotional harms therefore differ both from emotional suffering arising from ordinary human vulnerability and from emotional injustice involving arbitrary relational disadvantage.

How, then, should we distinguish emotional harm from emotional injustice? While all emotional injustice involves emotional harm, not all emotional harm involves injustice. Emotional injustice, according to a relational account, occurs when emotional experiences, expressions, or behaviors are subject to arbitrary relational disadvantage. For instance, when social norms systematically discourage men from expressing vulnerability or require marginalized groups to suppress anger, individuals are disadvantaged in their emotional lives compared to others. Such disadvantages are relational and structurally patterned; they reflect unjust hierarchies or norms that mediate emotional experience, expression and recognition.

By contrast, emotional harms that lack this relational structure are not injustices, though they may still be significant. In addition, there are also cases of emotional harms that are intentionally enacted and even relational, but not arbitrary in the sense of being normatively extraneous. One might punish a person who has violated social norms by withdrawing affection or shaming them. That person may become more emotionally isolated or distressed than others. This is an emotional cost on the perpetrator, and hence a harm, but it is not arbitrary, i.e. not necessarily unjust.

Recognizing this distinction between emotional harm, injustice, and suffering preserves the conceptual integrity of injustice while still acknowledging the moral significance of affective vulnerability. Emotional harms can call for empathy, moral repair, or interpersonal accountability without necessarily invoking the apparatus of injustice. Moreover, emotional harms are pluralistic in form. Some are acute and transient, such as the betrayal experienced when a close friend divulges a private confidence; others are chronic and cumulative, such as the long-term effects of emotional neglect. Emotional suffering is

an even broader category, which includes painful affective experiences arising from ordinary features of human dependency and social attachment. Like emotional injustice, both emotional suffering and emotional harm reflect our fundamental affective dependence on others within a shared social world.

To summarize, emotional harms are distinct from emotional injustice both in structure and in normative significance. Emotional harms involve mistreatment, whereas emotional injustice more specifically involves arbitrary relational disadvantage. Emotional suffering more broadly may also arise from ordinary forms of human vulnerability without involving either harm or injustice. While injustice demands rectification through systemic, often political means, emotional harms often call for interpersonal recognition, care, accountability, and repair.

4.2. Emotional oppression

Emotional oppression is a particular species of emotional injustice. It represents a specific configuration of relational disadvantage: one that is structurally embedded, group-directed, and targets those already positioned as subordinate within social hierarchies. All oppression involves relational injustice, but not all relational injustice involves oppression. While both concepts involve arbitrary relational disadvantage, oppression requires additional features that we explore below. To understand why injustice outstrips oppression, it will be helpful to examine how oppression is understood outside the context of emotion.

One of the most influential accounts of oppression can be found in the work of Iris Marion Young. She defines oppression as the ‘institutional constraint on self-development’ (Young 1990, 37). Young’s framework emphasizes that oppression is deeply embedded in the social, political, and economic structures of society. Oppression is not reducible to the actions of individuals or to isolated acts of injustice but is a *structural phenomenon*. It encompasses systematic institutional processes that inhibit people’s abilities to develop and exercise their capacities or to express themselves and be heard in meaningful social contexts.

As noted above, Young argues further that oppression is multidimensional. She famously identifies five ‘faces’ of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 1990, 39–65). These categories illustrate how different groups may experience oppression in different ways, and how multiple forms of disadvantage can intersect and reinforce one another. For example, women may be exploited through unpaid domestic labor, racialized individuals may be marginalized by exclusion from employment opportunities, and disabled people may experience powerlessness through institutional dependency and lack of representation.

These examples bring out another feature of Young's account. Oppression is group-based. It targets people who fall under a shared identity. Her analysis suggests more specifically that oppression impacts groups that have lower status within a society than a dominant or privileged. Indeed, her faces of oppression relate directly to social processes by which a group is placed and held in lower positions.

Some authors have challenged Young's analysis. For example, Fraser (1997: 193) adduces a subtle tension in Young's concept of 'constraints on self-development.' Sifting through the details, she finds that Young blurs together two issues. On the one hand, self-development is said to be held back by the way resources are distributed in a society, and, on the other, it refers to failures of recognition. Fraser points out that these two problems can conflict: achieving recognition does not always result in improved material conditions and can even impede progress on that front.

This worry may call for a refinement of Young's definition, but it need not affect our application in this context. There are three things we want to draw from Young's analysis, since they reflect both the folk understanding and widespread assumptions in scholarly literatures. First, oppression is institutional, structural, or systematic. That is, oppression is not the result of an individual act or actor, and it does not hinge on bad intentions. It typically involves multiple interlocking forces (see also, Frye 1983). Second, oppression is directed at groups. Individuals can only be oppressed *qua* group identity (Frye converges on this point as well). Individuals are marginalized, for example, in virtue of group membership. Third, only low-status groups can be said to be oppressed (see also Lugones 2010). This may be due, in part, to the fact that oppression causes and reinforces a lowering of status. It does not make sense to call a powerful and privileged group oppressed. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls oppression a 'matrix of domination.'

From a relational perspective, these features of oppression constitute a particularly entrenched form of disadvantage. Oppression doesn't merely harm individuals – it systematically positions groups in subordinate relations to others, where their emotional lives are shaped, constrained, and devalued through interlocking institutional forces. These points help show why oppression is a form of injustice. If injustice is an arbitrarily imposed disadvantage, structures that lower the status of a group on the basis of their identity would qualify as unjust. That is a form of disadvantage, and it is normatively extraneous. But the converse doesn't hold. Not every form of injustice exhibits these features in turn. To illustrate, we want to return to our main focus, emotional injustice. There are cases of emotional injustice that are not institutional, group-directed, or directed at low-status groups.

Consider, first, cases of emotional injustice that are not institutional. Some cases of emotional injustice involve interactions between individuals. Consider the treatment of 'nerds' in secondary schools. Kids are shamed by their peers

for academic interests, leading to social disadvantages. But educational institutions do not reinforce this abuse. On the foregoing analysis, this would not qualify as an instance of oppression since it is not institutional or structural.

Other cases of emotional injustice do not target people as a function of their group membership. Consider emotion work. Often, healthcare workers are expected to provide emotional support for patients and always present a positive attitude. This aspect of the job is not directly compensated and can lead to burnout. This may be unjust even though it is not directed at a specific social group. Another case would be a courtroom prosecutor who regularly manipulates the emotions of jurors. This manipulation may be unjust, diminishing jurors' ability to make autonomous decisions, but it is not directed at a social group. A third example is normative happiness. In a society where everyone is expected to be positive all the time, people who are not disposed to happiness or dissatisfied with life may be subject to arbitrary relational disadvantage. Another example might be norms against polyamory, which regulate desires across social groups.

There are also cases where emotional injustice targets members of privileged social groups. One example has already been discussed: emotion suppression in men, including cis, white, middle-class men (see also Stockdale, 2024). Carine Fourie (2022) discusses white fragility in a similar vein: cultural conditions to encourage white people to react with excessive defensiveness or guilt in the context of minor racial stress can be disadvantageous to those white people. For another case, consider the way teens in affluent families might be pressured into prestigious schools and high-status careers. This becomes especially extreme in royal families, where having aristocratic tastes and ambitions becomes a matter of national concern. For individuals who deviate from these expectations, it becomes clear that the pressure to conform crosses the boundary into injustice. Relative to other members of society, like those in the middle class, emotional autonomy may be compromised. It is hard to feel pity for those who are extremely well-off as they are not oppressed. It might be offensive, even, to call them oppressed. Nevertheless, such individuals would be justified in seeing the emotional expectations placed on them as unfair and stifling, i.e. unjust in many cases.

In summary, we characterized emotional injustice as any instance in which emotions are treated unjustly or used as instruments of injustice, where injustice consists in the imposition of an arbitrary relational disadvantage. Emotional oppression refers specifically to forms of emotional injustice that are structural and directed at members of marginalized groups, tracking, causing or maintaining diminished social group status. More specifically, emotional oppression directly reinforces norms, practices, and institutions that regulate, devalue, or instrumentalize emotional life in ways that reinforce social subordination. Emotional oppression is systemic, not based on the whims or attitudes of individual actors, and it targets those who occupy

marginalized social positions. Because it results in disadvantages on the basis of identity, it qualifies as unjust. But there are cases of emotional injustice that do not qualify as oppression in the sense. Emotional injustice is a broader category, though not as broad as emotional harms.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued for a relational approach to emotional injustice, distinguishing it from emotional harms and emotional oppression. Central to our account is the recognition that emotions and injustices alike are constituted through relations. Emotional injustice occurs when individuals or groups are subject to arbitrary *relational* disadvantage in their emotional expressions, behaviors, or experiences. This disadvantage is relational insofar as it arises through social relations, norms, treatment, regard, recognition, or social structures that causally and constitutively impose comparative costs for normatively extraneous reasons.

The relational framework illuminates what distinguishes emotional injustice from emotional harms and emotional oppression. Emotional harms involve suffering but do not necessarily involve arbitrary relational disadvantage. Emotional oppression is a specific form of relational disadvantage – structurally enforced and directed at marginalized groups. Emotional injustice encompasses the broader continuum of relational disadvantages, from instances affecting privileged individuals through normative constraints to those that reinforce subordination for marginalized groups.

By grounding emotional injustice in relational ontology and relational theories of equality and autonomy, we capture the full continuum of emotional injustice described in the introduction. This framework explains how emotional injustice can affect privileged individuals through norms that paradoxically reinforce their social position (such as emotional suppression in men), while simultaneously accounting for injustices that directly reinforce subordination for marginalized groups. We hope to have shown that the term ‘injustice’ in emotional injustice is meaningful and can be used to identify, understand, and ultimately redress a specific class of cases. By viewing emotional injustice through a relational lens, we clarify both the scope and the stakes of this form of injustice: mistreatment in the emotional domain is not simply a matter of deprivation or injury, but involves social relations, norms, treatment, recognition, and social structures that impose arbitrary relational disadvantage.

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