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FROM NEGATIVE EMOTIONALITY TO EMOTIONALLY WOUNDED SUBJECTIVITY: A PROCESS OF NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIFICATION

Abstract

This paper proposes an integrative theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of contemporary forms of subjectivity – specifically, emotionally wounded subjectivity – within the globalizing conditions of neoliberal life. I argue that such subjectivity arises through a complex interplay of political, economic, cultural, and scientific processes that mediate one's relationship to oneself, others, and the world in a particular manner – namely, by constructing subjects as capable of achieving invulnerability to negatively valenced influences. In this context, the basic human capacity to experience negative emotions ceases to be perceived as a condition of (transformative) possibilities, and instead becomes reified as an imposed identity. By critically deconstructing the preconditions of these identificatory processes, I aim to rehabilitate negative emotionality as an embodied, embedded, and interactive site of transformative engagement with the world.

Keywords

negative emotionality, vulnerability, subjectivity, subjectification, wounded subjectivity, Victim

1. Introduction

Neoliberal globalization gives rise to new forms of subjectivity that require critical examination. In this paper I intend to critically synthesize interdisciplinary literature to explicate the complex processes that place a fundamental human capacity – negative emotionality – 'under siege' in the contemporary neoliberal context. I propose an integrative theoretical framework for

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understanding how wounding subjectivities[1] emerge, and seek to theorize an alternative form of subjectivity that sustains and fosters negative emotionality as a site of human transformative potential.

This paper is structured as follows. To understand the consequences of a distorted conception of negative emotionality on individual and societal well-being, I first address the issue of vulnerability, which I consider to be at the core of the ability to experience all emotions, including negative ones. I conceptualize vulnerability as a universal condition of subjectivity (Butler, 2001; Gilson, 2011; Gilson, 2016) and then narrow the focus to its negative dimension in the realm of emotionality, drawing on contemporary phenomenological approaches (e.g., Ratcliffe, 2019; Slaby, 2012; Cvejić, 2024). Second, I adopt a critical-psychological perspective, drawing primarily on the post-Foucauldian interdisciplinary tradition of "governmentality studies" (e.g., Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1996; Urošević, 2024). Here I utilize the concept of *subjectification* as the central analytical tool to examine the political-economic, cultural, and scientific (psy-disciplinary) mechanisms that give rise to problematic identifications with 'emotional injury'. Finally, I propose that integrating Nancy Fraser's structural conception of social justice with post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory offers a promising theoretical and emancipatory response. I conclude by outlining a more socially just and psychoanalytically informed (alternative) form of subjectivity.

2. Defining Vulnerability and Negative Emotionality

2.1. Universal Ontological Character of Human Vulnerability

To clarify the universal concept of vulnerability one could define what "human" invulnerability would mean. Invulnerability entails being able to do anything – being unconstrained and without limits. It entails complete independence from all influences (e.g., physical, economic, political, cultural, relational, biological, situational, unconscious); in other words, it is an utter inability to be affected, either negatively (by something that *hinders or harms* our life) or positively (by something that *improves or fulfills* our life) (Cvejić, 2024, pp. 45-49). One could say that to be invulnerable is to be fundamentally non-human.

In contrast, vulnerability means not being able to do everything – being constrained and limited. In reality, as embodied, physically, socioculturaly and relationally embedded psychological persons, we are ontologically (existentially) vulnerable. That is, vulnerability is a universal and shared potentiality (condition) of subjectivity (Butler, 2001). It implies openness for being (positively and negatively) affected by *otherness* with which/whom one's subjectivity is entangled. In other words, to be vulnerable is to be exposed to positive and negative conditions that both constrain and enable one's being and functioning (e.g., feeling, understanding, relating and acting) in the world (Gilson, 2011; Gilson, 2016). Importantly, vulnerability also means openness to change – it is a foundational precondition for transforming the horizon of possibilities[2].

[1] Various forms of "wounding subjectivities" emerge in the neoliberal era. My assumption is that all neoliberal wounding subjectivities are grounded in an ideal of *invulnerability* to negative affective influences, an ideal that governs *primitive* (borderline) organizations of the psyche. In this paper, I focus on a specific form of wounding subjectivity, a socially sanctioned *depressive organization of the psyche*, which I term „emotionally wounded subjectivity".

[2] This is particularly important because vulnerability is not equally distributed (Butler, 2001), which is precisely where normative definitions of vulnerability come into play.

Understanding ontological character of human vulnerability provides the background condition that makes the normative definition of vulnerability (and other specific definitions) meaningful and necessary. In the following section, I will shift the focus to a more specific form of vulnerability: the negatively valenced emotionality.

2.2. Negative Emotionality and the Sense of (In)Ability

From a contemporary phenomenological standpoint (e.g., Ratcliffe, 2019; Slaby, 2012; Cvejić, 2024), the nature of emotional experiences (self-awareness) cannot be understood without considering one's embodied first-person perspective and its unique emotional engagement with the world. In this light, the negatively valenced emotionality (hereafter referred to as 'negative emotionality') entails an ability to be affected by negative influences. Negative emotions constitute a sense of being exposed to influences that hinder or harm one's life. To experience negative emotions is to endure significant aversive influences from the world, our body, and our unconscious. This reflects an exposure to the passive aspect of emotional experiences (such as feelings of anxiety, shame, resentment; *the situational aspect of affectivity*) – i.e., feelings are something that happens to us, that affects us, permeates us, or even overwhelms us. Yet, despite the fact that emotional experiences inherently contain an element of "otherness" (something beyond our control that acts upon us), they are at the same time *our* emotional experiences, belonging to *our* (intra)subjectivity as a condition of *our* possibilities.

The description of the dynamics of emotions would be incomplete if, alongside its passive dimension (what happens to us), we did not simultaneously account for its active dimension (what we do). Negative emotions do not merely involve the passive unfolding of various forms of suffering, distress, or frustration that arise in our embodied interactions with the world; they are equally – if not even more so – active transformations of those very (passive) experiences (Cvejić, 2024, pp. 63-68). That is, it can be said that in an emotional episode our *disturbances* in relation to the situation and our own body necessarily transforms into activity (Cvejić, 2024, pp. 63–68). More precisely, the effect of the object of the emotion entangles us in the situation and prompts active engagement with its relevant aspects, in an attempt to respond to it appropriately.

Remaining within a phenomenological framework, this *agentic aspect of affectivity* figures through an embodied *sense of (in)ability* in relation to a given (significant) situation. Our sense of ability develops "within an 'I can' / 'I cannot' relational schema" (Slaby, 2012, 2022; Cvejić, 2024, p. 84), that is, within the horizon of agentic (im)possibilities – what we can or cannot do in a given situation. This implies that our negative affectedness both constrains and enables our imminent practical engagement with the world, in a *distinctive* way. This distinctiveness, beyond the irreplicability of a given situation, stems from our particular *relation with the world* and the *sense of self* (Slaby, 2012) that emerge dynamically within the sociomaterial setting. More precisely, they arise from cultural-historical and sociopolitical practices and forms of life, as well as from individual affective biographies (von Maur, 2021).

In this paper, I argue that this negative emotionality becomes subjected to practices, processes, and structures of power, altering how individuals affectively relate to themselves and the world "as subjects of a certain type" (Rose, 1996b, pp. 130-131). Concretely, I contend that this mode of relating actively contributes to the reproduction of the neoliberal political economy, while at the same time

being incompatible with notions of individual and social well-being, social justice, and both individual and collective transformative agency.

3. A Process of Neoliberal Subjectification: Identifying with Emotional Injury

3.1. Neoliberal Form(s) of Subjectivity

Here I adopt an understanding of neoliberalism grounded in Michel Foucault's third phase of work, as well as in the contributions of contemporary authors associated with a specific theoretical orientation termed *governmentality theory* (see Miller & Rose, 2008; Urošević, 2020, 2024). The relevance of this body of work lies in its efforts to link the *ideological* and *political-economic* dimensions of neoliberalism with the dimension of individual *subjectivity*, that is, with individuals' conduct. Neoliberalism is thus conceptualized as a *regime of governance*, or as a heterogeneous network that connects discursive practices of knowledge, non-discursive practices of power, and forms of subjection, with the aim of regulating subjectivity and therefore individual conduct, in accordance with a specific governmental rationality (Urošević, 2024b, p. 413).

The neoliberal regime of governance seeks to shape the human psyche and social relations in ways that facilitate the reproduction and expansion of neoliberal political economy. Unlike the preceding *disciplinary regime* of governance, which aligned subjects' conduct with its own logic primarily through interventions upon the body (with technology of governance taking the form of *biopolitics*), neoliberalism operates by incorporating the dimension of individual subjectivity (with technology of governance assuming the form of *psychopolitics*) (Han, 2017). More specifically, neoliberalism aims – through a particular "coding" of subjectivity, that is, through the regulation of the individual's relation to the self – to shape conduct in the form of self-governance (subjection through subjectification). As a result, individuals come to govern themselves according to the model of neoliberal subjectivity – the "self-entrepreneur" – while experiencing their conduct as ego-syntonic and autonomous. In other words, subjects not only act *optimally* without the appearance of externally imposed and/or internalized norms, but do so with a *sense of* personal freedom and an experience of self-realization (Urošević, 2021).

These transformations in modes of governance are grounded in the reorganization of economic relations during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, economic and political reforms prompted a shift from a rigid Fordist to a more flexible and efficient post-Fordist 'mode of regulation' (see Harvey, 1991; Urošević, 2021), thereby laying the foundations for the neoliberal era. As numerous authors have argued, these changes were also conditioned by the appropriation of critiques of Fordist "mass culture", which emphasized its repetitiveness and monotony, and by its replacement with a postmodern culture that places individual subjectivity at the center – namely, the "authentic" needs and desires of consumers (Urošević, 2021).

Individuals were thus encouraged to pursue self-actualization and the satisfaction of "authentic" needs in ways that simultaneously served market objectives. This points to the central difference between the *disciplined subject* and the *neoliberal subject*: the former acts in a certain way because it is required, whereas the latter acts because it desires to do so. More precisely, the source of action for the disciplined subject lies in the Other (in the form of demands, prohibitions, expectations,

or norms) or in a "programmed" self, whereas for the neoliberal subject it ostensibly lies in an authentic ("non-programmed") self.

Neoliberal authenticity of the self is grounded in the idea of *unconstrained* freedom to act as an autonomous entrepreneur, making rational and responsible choices that lead to the achievement of their self-chosen goals (Sugarman, 2015). However, while emphasizing people's capacity for freedom and agency – predominantly framed as freedom of choice – this perspective masks the reality that such freedom is actually guided and limited by the economic principles and expectations ingrained in society (Sugarman, 2015).

Also, the unconstrained freedom of autonomous entrepreneurs comes with a cost. That is, if one is framed as an unconditionally free and responsible agent, one is also burdened with the unlimited and overwhelming baggage of accountability for the consequences of their choices and actions – including frustrations and failures to achieve (commodified) happiness and success. Of course, as Sugarman (2015) argues, these choices often emerge from a context of reduced government support, effectively transferring risk from the state to individuals (Beck, 1992). Moreover, individual circumstances are not solely the result of personal choices but are shaped by various external structural and systemic factors, including access to opportunities, the capacity to utilize them (Sen & Nusbaum, 2021), as well as personal (relational) histories, life circumstances, and other conditions necessary for developing psychological capacities.

Neoliberal subjectivity, grounded in the foundational belief that we are all equally free to pursue our self-chosen ends, is therefore blind to institutional, economic, social, and political privileges and injustices – ignorant of both one's own and others' social positions (Teo, 2018). As a result, negative emotions are associated with individual failings or toxic detours that must be corrected (regulated) through the private workings of the self (Teo, 2018). This framing leads social and political stresses brought about by neoliberal reforms (e.g., the decline of the welfare state, precarity, competition, debt, loss of trust, instrumentalization of relationships) to be understood exclusively in psychological terms (e.g., lack of coping abilities and skills, lack of resilience) (Teo, 2018). In this way, suffering becomes decontextualized, depoliticized, and psychologized.

Building on this, the neoliberal subject is encouraged to pursue change (i.e., adaptation or self-enhancement) at the *micro* (personal, individual) level through self/emotional discipline and regulation, while neglecting the possibility of transforming *macro* (structural) life conditions. In this way, structural-level problems are addressed through individual solutions. One might assume that this approach favors the privileged (i.e., the wealthy), who have access to a broader horizon of possibilities within the current political economy. However, because neoliberalism remains blind to systemic injustices, differences in outcomes are interpreted solely in terms of individuals' personal choices, abilities, and the effort they invest within a competitive socio-political environment (Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018).

Within the above-elaborated framework of neoliberal decontextualization, individualization, and responsibilization, the ideal of unconstrained freedom carries the promise of a life experienced as a continuous, uninterrupted *flow*. It suggests that we can become completely positive, healthy, happy, relaxed, self-fulfilled, authentic, and resilient if we continuously aspire to work on ourselves through ongoing practices of self-regulation, self-modification, and self-enhancement. This positions negative

emotional experiences as undesirable, framing them as *personal* failures, setbacks, and indicators of the moral decline of the achievement subject who upholds the imperative of individual freedom, self-sufficiency and happiness. By internalizing these neoliberal imperatives, a person becomes a neoliberal subject – that is, undergoes the process of neoliberal subjectification (Teo, 2018). I argue that this kind of subjectification constitutes us as subjects capable of being *invulnerable* to negatively valenced influences.

This overwhelming pressure and unattainability of 'hyper-positivity' – which denotes that one can be and achieve anything they set their mind to – exposes subjects to unbearable negative emotions (such as anxiety, shame, guilt, or sadness) that they are unable to process or transform within neoliberal sociomaterial conditions. Han (2017b, p. 11) captures this when he argues that neoliberalism necessarily drives subjects toward "depression and burnout". While this is in a sense true, it overlooks the ways in which unbearable negative emotions can nevertheless be channeled under neoliberalism. I will argue that one such way is through neoliberalism's entanglement with "psy-culture" – that is, with discursive and non-discursive practices that problematize individuals' mental health. Accordingly, the neoliberal regime of governance mediates the subject's relationship to their own distress, distinctively encoding the depressive organization of their psyche (Yeung, 2025, p. 139).

I propose that, supported by mainstream[3] psychology – primarily its subfields addressing mental health – and by the relatively recent emergence of the social type of "the Victim", the achievement-oriented subject finds a way to *defend* oneself from the pressures of neoliberal hyper-positivity while successfully avoiding both public and self-devaluation. One could argue that this success stems from neoliberal co-optation.

In the following pages, I will examine these scientific and cultural processes in order to showcase the growing tendency of individuals to actively suture themselves into the form of an *emotionally wounded subject*. This foregrounds a seemingly paradoxical dynamic in relation to negative emotionality: a striving for invulnerability that simultaneously entails identification with "emotional injury".

3.2. Psychology's 'Helping Hand'

A brief reminder: from a phenomenological perspective (e.g., Cvejić, 2024), the actualized potential of negative emotionality (the capacity to be affected by negative influences) manifests as suffering, displeasure, distress, or frustration (hereafter referred to as 'suffering'). This experience is immanently transformed through an individual's unique, *active* engagement with the world, which is conditioned by our sense of (in)ability in a given situation. Moreover, this sense of (in)ability is shaped by how one affectively (both pre-reflectively and reflectively) *relates* to oneself and the world. As I have discussed, this mode of relating emerges developmentally and is mediated by power dynamics, cultural structures, symbolic, relational, and discursive practices, as well as biographical particularities (e.g., personal histories and lived experiences).

[3] By *mainstream psychology*, I refer to the dominant approaches within psychology that are grounded in the ideas of ontological individualism, mentalism, biologism, and methodologism.

Understanding the complexity of our emotional engagements with the world is crucial for uncovering and resisting the oppressive processes that constitute these engagements – forces that constrain our horizon of possibilities. My aim is to reveal these power dynamics involved in one's relationship with oneself and the world, which shape persons' sense of (in)ability while emotionally engaging with the world. This is where the critical role of the psy-disciplines comes into focus.

3.2.1. Psychologism: Reconstructing the Nature of Negative Emotional Experiences

The style of reasoning inherent to *mainstream* psychology has been termed 'psychologism' (Sugarman, 2017, 2020). Given that styles of reasoning always emerge within specific socio-historical contexts, Sugarman connects psychologism to the highly problematic notion of human nature rooted in possessive individualism[4]. The central idea of psychologism lies in "identifying (attributing) causes of individuals' perceptions, experiences, knowledge, and actions within the structures, processes, and/or operations of their inner mental life", often accompanied by an additional assumption that these structures, processes, and operations are, in essence, neurophysiological in nature (so-called *natural kinds*).

In summarizing this style of reasoning in light of suffering (enabled by our capacity to be negatively affected), I will emphasize a few processes that alter its phenomenological structure. First, we can observe the process of *decontextualization*, in which suffering loses its connection to the world (its affective intentionality), despite arising through a person's interaction with it. Instead, suffering becomes an atomized feature of the individual (*individualization*). This, in turn, allows for its reduction to an emotional essence (*essentialization*, *objectivization*), meaning that suffering is framed as the consequence or manifestation of a fixed emotional source (*psychologization*) – one that is completely out of one's control (*alienation*) – an 'emotional wound' (e.g., *my trauma, ADHD, toxic trait*).

At this point, an important caveat is warranted. That is, an emotional experience is by no means *a source* of harm but rather *a window* into the event of particular significance that negatively affect us. In this light, I challenge the analogy between *physical harm* and *emotional harm*, which one might suspect stems from clinical psychology's adherence to the dominant biomedical and biopsychosocial theoretical models. The former pertains to our body as a *natural kind* (and thus may have an intrinsic essence), whereas the latter is tied to our embodied situated subjectivity as a *psychological or human kind* (therefore presenting an interactive, dynamic and agentive process). For this reason, rather than speaking of 'emotional harm' which suggests a fixed injury, it is more appropriate to talk about a potentially prolonged "*disturbance* of the experiential world within which the object of one's emotion is encountered" (Ratcliffe, 2019, p. 3). The object of emotion does not irreparably tear the fabric of one's emotional life ("scarring someone for life"), but it does affect and potentially restructure, in varying degrees and ways, "the 'architecture' of one's concerns, commitments, and dependencies" (Ratcliffe, 2019, p. 15).

[4] Possessive individualism views a person as an autonomous, self-determined individual, driven by personal interests and oriented toward the acquisition of material goods – an individual who acts as the owner of themselves and exploits their various resources (traits and skills). From the perspective of possessive individualism, society is the result of ontologically primary individuals (Sugarman, 2017, pp. 2-3).

The (re)framing of suffering (due to psychologism) enables emotional experiences to be problematized and understood as manifestations or consequences of third-person structures or processes within one's interiority. In other words, an inherently holistic subjectivity – one that both experiences and interprets the world, others, and the self – is now reframed as inherently divided. This perceived fragmentation of subjectivity paradoxically enables an ultimately unjustified identification with alienated parts of ourselves. To take a step back, *I* cannot identify with *myself* because identification inherently requires otherness; one cannot identify with what is fundamentally the same (oneself). In other words, the self is constitutively a conglomerate of identifications – particular (pre-reflective and reflective) understandings of ourselves within the life-world of significances and meanings. Yet, when part of *my* subjectivity is constructed and reified as alienated, problematic and essentialized 'emotional injury' that is part of *my* interiority but other to *my* self (*splitting*), a space emerges for using this reconceptualized relationality to understand my self.

Building on this, we can trace how the psychologization of suffering does not remain confined within academic psychology, but rather expands into broader cultural, institutional, and political domains. In what follows, I turn to the concept of *therapeutic culture* to illustrate how psychologism becomes embedded in everyday life, shaping subjectivity in ways that align with neoliberal governance.

3.2.2. Therapeutic Culture: Reconstructing the Sense of Self

Therapeutic culture can be understood as the outcome of a "gradual process of psychologization, marked by the spread of diverse discourses and techniques from psy-disciplines into state and economic institutions, as well as culture and everyday life" (Urošević, 2024b, p. 914). Christopher Lasch argues that the therapeutic ethos places a strong emphasis on an individual's psychological life, well-being, health, and self-realization – reinforcing a narcissistic identity (Urošević, 2024b). In this way, therapeutic culture becomes intertwined with the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, which critiqued mass society by promoting individuality, creativity, and self-expression – only to be later absorbed into the new mode of governance characteristic of neoliberalism. In this way, we can say the neoliberal reforms utilized psychological knowledge as "governmental technologies through which individual subjectivity is incorporated into the apparatus of neoliberalism" (Urošević, 2024b, p. 12).

Milan Urošević (2024, p. 7) investigated how therapeutic culture, along with self-help literature which he believes is „textual codification of therapeutic ethos that influences subjectivity through cultural sphere" – aligns with neoliberal governing rationality in creating autonomous and self-responsible subjects. He asserts that this culture tends to establish a 'synoptic structure' of subjectivity that enables individuals to manage themselves in accordance with neoliberal norms while maintaining the fantasy of achieving a state of happiness, self-fulfillment, and authenticity (Urošević, 2024b).

I attempt to broaden the view of therapeutic culture as a neoliberal technology of the self by flipping the coin. At a deeper level, therapeutic culture operates on the premise that individuals are inherently fragile or hypersensitive to negativity – that is, that they have an extremely limited capacity to cope with the negative forces of the world, including 'emotional harm' (Furedi, 2016). In this way,

therapeutic culture simultaneously with a *narcissistic identity*, constructs and promotes the notion of an emotionally *fragile identity* – a subject highly susceptible to being 'emotionally injured'.

This, in turn, leads to the redefinition of everyday distress as 'emotional harm' requiring professional intervention (Sugarman & Martin, 2018). In other words, neoliberalism does not merely adopt a therapeutic ethos that values an individual's psychological life, well-being, health, and self-realization; it also draws on psy-discourses that emphasize human susceptibility to 'emotional wounds' (see later). This not only sustains neoliberalism but actively enables it to thrive (see *affective capitalism* and the commodification of mental health: Illouz, 2007; Timimi, 2017).

3.2.3. Concept Creep: Reconstructing the Object of Negative Emotional Experience

Psychology contributes in various ways to the neoliberal political agenda. One such way is through what Nick Haslam (2016) terms 'concept creep'. Concept creep is a culturally embedded trend (Furedi, 2016), that refers to the growing tendency in psychology to broaden the definitions of (negative) concepts related to 'emotional harm' (Haslam, 2016). This trend involves the semantic expansion of pathology and the narrowing of normality. Specifically, definitions of psychological concepts related to 'emotional harm' (e.g., mental disorders, trauma, prejudice, abuse) are evolving in two ways: (a) vertically – when the concept is applied to milder versions of the original phenomena, and (b) horizontally – when the concept is extended to cover a broader range of phenomena (e.g., previously conceived under a different classification, application to different contexts), thereby creating conditions that make the experience of 'emotional harm' more frequent.

Without a doubt, increasing sensitivity to negativity can, in some ways, unveil new forms of injustice and harm, fostering care and sympathy over neglect and blame in the name of liberal values such as individual freedom and social justice (Haslam, 2016). However, this is a complex and ambiguous process that can paradoxically become oppressive to both individual and collective well-being. This 'boundary work' – the construction of various events and experiences as harmful – if not carefully deliberated, can, through the *looping effect*, narrow the horizon of possibilities for individuals. That is, it becomes easier to perceive oneself (and others) as victims of its adverse effects, facilitating a diminished sense of agency to overcoming life challenges. This sense of defeat – of paralyzed possibilities – constitutes depressive (dis)identifications of the neoliberal subject. It also contributes to the increasing pathologization of normal experiences, thereby diluting the significance of more extreme forms of suffering (Haslam, 2016; Furedi, 2016) that require recognition and intervention (e.g., blurring the distinction between 'trauma' and 'Trauma').

3.3. Identifying with Emotional Injury: Becoming 'The Victim'

It now seems quite evident that the neoliberal subject, aided by the psy-disciplines, has an escape route from the pressures of hyper-positivity. Namely, to evade its negative emotionality (that is *self-failure* in the eyes of the neoliberal subject), the achievement subject can turn to its 'emotional injury', a third-person internal entity that could serve as the source of its inability. This 'injury', an outcome of an external force beyond the individual's control, has the potential to manifest 'deficient', 'problematic', or 'harmful' experiences and behaviors, all while leaving the essentially able and free (i.e., good) self *uncontaminated*. In short, one could assert, with self-esteem intact: "I am the Positive Self upon which the Negative Other treads".

Yet, one could argue that for identification to be warranted, the relationship between the person who identifies and the object of identification must be imbued with moral worth (Taylor, 2008). Without a (*positive*) moral orientation, the neoliberal subject is merely escaping its sense of inability, which itself functions as a *negative* moral orientation. But this is not what we are witnessing. Rather than merely a defense mechanism, it appears that *the Positive Self upon which the Negative Other treads* has become a good in itself – something we actively seek. This is where I turn to the social type of 'the Victim'.

Lucas Mazur (2023, 2023b, 2024), drawing on Georg Simmel's social theory, has articulated the emergence of this relatively new social type ('the Victim') which creates inviting possibilities for identification with 'emotional injury'. The distinctive constellation of social forms that constitute this social type arises in the wake of various societal changes, such as shifting moral cultures towards the *victimhood culture* (Campbell & Manning, 2018); *Tribunalization* of society; hyper-positivity within a clinicalized society; cultural narcissism; tensions between hyper-individuality (primacy of individual freedom) and hyper-sociality (need for recognition from the masses); as well as *look-at-me* online culture (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021).

As I alluded to above, negative and unpleasant emotional experiences have increasingly been reinterpreted as potentially irreparable threats to one's well-being. Let me clarify this point. If well-being pertains to one's notion of a good life, then – within a neoliberal framework – a central criterion of that good life is the individual's uncompromised right to freely pursue their own vision of happiness and fulfillment (Sugarman & Martin, 2018). In this context, negative emotions constitute a direct violation of this key pillar. By definition, they involve frustration and obstruction – they disrupt the imperative of the individuals' right to be free and happy.

In this way, negative emotionality – our fundamental condition of subjectivity – stands in direct contradiction to prevailing notions of a good life. This is where the objectivization of suffering (as an 'emotional wound') comes into play, depriving one of their negative emotionality. In other words, *I* do not suffer as a result of *my* unique emotional interaction with the world (which affirms *my* negative emotionality); *I* suffer because *I* am wounded (which denounces it). Suffering, then, ceases to be a transformative condition of possibilities and becomes an imposed identity. In the former, one is a subject of negative emotional experience (e.g., "I grieve – that is, I sense the absence of what could have been"); in the latter, one is subjected to it (e.g., "I suffer – that is, I have depression"). In this (latter) framing, the *true* or *healthy* self is implicitly imagined as essentially positive (free and happy), while negative emotions appear as deviations, intrusions, or malfunctions – phenomena out of one's control and therefore detached from the presumed essence of the self's (that is inherently agentive). Suffering is thus understood as something that must be treated, eliminated, or overcome in order for the *true* positive state to be restored.

Assuming the social type of the Victim – by identifying with one's 'emotional injury' – serves to stabilize a sense of positive selfhood, even in the absence of "winning life" as an achievement subject. Its stability rests in the nexus of seemingly contradictory positions (*non-conflicting dichotomies*) that emerge through social interaction (Simmel, 1950). That is, one *sutures* into a position of both *weakness and strength* (positioned as sufficiently weak for their compromised rights to be acknowledged, and at the same time vigorous in a morally righteous appeal that obliges others to attend to those rights); of both *sameness and difference* (positioned as sufficiently similar to highlight

a denied shared humanity, while simultaneously reflecting an authentically wronged self); of both *abhorred and desired* status (positioned as sufficiently undesirable to preserve its problematic nature and the demand for redress, while simultaneously appealing through the recognition of moral strength and authenticity); of both *temporal distance and temporal closeness* (positioned as sufficiently distant to remain presently insoluble, yet simultaneously close enough to sustain its relevance); of both *demand to be assisted/supported and unhealable/unforgiving* status (positioned as requiring the intervention of others to be rectified, yet never truly rectified, as doing so would transform the very status of the Victim); and of both *institutionalized abstraction and lived particularity* (positioned as an (institutionalized) abstraction with a life of its own, and simultaneously as a lived particularity that cannot be adequately generalized) (Mazur, 2023, 2023b, 2024).

Identifying with 'emotional injury' serves to (re)establish one's sense of positivity (or the absence of personal responsibility for one's inability or failure) and affirm one's moral superiority (in relation to the breach of a core moral virtue). At the same time, it asserts one's relevance, worthiness, and authenticity in a bid for recognition. Recognition of one's value demands the existence of the Other. In contemporary society, this Other is depersonalized, it is figured through the masses. In this sense, individuals display their position as the Victim to the public, as the public opinion holds the power to generate (1) quantitative attention, (2) qualitative acclaim, and (3) normative approval (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2018), which in turn facilitates the "oppression Olympics" (Sugarman & Martin, 2018. p. 327). In this dynamic, the extent of one's perceived damage and suffering becomes a measure of one's worth. It is important to note that this also reveals the extent of one's inability to transform constraints (a lack of transformative agency) and of one's self-absorption, i.e., of disregard for the conditions of vulnerability of others.

At the end of this section, I would like to highlight an intriguing dynamic. Suppose that self-sufficiency (or autonomy) is highly valued in contemporary Western societies, where it serves as a marker of positivity. In that case, the figure of the Victim appears to mediate, in a particularly convenient way, the relationship between this cultural ideal and the reality of human dependence. To be dependent on others *without* claiming the status of a Victim is often seen as a sign of weakness, moral decline, or personal failure. One becomes a burden, and the pressures of positivity are redirected inward: one must work on oneself, become autonomous, become free. However, by assuming the status of the Victim, dependence is no longer perceived as moral deficiency but as a legitimate and even dignified position. One preserves the symbolic value of autonomy (by affirming the moral authority of *violated* individual freedom) while simultaneously displacing one's agency onto others – who are now expected to assist, support, rescue, or recognize the Victim. In this way, the Victim is not merely excused for their dependence; they are *empowered* by it. They are affirmed not despite their lack of power, but *through* it. In a sense, one becomes empowered by one's very powerlessness. When the position of the Victim is assumed, the other is morally obliged to act. Dependence no longer appears as a condition of transformative possibilities – it becomes fixed and redefined as the basis for a moral claim, a right (demand) to be cared for by others.

But it is important to note, as evident in clinical settings, that the neoliberal subject cannot remain in the subject position of a Victim for far too long (Yeung, 2025). Psychotropic medications, as the treatment of choice for the "neurochemical self" (Rose, 2003), are intended – by acting on presumed neurochemical agents – to re-energize the subject's entrepreneurial endeavors or, at the very least, to reestablish their "functional dissatisfaction" (Davies, 2021). However, following – or in

parallel with – medicalization and the initial "ill" position, individuals are once again directed toward their own active responsibility for successfully overcoming obstacles, recovery, and self-development. This responsibilization of subjects thus both closes and renews the loop of neoliberal subjectification in conjunction with psy-culture, which valorizes the ideal of the emotionally wounded subject who is ultimately obliged to continuously work on the self.

4. A Way Out: An Alternative Form of Subjectivity

As I pointed out, negatively valenced emotional experiences are by no means sources of harm; rather, they offer *a window* into particular significances that affect and potentially restructure, in varying degrees and ways, "the 'architecture' of one's concerns, commitments, and dependencies" (Ratcliffe, 2019, p. 3). In other words, negative emotionality discloses our both shared and distinctive vulnerabilities in the world. We are by no means *invulnerable* to its aversive influences – which expose our structural barriers, social positions, relational dependencies, epistemic limitations, personal lived experiences and self-understandings, as well as (under)developed psychological capacities. Any form of governance that fails to acknowledge both structural and personal constraints – as well as the deliberative possibilities for their transformation – is, at best, ill-suited.

I argue that the neoliberal form of subjectivity – sustained by psy-disciplines and cultural co-optation – promotes the individualization, depoliticization, psychologization, and pathologization of suffering. In doing so, it restricts the deliberative space for transformative, critical dialogue and collective engagement that might challenge and change the aversive structural conditions – and, with it, the pursuit of social justice. I firmly hold that individual freedom, regarded as the underlying common good of liberal society, is not an inherent property of an individual. Rather, it requires the development of capacities that can only be realized through the provision of appropriate economic, political, and cultural conditions (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019). In other words, individual freedom emerges from an adequate social order, not from a natural one. This is precisely where I see the importance of positing a structural normativity when considering alternative form of subjectivity. And this is where I turn to Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice.

4.1. Drawing from Political Philosophy – Fraser's Theory of Social Justice

Social justice has been designated as a *cultural keyword*, a concept so deeply embedded in social and political discourse that its meaning has become ambiguous, frequently reinterpreted, and often contested. Considering its multiple meanings throughout history, Erin Thrift and Jeff Sugarman (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019) have examined its historical ontology with the aim of identifying the *best account*: (1) one that respects and successfully incorporates its complex and multifaceted nature, and (2) one that is capable of addressing contemporary challenges (such as globalization). Given these criteria, their analysis ultimately leads them to Nancy Fraser's normative definition of social justice.

Nancy Fraser (2009) defines social justice through a three-dimensional framework: (1) *economic* (focused on the distribution of material goods and resources), (2) *cultural* (concerned with the recognition of individual and group identities), and (3) *political* (centered on representation in governance). The overarching principle that unifies these dimensions is the "person's ability to participate socially and politically on equal grounds with their peers" (*the principle of participational parity*).

Relying on this approach, I define vulnerability in terms of *economic inequalities* (e.g., exposure to exploitation, economic marginalization, deprivation, precarity), *cultural/intersubjective injustices* (e.g., cultural domination, non-recognition, misrecognition, and disrespect), and *political injustices* (e.g., political exclusion, misrepresentation, political misrecognition) (Fraser, 1998, 2009). All of these forms of injustice expose the formative and sustaining conditions of vulnerability by hindering an individual or group's ability to participate in social and political processes on par with others, thus compromising the very principle of participational parity. This principle entails ensuring the essential conditions (prerequisites), including both economic resources and proper (universalist, differentialist, or deconstructive) recognition of social status (Ivković & Zarić, 2024, p. 54).

4.2. Drawing from Critical Psychology and Psychoanalysis

The above presented normative definition of social justice makes us aware of structural vulnerabilities that restrict individual and societal well-being. However, I would argue that it is equally important to theorize the psychological capacities and dynamics that would complement a concept of social justice grounded in the principle of participational parity. In other words, what virtues should be cultivated through a person's development and education to support active participation in establishing, developing, and sustaining political and social structures that promote both social equality and individual freedom?

One could begin by reimagining conditions of intrasubjectivity that could contradict the neoliberal mode of subjectivity. In this regard, cultivating conceptual and (radical) critical thinking – as opposed to perceptual-intuitive thinking and emotional reasoning – seems warranted in order to challenge the status quo (Teo, 2018). Also, (re)situating individual suffering at the nexus of the world and the self reveals the utility of negative emotional experiences, creates space for shared emotions, and thereby exposes structural barriers and social injustices. This has a potential to encourage focus to the ethics of care, solidarity, and transformative political action that nurtures social equality as well as individual freedom. It is paramount to recognize the *constrained* nature of individual freedom – and therefore of responsibility. Individuals are indeed agentic and accountable, yet their agency is shaped and limited by various structural and contextual factors. For that reason, these constraints must become a proper object of understanding, deliberation, and intervention.

Virtues that some authors (e.g., Sugarman, 2014) identify as crucial for deliberative democracies include critical (self-)understanding and communicative virtues such as freedom of expression, tolerance, civility, open-mindedness, and perseverance in understanding and recognition. In other words, they emphasize deliberative (reflective) agency – a capacity for reflective (whether monological or dialogical) understanding that enables a partial recognition of one's own and others' *unique* situatedness, which shapes our understandings, significances, commitments, concerns, choices, and actions (Martin et al., 2003). This form of agency appears promising in opening possibilities for transformation by facilitating critical examination, compassionate and respectful exchange of perspectives, and encouraging cooperative practical engagements in social and political life.

Moreover, I assert that the *psychoanalytic tradition* is of crucial importance here – both as a normative framework that complements the development of (intra)subjective conditions necessary for equal, deliberative, and respectful participation in social and political life, and as an emancipatory

guide: a potential way out of the oppressive freedom within the colonizing neoliberal form of life (e.g., Cushman 2015; Layton, 2013; Glynos, 2013).

In line with the first point, the post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory[5] offers a (somewhat implicit) normative framework – or vision of the good life – that stands in contrast to the dominant mode of being in our time (Cushman, 2015). It enables "a way of being that is honest, self-reflective, critical, humble, curious, compassionate, and respectful of and willing to learn from difference" (Cushman, 2015, p. 424). Psychoanalytic thought centers on the development of key psychodynamic capacities that allows individuals to engage meaningfully in personal, relational, and social life. These include a tolerant and caring superego, a coherent and stable sense of self and others, the maturation of defense mechanisms, the capacity to defer gratification and tolerate frustration, as well as ambivalence and ambiguity. Together with the ability to regulate affect, these capacities foster greater self-acceptance, even in the face of one's own limitations, and strengthen an individual's overall resilience and sense of agency. This framework supports the cultivation of realistic self-esteem, moral sensibilities, and the capacity for intimacy. Crucially, it also enables a deeper awareness of others as separate subjects, enriching interpersonal understanding and expanding one's tolerance for a wide range of thoughts and emotions (McWilliams, 2011).

We can clearly see how essential these capacities are for meaningful participation in deliberative democracies, as well as emancipatory structural reforms. In other words, genuine emancipation requires transforming the precarizing socio-economic conditions that shape neoliberal forms of *wounding* identifications, and can only be achieved by agents who are psychologically equipped to resist and oppose this structure with persistence, determination, and a sincere commitment to collective needs (Yeung, 2025, p. 271). In this sense, psychoanalysis may contribute to emancipatory political practice by foregrounding the psychodynamic conditions required for a constructive deliberative praxis – one that resists repressive intolerance of thought, pseudo-activity, and the reproduction of oppressive affective relations (see Yeung, 2025). That is, post-Freudian psychoanalysis presents us with a necessary toolkit for the transformation of wounding subjectivities, and thus for the genuine (collective) potential to transcend the neoliberal status quo.

5. Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate how complex power structures, in conjunction with heterogeneous practices and processes, foster a problematic tendency to identify with 'emotional injury' – a tendency that ultimately serves to reproduce the very functioning of those structures. In doing so, I attempted to expose a troubling consequence: the basic condition of subjectivity has been compromised – namely, the capacity to *receive* and *contain* negative emotions, suffering and frustration. This capacity has increasingly been cast as unacceptable – as a violation of a prevailing

[5] By post-Freudian psychoanalysis, I refer to a range of psychoanalytic theories, particularly post-Kleinian theories and contemporary intersubjective psychoanalysis, which are centered on the theoretical ideal of psychosocial integration. In other words, they emphasize realistic capacities for receptivity, love (reciprocity), and the tolerance of ambivalence, ambiguity, and conflict as foundations of psychosocial well-being (Cushman, 2015; McIvor, 2016; Sedgwick, 2007; Yeung, 2025). It is also important to note that creating space for meaningful emancipation requires resisting the assumption that full integration is a realistic end point, or that it can be realized solely through private, individualized clinical practices (Yeung, 2025, p. 238).

moral imperative: to be perpetually free and happy. One must ask – why is that the case? What interests are protected by the dismissal of this fundamental human possibility?

First, containing suffering means recognizing and accepting oneself as a (vulnerable) psychological being, as well as accepting reality as it is – frustrating in varying of ways and forms. Only by acknowledging and integrating our negative emotionality can we access the means for personal development, as well as for transformation of our shared life-world. In this sense, such receptivity becomes a precursor to expanding our horizon of possibilities – by extending our psychological capacities and enabling deeper relational and collective engagements. It makes genuine change possible – both personal and sociopolitical. Drawing on psychoanalytic and developmental theories, I firmly argue that frustration and suffering are not merely obstacles to individual freedom; on the contrary, they are its very precondition.

Finally, by integrating Nancy Fraser's critical theory with psychoanalysis, I outlined a pathway toward an alternative form of subjectivity – one that is deeply attentive to structural vulnerabilities, and that recognizes our negative emotionality and *constrained* agency not as signs of personal weakness, but as sources of individual and collective (*true*) empowerment.

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